



Employee Morale: Corporate Mental Health

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Positive employee morale is the corporate version of good mental health. Good mental health enhances performance for individuals, and for organizations. Some techniques that we use to enhance individual and family mental health can also help companies to improve employee morale.

So what are the benefits?

When company morale is high, the task of management becomes easy. Employees perform better when they're satisfied with their work and their work environment. That's why, in most companies, one of management's top priorities is to maintain morale at a high level.

Many factors can influence employee morale. There are factors relating to employees, factors relating to the workplace, and factors relating to management.

As a manager, you have the ability to correct any problems in these areas. Here are some methods that can help in each area:

Factors with Employees

Often, problems experienced by one worker impact the whole team. If a worker is having problems at home, his performance at work may suffer. This puts a strain on team members who find themselves covering for him.

Similarly, an employee may conduct personal business at work. It's actually good for morale to allow employees some leeway here. But if one employee starts abusing this, it's unfair to the others and it sets a bad example.

These two problems can usually be solved without much trouble.

First, you need to gather information to find out what's happening. Second, you need to intervene by talking with the employee about the problem. Third, make a plan with the employee about what can be done to change his or her behavior. As part of the plan, set a schedule for when you'll reevaluate the situation.

But there's another kind of employee problem, that of the disruptive employee. This employee may be angry, lazy, drug or alcohol addicted, rumor mongering, or even an overachiever who derides fellow workers. These types of behaviors can be habitual and therefore difficult to change.

So what can you do? First, do as you would in any other situation: gather information, intervene, and make a plan with the employee. The plan however may need to be tougher. Consider using language like, "We cannot tolerate your angry comments at work." Or "You need to be completely sober at work; we can't have you on site if you are not." You may want to

recommend outside help such as psychotherapy. Also you might have to change this employee's job duties so he or she is not around other employees as much. Or talk with the other employees about how to handle the disruptive employee. Or you may have to terminate this employee.

Factors in the Workplace

In general, any improvements you make to the work environment helps to improve employee morale. These include things like installing new lighting or new carpeting, applying a fresh coat of paint, or allowing music to be played. Even doing something as simple as spring-cleaning can lift staff spirit.

If the company is having financial difficulties, staff are likely to be worried and on the lookout for any information to help them understand what is going on. In this case, it helps to provide accurate information. Tell employees the truth but frame it in a positive way. Don't say, "We might not be able to make payroll." Tell what you're doing to correct the problem, like "We've developed a new marketing plan that should boost sales," or "We've found a new buyer for our product." Reporting only the negative to employees will lower morale.

Factors with Management

As a manager, you can boost morale by paying attention to employees and acknowledging good work. So be generous with praise. It works best to praise a specific person or a specific group rather than the whole company. Also, when you praise someone, do it publicly. Make sure others hear it too.

Finally it's important to offer the right set of job benefits and job satisfactions. It's true that money isn't everything. Employees want to find satisfaction with their work. In addition to the routine benefits you offer with the job (such as paid vacation, health insurance, and retirement fund), you could provide specific opportunities for employees to grow and change. Here are some examples:

- Offer educational programs on helpful topics, such as physical fitness, career development, or personal finances.
- Offer some time off each week to employees who do charitable, volunteer work for outside organizations. Or allow employees an hour each week to do something different within the company.
- There are some employees who experience low job satisfaction because their jobs are defined too narrowly. What can make their jobs more fulfilling? Often changing the focus of a job can boost satisfaction. For instance for frontline staff such as receptionists or supermarket checkers, request that they smile at every customer. Adding this specific focus to a frontline job actually boosts satisfaction with it.

Hopefully you can continue to build company morale. Your employees will welcome it and it will pay off on the bottom line.

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