

Vitality!

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Professionals, Program Administrators,
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Bringing the Team Together and Improving Employee Morale

LOW EMPLOYEE MORALE COMES WITH A HIGH PRICE TAG. FORTUNATELY, IMPROVING EMPLOYEE MORALE IS RELATIVELY SIMPLE AND MANAGERS CAN HAVE A PROFOUND EFFECT ON BUILDING MOTIVATED, ENGAGED AND PRODUCTIVE TEAMS.

Unhappy, disengaged employees cost the Canadian economy billions of dollars each year in lost productivity, absenteeism, errors, turnover and poor customer service. Signs of low morale include uncooperative, negative attitudes, fault-finding, complaining, increased tardiness, gossiping, and backstabbing. Morale can often become so bad that openly discussing what a terrible organization they work for becomes the common bond among employees—and that means serious trouble for team leaders.

For managers who find themselves leading departments or teams with bad morale, all teambuilding efforts will be for naught until morale is improved. Fortunately, morale can be elevated quickly and inexpensively and managers hold the key.

Morale can be the fuel that drives an organization forward or the fuel that fires poor performance and absenteeism. Unifying teams by improving morale is an essential role for managers everywhere.

Getting to the root of the problem

- The first step in resolving a morale problem is to determine the causes — and there are usually several. Some of the most common are:
- a negative event, such as a downsizing
- new management
- unappreciated or underappreciated work
- working conditions
- lack of communication
- workload
- supervision that's too rigid, demanding, direct or involved
- supervision that's not supportive and doesn't provide guidance or input
- lack of career opportunities/unfair promotions/favouritism
- turf wars among senior management

The easiest and most effective way to get to the bottom of the problem is to go to the source — the employees. Ask them what they think can be done to turn things around. People appreciate being asked for their opinions and included in business decisions. This information seeking can be accomplished through informal chats between managers and their team members or more strategically with regular company-wide employee satisfaction surveys.

It starts at the top

The impact of managers on morale is immeasurable. With words, body language and actions, they clearly transmit how they feel about the value of the people on their teams. In fact, the behaviour of the entire executive team can directly affect morale, as employees read the mood of their leaders for clues about performance and job security.

Letting employees know that they are valued and appreciated is perhaps the most important element in creating unified teams with great morale. Managers can easily send this message by:

- **Providing appropriate and ongoing feedback.** Employees need to know what's expected of them and how well they're doing. Without this

information, they'll either overwork or underwork, think of their work as above average or below average, and may stray from organizational goals.

- **Showing concern.** If people believe their employer doesn't care about their role, contribution or wellbeing, then they probably won't care about their employer. Begin by inviting opinions and ideas whenever an opportunity arises rather than simply assigning tasks. Get out of your office and talk to team members. Ask people how they are and how they're doing.
- **Recognizing good work.** It only takes a few seconds to say, "Nice job," "Well done," "Great effort," or "Thank you," to let people know that their contribution is recognized and appreciated. Also, applaud team members at staff meetings and in emails, newsletters and reports.

Communication is king

A 2009 study by *Accountemps* found that a lack of open and honest communication is one of the major management missteps that can erode morale. Avoid this by sharing information to the best of your ability. If possible, let your team know the rationale behind organizational decisions and their roles to achieving corporate goals. Also, share your goals for the department or project. In other words, keep people in the loop.

Effective communication involves everyone and this means encouraging constructive debate. Teams can easily slip into "group think," especially when they're succeeding or when management is not open to employee feedback. Those who see flaws in the way things are done or have ideas for improving processes may be politely ignored or even treated with hostility. When this happens, teams risk failure because when things change they can't adapt. Effective managers build trust by encouraging a diversity of opinion. Those in the majority must trust that those who disagree do so honestly and with good intentions while those in the minority must feel that they are free to speak up.

