SPIRIT SQUAD—
HOW TO FIX BROKEN MORALE

Margaret Moran

Are your staff members demonstrating less enthusiasm and energy at work? Do they seem unhappy, smiling less and sighing more as they go about their workday? Do they have a less cooperative attitude? Is the quality or quantity of their work slipping?

If you're noticing any of these signs in the practice, your staff could be experiencing low morale. More than just a temporary funk, low employee morale is directly tied to a decrease in job and workplace satisfaction. If not managed effectively, low morale can prove costly to the practice through poor staff performance, increased absenteeism, and a spike in employee turnover. Therefore it is in the best interest of a practice to manage morale effectively.

CASE STUDY
Walking through the front door of the mid-sized Northeast practice she oversees, a veteran practice administrator is overcome by the palpable negative atmosphere inside the office. This is not the first day she has sensed this; rather, it's been building gradually over the past several months. It's now at a point where employees are frequently calling out of work sick, staff productivity is down, and the quality of customer service is noticeably suffering. "This has to stop," the practice administrator thinks, as she looks around, seeing unhappy and dejected employees going about their work. "I need to find out what is going on with the staff and fix it. The practice simply can't continue to operate in this manner."

BE PROACTIVE
If low morale is present, it needs to be addressed immediately. It won't simply go away on its own. Instead, it will likely spread and intensify, since people tend to feed off each other's energy and mood, especially in the workplace. Luckily, as a leader, you have the ability to directly impact employee morale by shaping people's jobs and the overall practice environment. To elevate low staff morale, follow these tips:

Find the root cause. Before any problem can be fixed, it must be accurately identified. Low employee morale can be caused by many factors including—but not limited to—staff layoffs, a change in ownership, unclear or unattainable job expectations, improper training, a lack of professional growth opportunities, and inflexible working conditions. To find the true cause of the problem, seek honest feedback from employees. With their input, an effective solution usually can be devised and implemented to correct the problem(s).

Get to know staff. To get the best out of staff, you need to connect with them on a personal level. Spend time genuinely getting to know each staff member—learn about their family, interests, hobbies, etc. This will make

staff members feel like you care. It will also establish friendly rapport with staff, making it easier for them to approach you about both work and non-work matters and thereby facilitate better communication. With better communication, issues can likely be dealt with before they fester and impact employee morale.

Communicate regularly. Don't leave employees in the dark. Be open and honest with them, communicating regularly to the group about practice happenings, upcoming practice changes, and practice goals. This will stop any potential morale-damaging rumors from spreading in the office. On an individual employee level, be sure to have clear job expectations and provide regular feedback on job performance. When employees are in the know, they feel confident and more secure in their role.

Seek staff input. When appropriate, reach out to staff and get their feedback on upcoming practice decisions. Involving staff in the decision-making process gives them a say in what might ultimately affect their jobs and work environment. Such influence will make employees feel empowered in their role. In addition, their feedback might provide you with information that leads to better practice decisions, more innovative solutions, or responsive practice policies and procedures.

Set attainable goals. Goals give employees clear direction on what to work toward while also providing them an opportunity to grow professionally. When setting goals, be sure to involve the affected individuals and get their input. This will create buy-in and make staff members more committed to achieving the outlined goals. Goals should stretch employee skills just enough to make them challenging, but not too much to make them unattainable. In other words, they should

be realistic. When goals are achieved, employees gain a sense of pride and accomplishment from their work.

Give praise when it's due. All employees want to feel valued and appreciated for the work they do. Be sure to take a moment out of your busy day to recognize individual employees for a job well done. Compliments should not be handed out carelessly, rendering them meaningless. Instead, they should be given when an employee either meets or exceeds expectations. Beyond praising an employee in private, be sure to call out employee successes in front of others such as fellow staff members and practice leaders. It can go a long way toward boosting employee morale.

Deal with difficult employees. Underperforming or problem employees can have a huge impact on the rest of the staff if left unchecked. When a few individuals are able to get away with undesirable conduct, other employees can grow resentful from perceived unequal treatment. In addition, staff members may have to take on additional responsibilities or fix unexpected problems to make up for the shortcomings of a few troublesome employees. This can quickly create a toxic work environment. Problem employees should be confronted in private as soon as possible and the rest of the staff made aware that the issue is being handled.

Manage your own mood. As a practice leader, you help set the tone in the office. If you are stressed, frustrated, worried, or unhappy, your mood will be "felt" by the staff and will quickly spread throughout the entire office. To avoid this, learn to control your emotions and emit a cool, calm, and collected composure no matter the situation. By managing your mood, you can avoid tainting the practice atmosphere and employee morale.

Create a welcoming office. The work environment isn't only affected by those in it, but also office aesthetics. Simple things such as soothing wall colors, soft lighting, plants, a coffee machine, and comfortable office furnishings can enhance the practice environment and have a positive effect on staff mood. A friendly, welcoming space will help ensure that employees look forward to coming to work and being productive while there.

THE SHIFT

When employee morale starts to improve, it will be noticeable. Staff members will be more committed to their jobs, performing them enthusiastically and well. The entire staff will be motivated, working hard and cooperating with one another to meet or exceed expectations. As a result, the practice will run more efficiently and productively, all the while emitting a positive atmosphere to those who enter. This is the work environment you should aim to create and maintain at all times. *AE*

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