

Boosting Morale

There's no denying that occasional, unexpected rewards from management can really lift a group's spirits. Thoughtful gestures such as a surprise lunch together, tickets for an event that can be shared later with a spouse or a snazzy new espresso machine for the office speak louder than words for saying, "We appreciate you."

When budgets were especially tight this past year, smart companies rewarded heavily burdened employees with bonus paid time off. Whether it was a half day, a full day, or a chance to plan for leaving early on Friday afternoon, these companies showed they really cared about taking the "mean" out of lean times.

But boosting morale in a consistent, meaningful way is a day-in, day-out way of life for businesses who want to retain valuable talent. Here are some best practices from the champions:

- **Communicate honestly & clearly about where the company is headed and what management is doing to get there.** Give employees a choice of ways to submit questions and give feedback to management. Conduct an employee survey to find out what their current perceptions and concerns are. Address their concerns.
- **Don't shy away from difficult conversations.** Your silence leaves a void for gossip and (probably inaccurate) speculation, while your straightforward honesty builds trust and credibility. Respond to employee questions, even when you have to admit you don't know the answer or have made a mistake that requires a course correction.
- **Show employees how their role fits into the big picture.** Connect individual, group and departmental goals to company goals. Connect company goals to the mission and potential to positively impact stakeholders and the industry at large. This underscores daily activities by connecting them to the team's shared effort to achieve outcomes and makes work more meaningful in the process.
- **Apply fair, consistent and transparent policies in the workplace.** Don't selectively allow certain people to, for example, borrow company equipment for personal use, bring dogs or kids to work, or sidestep dress codes unless everyone can. Have a policy for telecommuting and flexible scheduling that is based on a logical evaluation of roles and tasks, not preferential treatment for individuals. If some employees have earned extra privileges through performance, be sure that the reasons (and the way others can earn the same privileges) are clearly understood.
- **Be respectful.** By all means acknowledge when an employee has made improvement in an area where they've struggled, but be sensitive to their feelings by giving reinforcement in private when appropriate.
- **Show appreciation publicly.** Make it a point to praise employees for a job well done in front of their peers and customers, but be sincere or don't bother. Everyone else's baloney-indicator works as well as yours

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does. And there's no need to limit positive feedback to an employee of the month program. Just as it takes (depending on which marketing expert you listen to) 3 - 7 repetitions for a person to absorb a message or recognize a brand name, it takes multiple messages for employees to really believe that you see and value their contributions. Remember that your frequent, honest praise for a job well done establishes a foundation of respect between you. This is the foundation that will give employees the confidence to feel safe discussing areas where they need improvement.

- **Deliver development opportunities.** Professional development is a vote of confidence in their abilities and an investment in employees' career progression within your company. They recognize both, and the bonus (beyond improved performance here and now) is that the company will have a healthier internal talent pool to draw from as growth opens up new positions.
- **Offer a sense of ownership.** Invite employees to make suggestions for better ways to get the work done. Really listen. Then give them responsibility for integrating a good idea or process into the job. Adults appreciate being treated with respect for their abilities and judgement. At the same time, over-extended managers need to strengthen the "delegation muscle." For example, use a performance management and development process that actively involves employees in decisions about enhancing their competencies.
- **Allow choice & control when you can.** Being micro-managed should be the consequence of a pattern of poor decision-making, not a standard operating procedure. Preferred "best practices" should be established because they are clearly connected to results, not based on one person's whims. Look for opportunities to give employees healthy autonomy over their personal work space and processes, as long as they are not in conflict with company values.
- **Align business practices with core values.** Really make working at your company something to be proud of. "Walk the talk" is just another way to say "Have integrity." It means that the values your company claims on the company web site or in documents are in fact visible in its actions toward employees, customers and vendors.

Managers and their teams thrive in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. An assessment of the entire group provides a team motivators and behaviors report that shows at a glance where the group's strengths and potential lie. For more information, contact Anita Sirianni 800-471-2619 or coach@anitasirianni.com.