Recognize and reward

Recognition is a win-win practice. It shows employees that they're valued for their contributions and helps managers develop results-oriented and

high-performance teams. Recognition needs to be timely and personalized – that is, delivered in a way that is meaningful to recipients. For example, one employee may appreciate an e-mail or handwritten thank-you note while another might prefer public praise during a department-wide meeting. LinkedIn recommendations or a shout-out on Twitter might work for younger team members while older employees may enjoy traditional service awards. Smart managers take the guesswork out by asking each member of their team how they like to be recognized and then delivering.

There is one caveat. Singling people out for outstanding performance can sometimes work as a disincentive on a larger scale. Instead of giving all your praise to the superstars, try rewarding everyone for departmental achievements to reinforce teamwork.

Invest in training and development

Making employees feel valued by the organization means investing in their futures. Most people want to learn and grow their skills at work. Discuss career objectives with team members and how the organization can help them reach their professional goals. Create a performance development plan with each person and support them in carrying out the plan through quarterly performance development meetings. Knowing their manager is in their corner can re-energize frustrated employees.

It's important to note that employees should feel that everyone has equal access to career development opportunities, no matter what their age or current role, and that promotions are based purely on merit. While it is in an organization's favour to develop a pipeline of talented, high performing individuals, organizational morale is heightened when training and development opportunities are available to all.

Training and development also means supporting employees' personal wellbeing and companies might want to consider offering seminars or workshops on such subjects as stress management, conflict resolution, resilience and nutrition. Employees who are better able to deal with stress and change are less likely to be negative and overwhelmed.

Deal with conflicts when they arise

It's natural for conflicts to arise when people work closely. They will annoy each other, step on toes, or hurt each other's feelings. Some degree of conflict among co-workers is normal, but left to fester, honest disagreements can become personal and heated and work processes that seemed efficient can break down.

Conflict, handled promptly and appropriately, can actually produce constructive ideas and strengthen teams. So let problems come to the surface and deal with small issues quickly before they turn into big problems. Avoid the impulse to tell people to "drop it," "forget about it," or "just cut it out." Also, anticipate that more conflicts may occur whenever there are changes that affect the team's membership or goals.

Fun and flexibility

In today's tough economy, organizations have been forced to freeze salaries, reduce staff and scale back on benefits. As a result, many employees feel they're working longer and harder for less. Building some fun and whimsy into the work week can work wonders for bringing teams together and improving overall morale. Consider off-site teambuilding days, fun Fridays, celebrating a departmental accomplishment, or monthly game days that pit departments against each other in friendly competition. Some companies offer quarterly fun rewards for staffers who achieve certain goals.

Most employees are working harder and longer for less and this makes it tough for managers who have been given difficult deadlines or demanding projects. Building fun into the workweek promotes camaraderie, re-energizes the team, fosters loyalty and elevates everyone's mood.

As a busy manager, you probably don't have time to come up with morale-boosting activities so, again, ask your employees for their ideas. Form a social committee and give them a small budget and the mandate to create fun. And make sure you and other managers are front and centre at all events.

In addition, workers of all ages appreciate flexible work options. Those with young children like being able to start and finish earlier so they can juggle work and parenting responsibilities and workers like

compressed workweeks so they can spend more time on leisure activities. Everybody appreciates being able to work from home either full time (for those with onerous commutes) or on occasion (such as bad winter weather).

Be an example

Above all, to effectively build cohesive and motivated teams, managers must be seen as taking responsibility for their actions, the actions of the people they lead, and the success or failure of projects they head. In other words, managers need to be accountable.

It's tough for employees to be negative and unmotivated when the boss is working hard and always positive, when he or she is seen to be approachable, fair and supportive of staff. In a nutshell, leading by example is the best way to influence people's attitudes and actions. There is reduced blame-game when things go wrong and there is collective responsibility.



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vitality@homewoodhumansolutions.com

Contact Us

1.800.663.1142

EN FRANÇAIS

1.866.398.9505

TTY

1.888.384.1152

INTERNATIONAL ACCESS

604.689.1717 (Call collect)

www.homewoodhumansolutions.com


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