

10 Ways Managers Accidentally Destroy Team Morale

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Learn why setting clear expectations and tracking progress is key to a thriving team.



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Even managers with the best intentions can sometimes compromise team morale without realizing it. The art of team management involves balancing professional competence with genuine interpersonal connection. We consulted with 10 experienced industry professionals who shared the common pitfalls that can zap a team's spirit as well as practical tips to help you avoid missteps and lead a motivated, high-performing group.

Shift from micromanagement to autonomy

One specific way managers unknowingly harm team morale is through micromanagement. We noticed a roughly 20% drop in employee satisfaction scores and a decline in on-time project delivery whenever team leads checked every minor detail. This oversight, even if well-intended, stifled creativity and made employees feel they weren't trusted.

To fix this, we shifted from daily "check-ins" to weekly milestone reviews, giving each person more autonomy while still ensuring accountability. Within a quarter, on-time project completion rose by around 15%, and employee satisfaction rebounded, helping us maintain our 100%+

year-over-year growth. The key is to provide clear objectives and support—but step back enough that people feel ownership of their work.

Harsha Abegunasekara, CEO, Metana

Acknowledge challenges, avoid forced optimism

When managers gloss over challenges with forced optimism, employees feel invalidated. They also begin to question the judgment of their leaders. Managers who do this are typically well-intentioned and want to keep morale high. But without confronting reality, innovation and progress come to a standstill.

Restating the problem and inviting correction helps team members feel heard. For example, “I’m hearing you say that the process for returns is cumbersome because of the customer field, what do I have wrong about that?”

Amanda Daering, CEO, Newance

Implement the ‘priority pause’ for requests

After coaching hundreds of managers through team dynamics, I’ve observed that one of the most damaging yet unconscious behaviors is what I call “selective urgency”—treating every task as equally critical and urgent, which inevitably burns out teams and dilutes genuine priorities. This often manifests when managers forward emails late at night with a simple, “Please handle,” or constantly interrupt focused work with “quick requests” that could wait.

Instead, I teach leaders to implement what I call the “Priority Pause”—taking 60 seconds before any request to ask: “Does this truly need immediate attention, and what’s the cost of interruption to my team?” One VP I coached reduced team stress by up to 40% simply by batching non-urgent requests into a daily morning huddle rather than sending them sporadically throughout the day.

When managers respect their team’s focus time and clearly differentiate between urgent and important tasks, morale naturally improves.

Joshua Miller, master certified executive leadership coach, Joshua Miller Executive Coaching

Ensure proper credit for team’s work

One specific way managers unknowingly harm team morale is by failing to give proper credit to their team’s work. This often happens when managers are new to leading people or feel insecure in their role. In an effort to prove their own value or meet high expectations, they may focus on results and unintentionally overlook the importance of celebrating the people who made those results possible. While their intentions aren’t malicious, the impact can leave employees feeling invisible or undervalued.

For example, I worked with a very results-focused manager. When presenting to leadership, they would share the outcomes without mentioning the individuals or teams who made those

results possible. The team began to feel like the manager was taking all the credit, even though that wasn't the intention. Frustration grew, and morale started to dip. Thankfully, a colleague provided honest feedback to the manager, explaining the impact and how this was being perceived.

The manager was open to learning and worked with a coach to improve. Together, they devised strategies to ensure contributions were acknowledged—like calling out team members by name during presentations and incorporating regular moments of recognition into team meetings. Over time, this shifted the dynamic. The team felt seen and appreciated, and morale improved significantly.

The lesson is that employee recognition goes a long way in building trust and keeping morale high. Managers should also seek input from their teams about what kind of acknowledgment feels meaningful to them, whether it's public recognition in meetings, a simple thank-you email, or sharing credit during leadership updates. Managers can create a more positive and engaged workplace culture by showing employees that their work matters.

Etty Burk, president and founder, Leading With Difference

Set clear expectations and track progress

One specific way managers unknowingly harm team morale is by failing to set clear expectations and deliverables for each team member and not having a transparent system to track and measure their work. When a manager's expectations are vague or inconsistent, employees can feel frustrated and uncertain about their contributions and value. This lack of clarity leads to disengagement, misaligned priorities, and a general decline in team cohesion.

