

The Root Causes of Low Employee Morale

By: [John Schaefer](#)

In the movie *Multiplicity* with Michael Keaton and Andie MacDowell, the character of Doug Kinney (Keaton) clones himself so he can get more work done while having more time for his family and hobbies. As you can imagine, everything goes wrong and at the end there are four Dougs and craziness ensues! Things are pretty stressed at his job as a foreman for Del King Construction. One of the best lines is when his counterpart Ken comes up with an idea to get things moving (and to brown-nose the boss a little). Ken states proudly, 'At my old job they used to say, 'If you don't show up for work on Saturday, don't even bother coming in on Sunday!' It was hysterical in the context of the movie (actually Doug wasn't laughing), but it does lead to one of the root causes of low employee morale.

In these hectic, overworked, understaffed times, it's easier than ever for managers (who are usually even more overworked than their subordinates) to come across something like the Quintus Arrius line to Roman slaves from Ben Hur, ' . . . we keep you alive to serve this ship, so row well and live!' It demonstrates how easy it is to come across as a leader who believes that everybody is lucky to have a job, so you better suck it up, keep your nose to the grindstone, and don't complain.

Sadly, this view, while effective during this struggling economy, is killing your company's productivity today, and will lead to significant retention, recruiting, and training costs down the road. The moment that your employees begin to feel that you don't appreciate them and that they're only on board to row, you have amplified the root cause of low employee morale and it's going to cost you big time.

Here are five suggestions that will help you to avoid destroying morale and experiencing both the hard and soft costs of poorly engaged employees:

Suggestion #1—Form Relationships Built on Trust

Strong, effective relationships are built on trust. If you don't have strong, trust-based relationships with your people, everything you do to recognize them will be seen as manipulation. When employees feel that you are using recognition to 'get more out of them' rather than to show that you value them personally, they begin to emotionally disengage and morale suffers. It's not hard to develop trusting relationships with your people, but it does take time, consistency, and integrity.

Suggestion #2—Show Them Respect

The book *The One Minute Manager* introduces a theory of personal responsibility that allows managers to get maximum results with a minimum of time invested with each staff member. The secret is in showing them respect, defining their expectations, and avoiding micromanaging. Most employees respond well to being given enough rope to hang themselves, as long as their job is well defined and they are allowed to fail periodically without fear of unrealistic retribution. Respected employees are more alert, creative, and productive. When they do make a mistake, they'll fix it, move on confidently and won't make that mistake again.

Suggestion #3—Nurture Creativity

Once you've built trusting relationships and developed a foundation of respect, employees will

automatically respond with more creativity. The best way to nurture and benefit from their new-found creativity is to go by the philosophy that there are no bad ideas, only undeveloped ones. Trusted and respected employees with managers who reinforce the fact that they have some flexibility to try new things will surprise you with the creative ingenuity that they bring to their work. The best part is that you get this for the same price you're paying unhappy employees who are doing just enough to get by.

Suggestion #4—Build Effective Teams

Team building is a more complex challenge than fostering high morale in individual employees. Here are five problems that many teams develop that keep them from being as effective as they want to be in accomplishing company goals:

- Absence of Trust—due to invulnerability
- Fear of Conflict—artificial harmony
- Lack of Commitment—ambiguity
- Avoidance of Accountability—low standards
- Inattention to Results—caused by individual status and ego issues

In the absence of trust, morale is at its lowest and self protectionism becomes the rule. It doesn't take a PhD in psychology to realize that this will limit productivity and make work a lot less rewarding for both employees and their managers. This 'every man for themselves' attitude destroys teams and makes it impossible to optimize goal setting and achieve corporate objectives in a timely manner, if at all.

By learning to communicate more effectively based on honesty, consistency, vulnerability, and respect, your teams will be able to focus unselfishly on common results. This in turn keeps individual egos and agendas in check.

Suggestion #5—Make It Real

One of the first things to stress with your management team is what's called 'Making It Real.' This means being genuine and believable in interacting with their people. Employees tend to fall into some common negative habit patterns that employees experience when they feel underappreciated. When your managers understand how to be more open and vulnerable with their staff, they work towards trust, respect and improved communication.

'Making It Real' is the answer to the question, 'What is the root cause of low employee morale?' Maybe it's because it's so simple that it is so often missed, but without your people believing you are genuine, honest, and practicing high levels of integrity, any efforts you make to improve morale will be suspect. If you keep this in mind in your dealings with your people, you will be surprised how easy it is to improve morale and you can enjoy the benefits of higher productivity, better retention, lower costs, and an overall happier, more satisfying workplace.

About the Author(s)

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