

## Rebuilding Morale

### Creating a Committed Workforce

Marianne's organization has just gone through a round of layoffs and her department has lost five team members. Her team's morale has taken a big hit - rumors are flying around about further layoffs, conflict is frequent and everyone's energy is visibly reduced.

Although her people are still working diligently, Marianne can sense that much of their activity is driven by fear. Passion and enthusiasm have, for all intents and purposes, vanished.

There are many different factors that can affect team morale. When morale suffers, it's important to take steps to rebuild it. But what can a leader do to rebuild the morale of his or her team? And, for that matter, what exactly is morale?

#### **About Morale**

The sociologist Alexander Leighton said, *"morale is the capacity of a group of people to pull together persistently and consistently in pursuit of a common purpose."*

For an organization to thrive, it's essential to take the time to develop good morale.

It's a truism that organizations with high morale experience higher productivity and staff engagement. They show lower employee turnover and absenteeism, they have a happier workforce and they find it easier to attract and retain the best talent. While "raising morale" can seem to be a nebulous goal, many of these other effects are measurable and directly affect the bottom line.

Last but not least, it's just a lot more fun to work in an organization where morale is high.

#### **Why Morale Suffers**

Many things can cause team morale to dip.

- Layoffs and restructuring
- Poor leadership
- Poor communication
- Lack of empowerment or autonomy
- Inflexible working conditions
- Cancellation of team benefits
- Damage to the organization's reputation or public image
- Losing a big contract or client
- Difficult co-workers
- Heavy workloads or stress, especially when accompanied by little-no reward or gratitude
- No sense of social value to the work being done, or a negative impact on the wider society

## Signs of Low Morale

Too often, managers don't realize that morale is poor. Whether or not your team or organization is facing any of the challenges above, watch out for the following clues that morale may be slipping:

- Obvious unhappiness.
- Increased complaints about work, or other team members.
- Increased absenteeism.
- An increase in conflict between team members.
- Insubordination or unruliness.
- Disorganized work environments.
- Increased employee turnover.
- Decreased productivity.
- Lack of enthusiasm.

## Leader Morale

If you're a leader or manager, your team's morale starts with you. It's up to you to be a good role model for your team. If your own morale is suffering, then it's vital that you work on rebuilding your own outlook and attitude first.

Start by identifying why your own morale is low, and then come up with ways to adjust your mental attitude.

Often, this starts with action. For instance, perhaps your morale is down because *your* boss is pressuring you to do a good job and is threatening to fire you if you don't perform. You can make yourself feel more positive and in control of the situation by getting organized and by achieving measurable goals that will put your boss at ease.

Work on rebuilding your self-confidence. Remember, your team is always watching you so if you're feeling positive and confident, they will too. Quick wins will also help build confidence, both for you and your team.

## Team Morale

If your team's morale needs rebuilding, there are several strategies that you can use. However, just as you did with your own morale, you need to start by understanding the problem. This helps you choose strategies that best fit your situation, which may include:

### 1. Reconnecting With Your Team

Morale is higher in situations where team members feel close to their managers. You can create this type of environment by developing good relationships with your team and by reconnecting whenever possible. Practice "Management by Walking Around" so you can touch base with team members often. With regular contact and communication you can reestablish trust and rapport with your team.

It obviously helps to develop your *emotional intelligence*. If you don't know what this is you probably don't have much of it. Suffice it to say that the better you can sense the emotions and needs of those around you, the better you will be as a leader.

Keep in mind that **lack of appreciation** is often cited as one of the root causes of low morale. So, do whatever you can to show your people that you appreciate them. Reward your team by (at the very least) thanking them for a job well done or, if possible, by offering benefits (e.g. extra days off, flexible scheduling) when key goals are met.

And if you have any kind of decent personality you'll also want to give everyone regular feedback on their work. Once a year just isn't enough.

## **2. Developing Your Team**

Another way of improving morale, especially after a round of layoffs, is by helping people develop *their* skills. So make sure that you're offering your people opportunities for learning and development as a way of helping them feel more secure and committed to the organization.

Offering training as needed is important. And *cross-training* is another great way of building morale and improving productivity, just as long as you explain why you're doing it. Be careful about this: without a clear explanation, in a low-moral workplace some may see an offer for training or cross-training as a sign that layoffs are on the way.

## **2. Improving the Workplace**

Sometimes, morale can suffer because of the physical environment that your team has to work in.

Take a look at the offices, conference rooms, and break rooms that your team uses. Are these rooms safe and clean? Is the air quality good? Are the rooms bright and energizing? Do team members have the tools and resources they need to work effectively?

Do what you can to improve the offices and other rooms your team uses every day.

## **4. Improving Communication**

Poor communication is another common root cause of low morale.

Rumors can spread quickly in the workplace, and these can destroy morale. This is why it's important to give people accurate, timely information, especially if sales are down, or if the company is restructuring or downsizing.

Identify ways that you can keep your team in the loop. Perhaps you could send a weekly email with important updates, or devote a few minutes in your regular meetings to keeping people up to speed with what's going on. Communicate fully with your team, and explain how any changes or decisions will affect them.

Remember, the flow of information should go both ways. Encourage your team to come to you any time they have questions or concerns. Listen actively to what they have to say, and respond in a timely manner to problems or suggestions. If rumors do begin to fly around the office, address them openly and immediately.

## **5. Setting Measurable Goals**

Morale can fall when your people are unclear about what they should be doing, or what your expectations are. This lack of direction is disheartening, and disorienting.

Make sure that your people are aware of your organization's mission and vision, and of how their work contributes towards these. Understanding these gives members of your team a clear and (hopefully) inspiring view of what the organization expects, and helps them think about how they can use their own talents and skills to fulfill the organization's mission.

Next, look at the tasks and responsibilities of each team member. Having clear, achievable goals will help to motivate people, and will help them know what they should be doing.

## **6. Rebuilding Confidence**

Perhaps your team just lost an important contract or project. If this is the case, people's confidence may be shaken.

Learn how to build confidence in other people. One great way to do this is to give them more autonomy to make decisions. Delegate tasks and responsibilities, and push them to work towards challenging but achievable goals. And when someone on your team has a success, celebrate it.

## **7. Focusing on Talent Management**

If times are tough for your organization, you might have a problem keeping your best people, or enticing good new people to join your team. This is another reason why rebuilding morale is so important: if morale is reduced, your most talented team members are likely to be the first to walk.

## **8. Keeping People Motivated**

Once you've rebuilt morale, it's important to keep people motivated so that your team can reach its objectives.

Also remember that morale can be affected even when times are good. Regularly look for signs of low-morale, and revisit the strategies above when necessary.

For more information contact Howard Weissman at the EASE Program.