

Boosting Team Morale

10 practical tips for Christian leaders



By Dr. Dan Nehrbass

A FEW YEARS AGO when I became the president of Nightlight Christian Adoptions, it was clear from the board and employees that I had a mandate to improve morale. Having positive team morale is a key to creating effective momentum in any organization.

For the first three months I determined to listen and learn, with the hope that the information I gathered would help explain why morale was low and, more importantly, how we could improve it. From the concerns, complaints and discussions certain recurring themes emerged. Rather than organize our thoughts negatively by answering “why morale is low,” we visualized them positively by looking forward to what we could do about it. Here

are 10 practical steps we identified to improve morale. You can infer which specific morale killer each action plan addressed.

1. Communicate Clearly. “We hate surprises around here,” said one employee reflecting on the lack of communication: “I was driving to work one morning and I heard one of our office directors on a radio show. Then I got to the office and we had a flood of calls from people who heard the same broadcast. If I hadn’t listened to the radio on the way in, I would have had no idea what they were talking about!” Even employees with the best attitudes have difficulty maintaining team spirit without excellent communication. What is good communication? In *The 17*



Indisputable Laws of Teamwork (Thomas Nelson, 2013), John Maxwell summarized the law of communication in six words: “Consistent. Clear. Courteous. Supportive. Current. Vulnerable.” Teams with high morale have consistent communication that is both positive and timely.

2. Be Transparent. “We were never privy to that information in the past,” said an employee referring to my call for an office-wide celebration of a very large gift from a donor. While we can’t share detailed donor records with all employees, we can at least celebrate that a large gift has been received. In many organizations, information is on a “need to know basis.” Yes, people should know what they need to know!

But the default position of an organization should not be to share the least amount of information possible. It should be to share the most amount of information unless there is a reason to keep it secret. Transparency enables another morale booster: empowerment.

3. Empower Others. Nearly everyone in management has heard the cry, “We don’t need to be micromanaged.” The difficulty is that no one identifies himself as a micromanager, and we all have different definitions of what that means. In the book, *Multippliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter* (HarperBusiness, 2010), Liz Wiseman gives excellent examples of what micromanagement is, and she explains how it saps the energy of an organization. Wiseman sees empowerment when the leader tells her managers they have 51 percent of the vote. Most leaders fear ceding that much power, but there is one insurance policy. It’s not the veto. It is the dependability of the person to whom you delegate. Wiseman argues that if you can’t give the other person 51 percent of the vote, you’ve got the wrong person in that position.

4. Celebrate Success. An employee shared, “We didn’t use to have time for all this drama when we were busy.” Inevitably, as an organization enters a period of decline, this change is felt by the employees and contributes to low morale. Although people can find almost anything to complain about, as leaders we can only determine the outcome of things under our control. Gaining more success in the organization is one thing we can influence, and such wins should have a positive impact on morale. In *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003), Michael Watkins explains that a new leader’s first order of business is to celebrate wins. Simply put, it’s more fun to win than to lose. Morale improves as people have more fun. We may not be able to change the tide of our industry or organization overnight, but we can acquire small wins that accumulate over time.

5. Affirm Others. In my first week at Nightlight, I had a stack of fancy thank you notes printed, and I looked for every authentic occasion to send them. Sometimes I would send them by mail, and other times I’d leave them on desks. When one employee got hers, she said, “Thanks

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for the note, I put it up on my wall at home.” I figured the thank you note would be appreciated a little, but had no idea that the thirst for affirmation was that great.

Dr. Gary Chapman knows how great is the thirst for affirmation in the workplace. He is well known for the Five Love Languages. Those insights are applied to the workplace in a book by he and Dr. Paul White: *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace: Empowering Organizations by Encouraging People* (Northfield Publishing, 2012). They suggest showing appreciation by affirmation, gifts, quality time, acts of service and appropriate touch. If you haven’t done so already, ask your team to take an inventory of their “language of appreciation” and keep a list of each person’s preference. Then, be sure to act accordingly and show appreciation to your team.

6. Repair Relationships. One employee had broken relationships with some managers early in her tenure, and

had earned limited access to our database. It was clear to me, however, that she was crippled not by access or ability, but by fragile relationships. I asked the managers to give her a fresh start. Though it would only be a small, tangible symbol, I knew it would be significant to restore full database access. She was touched to the point of tears, knowing what this move represented.

