Good work!

Alasdair Cant offers some tips on boosting morale in the workplace

Morale is defined as 'a psychological state of a person as expressed in self confidence, enthusiasm and/or loyalty to a cause or organisation'.

Morale at work is not a tangible product that can be bottled and dispensed as required. Yet it affects everybody, and everybody can affect it. Like many of the unseen forces in our lives, morale is often something that is simply there – ebbing and flowing all the time. Once we become more aware of it, we can choose to be passive or active in how we respond to the prevailing mood at work.

The expression 'it's all in the mind' is often used glibly and even in a belittling way, but there is sometimes a helpful truth hidden here. An honest exploration of our *own* state of mind in relation to our workplace is crucial before taking any practical steps to lift morale. It is useful here to borrow from one of A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh characters. Eeyore represents one end of the negative spectrum. When bid 'good morning', his response is to ask 'What's good about it?' This is Eeyorish behaviour and too much of this in our work can make the atmosphere gloomy.

We can look at any situation. For example, with pressure on resources and need for creative ways of smarter working, many workspaces have adopted 'hot-desking'. Let's imagine we arrive at work, and our desk has been left untidy by someone else. How we react to this tells us as much about our current state of mind as the situation itself.

'That's typical! This has happened before. I'm always the one to clear up after them. Everyone's so selfish around here …'

This kind of thinking pattern makes us feel worse about those around us and knocks morale. The reaction may be understandable, but the statements are unlikely to be true. You may feel angry, but a more balanced approach is to keep it in perspective, then address the problem constructively but assertively.

Generalising: Is it *really* typical? How many times has it actually happened in the last month? Are you sure you *always* do the clearing up for others, and is it fair to describe someone or everyone as 'so selfish', based on this incident, even if it is a recurrence?

Catastrophising: This is where you are aware of a difficult situation, (such as funding squeeze or cuts on the horizon) and decide in your head either consciously or unconsciously that the worst-case scenario is a probability rather than a possibility.

Negative spin: This is where you focus on one negative event to the exclusion of everything else, thereby giving too much authority to the event, allowing it to dictate your thinking about the entirety. For example, you get home in the evening declaring that the day was dreadful and the working atmosphere is awful. This is often based on one or two difficult situations and behaviours encountered. It disregards anything that has gone well and other positive interactions.

These are just a few examples of thinking patterns I come across most frequently. The opposite of Eeyorish behaviour is Tiggerish. The character Tigger is as upbeat as Eeyore is downbeat. It's not just a *good* morning, it's a *fantastic* morning because every day is new with lots of potential, never mind the problems. Some of this is needed. Too much of it results in denial and unrealistic expectation, and is also maddening to live with.

We can begin to address them by being honest with ourselves about how we're interpreting what's going on at work. These negative thought patterns can be as true for whole groups of staff as for individuals, and the first step is simply to recognise the thoughts and the feelings associated with them. Then we can rationalise and deal with behaviours more effectively.

SITUATION

Thoughts

Feelings ⟷ Actions
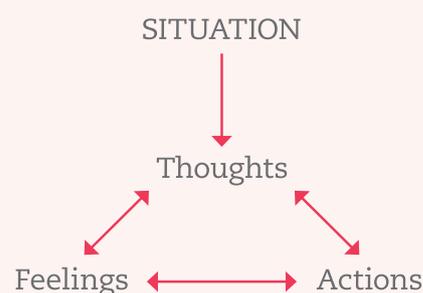
The diagram shown here is used in any cognitive behavioural approach. Morale, like stress, often worsens when negative events are (or seem to be) beyond our control. The reality is that stuff happens, but if we can take back some control over our responses to it then we are part way there.

There is no antidote to dealing directly with a problem that is affecting morale. This is a shared responsibility, although a manager may have to take more responsibility

and initiative. However, most difficulties that affect workplace mood are external factors outside our control, such as uncertain funding.

What can we do on a practical level to keep up morale in the workplace?

- Morale lifts when we can complete a task. Ensure that job descriptions are being adhered to, and that there are clear beginnings and endings where possible. This contributes to a sense of achievement.
- Communication from management should be clear and transparent. Avoid a vacuum building up, as rumours will abound. Avoid general negativity from being communicated as it only contributes to a gloomy backdrop to workplace morale. Be clear, specific, honest and balanced – upbeat without being unrealistic.
- Watch and listen out for the kind of language being used, and challenge it if it is becoming too negative or equally corrosive. The 'circular conversations' go round and round and, without any conclusion, worsen the mood.
- When morale is low, it can become a downward spiral. Do something counter-intuitive. It takes courage but helps to shift the negativity.
- Organising an activity together such as joining a charity walk as a team, ten-pin bowling, chutney making ... shifts the dynamic and perspective, helping the group to look outside themselves and builds the team too.
- Create some traditions together – celebrate festivals, birthdays, etc. – organise Secret Santa, small thoughtful gifts, etc.

- Don't overlook the impact of the physical work environment – where possible keep spaces clear and with as much natural light as possible. Flowers or greenery, a bowl of fruit, etc., can lift spirits and signals that someone cares.
- Small acts of kindness and thoughtfulness mean a lot when a team is facing difficulties. It shows that people are not so caught up with their own stuff that they have lost perspective and become selfish. Saying thank you and a genuine word of encouragement can go a long way to lift morale.

Finally, no self-respecting article on morale in the workplace would be complete without mention of *cake*... Need I say more? ●

Alasdair Cant
Alasdair Cant and Associates
e alasdairc@cambridgetraining.org
w www.cambridgetraining.org

AMA Conference 2011: www.leocinicolo.com