Often, it is not specific behaviors that cripple the workplace, but overarching relational problems. In *The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships* (Harmony, 2002), John Gottman states that it is not the infraction itself, or the number of times it occurs, but the *repair* of the relationship that determines success. To boost morale among your team, make sure that everyone knows and practices the skills of relational repair. A well-spoken apology and “I forgive you” can make tremendous progress in building a team’s morale.

7. Increase Pay and Benefits. “We haven’t had a raise in three years.” Such was the feedback I received from dozens of people in our organization. Leaders know that you get what you incentivize. If we incentivize hard work, that’s what we get. If we simply incentivize attendance, that’s often all we get. People respond to a variety of incentives: flexibility, praise, power, etc. But mostly, people like money. Since people generally feel that they deserve a raise (because of increasing experience as they stay with the organization), then they often feel mistreated if their compensation does not rise. For this reason, money is often called a demotivator. If employees don’t get a raise, they are de-motivated. But if they do get a raise, morale may only remain fixed, since the compensation was assumed. So leaders can remove a demotivating factor by addressing compensation. You will not solve all your people problems by simply paying people more money. But you can at least ensure that you have not created a problem by consistently paying people too little.

8. Refocus on the mission. The fact that the staff and the board gave me a mandate to improve morale is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, improving morale is indeed important. It’s vital for increasing performance. It’s vital for creating a Christ-honoring environment. It’s vital for organizational momentum. But once the employees in an organization decide that “how to improve morale” is the focus question, that organization is doomed. At our organization, the focus question must be “how to get more kids adopted.” If we let any other question consume us, we have lost sight of our true mission and purpose. Similarly, pastors and congregants alike are prone to make the focus question “what’s the problem with this church?” rather than “How can we make disciples of all nations?” The primary question on people’s minds spells defeat or success.

It may have come as quite a shock, but when our organization recently acquired a group of seven employees from another agency, I sat down with this team and said, “Please understand that you are priority number five. Our first priority is the gospel. Second is our mission to get more kids adopted. Vulnerable children and adoptive parents are third. The health of our organization is fourth. And our staff is fifth.” Fortunately, the team was not offended. Instead, they were excited to have such a clear path to achieving our mission.

9. Don’t demotivate. This means don’t do obvious things that kill morale. For a long list of these, read *Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to be the Best... and Learn from the Worst* (Business Plus, 2012) by Robert Sutton. I envy anyone who has not had the life experience to know the type of “bad boss” Sutton describes in the book. Not demotivating includes not doing things that you don’t know are demotivating. So, how can you do that? By listening. In my first three months at Nightlight, I carried a booklet and took sincere notes, which I still continue to reference

occasionally. I asked for feedback about any demotivators, including my own actions. I was told, for example, that whenever I closed my door while I was on the phone, people worried I was talking about them. If keeping my door open allays fear, it’s a no-brainer step to improving morale. Finally, not demotivating sometimes means removing people who are demotivating. In *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t* (HarperBusiness, 2001), Jim Collins makes the case that a vital step for growth is to “get the right people on the bus.” Nothing is more demotivating than having a person sit next to you on the bus who just simply doesn’t want to be there. They will make it painfully obvious to everyone on the team.

10. Choose High Morale.

“Where is morale located?” Morale is not a substance. It is not located in the air. It is neither anchored to the organization, nor stuck inside the building somewhere. Morale exists solely within people. In that sense, it seems a little awkward to say that a person has “high morale” and another person has “low morale.” We are more accustomed to saying a person has a generally good attitude, or another person has a generally bad attitude. Groups are not substances either; they are collections of individuals. Morale, therefore, is located in individuals, and is a reflection of their attitude. The primary action that any organization can take to improve morale is for each person to enter the office each day choosing to have a positive attitude. Rather than say an organization has high or low morale, it is more appropriate to say, “That person acts in a way that contributes to high morale.” Your actions, and those of the people around you, are choices that contribute to the attitudes of people on the team. Your team can choose to make today great!

We have seen the benefits of this approach at Nightlight Christian Adoptions. Morale has indeed improved, creating positive organizational momentum as a result. I hope that these 10 practical steps to boost team morale will be a blessing to your organization as well. ●

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