One thing we help our clients implement to help keep morale high is a team tracker using objectives and key results (OKRs) to outline specific goals and the measurable steps needed to achieve them. Weekly progress check-ins ensure everyone is aligned and provide an opportunity to celebrate wins or address roadblocks early. A shared dashboard that visualizes progress toward overarching goals can help team members see how their work contributes to the larger mission, giving them a greater sense of purpose and accountability.

You can use a simple spreadsheet. The manager could create a project board for each key objective—planning, execution, and review. Each task is linked to the relevant team member and key results, with deadlines and progress updates. Weekly team meetings then focus on reviewing the board, discussing achievements, and refining strategies as needed.

This approach ensures transparency and cultivates a fair and collaborative environment where every team member feels valued and essential to the organization's success. That is how you start building a team that can do anything.

Rhett Power, CEO and cofounder, Accountability Inc.

Align feedback with role competencies

One specific way managers unknowingly harm team morale is by failing to align their feedback with the competencies that drive success in a role. When feedback is vague, overly critical, or disconnected from what truly matters, it can leave employees feeling undervalued and unclear about how to improve.

For example, a manager might focus on a minor error without recognizing the critical thinking or problem-solving competencies an employee demonstrated in addressing a larger issue. This approach not only overlooks key contributions but also diminishes trust and motivation.

To avoid this, managers should deliver feedback that is competency-based and actionable. Start by identifying the specific skills or behaviors tied to the role's success—such as communication, adaptability, or collaboration. Then, acknowledge where the employee excels and provide clear, constructive guidance on areas to develop.

One of my clients, a manager in a fast-paced sales environment, found that conducting quarterly competency assessments with their team transformed their approach. By grounding feedback in data, they could celebrate progress while offering targeted strategies for improvement. This not only boosted morale but also created a culture of continuous growth and alignment with the team's goals.

When feedback is tied to competencies, employees feel supported in their professional development, which fosters trust, engagement, and higher morale.

Linda Scorzo, CEO, Hiring Indicators

Avoid inconsistent decision-making

I used to watch managers harm team morale in my corporate days, and it bothered me deeply. It's one of the reasons I studied coaching: I wanted to learn how to make a difference for both teams and the managers leading them. While there are many things a manager can do to unknowingly harm team morale (poor communication, favoritism, ignoring feedback, etc.), one that particularly pains me because it's so easily addressed is inconsistent decision-making.

Inconsistent decision-making—when decisions are made without transparency or consistency—undermines trust and fairness. The best leaders follow a predictable pattern with clear reasoning when making decisions so their team members know what to expect, can prioritize accordingly, and ultimately feel a sense of stability.

Inconsistent decision-making is very costly to an organization, causing distrust, hindered performance, employee disengagement, and a negative impact on the business.

I coach my clients to involve their teams in decision-making whenever possible, to be transparent about the reasoning behind decisions, and to ensure that the criteria used to make decisions are fair and clearly communicated.

Emily Golden, CEO and strategic talent advisor, Golden Resources, LLC

Foster active listening and engagement

One of the most common yet often overlooked ways managers unintentionally harm team morale is through a lack of active listening and engagement with their team members. In my experience working with both FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 companies, I've seen that when leaders fail to foster an environment where employees feel their voices are truly heard, it significantly undermines morale. This can manifest as a failure to ask for or acknowledge feedback, or, worse, dismissing concerns or suggestions as inconsequential. Over time, this not only diminishes trust but also leads to disengagement and a decline in overall performance.

For instance, a client I worked with in the tech sector had an exceptional product development team, but employee turnover was high, and productivity was slipping. When I conducted one-on-one interviews, it became apparent that employees felt their input was routinely overlooked in meetings, and their concerns were rarely addressed. The team had valuable insights into improving workflows and reducing stress but had grown cynical because they felt like their voices weren't genuinely being considered.

To reverse this, I recommended implementing structured "feedback loops" during regular team meetings and one-on-one discussions. This would not only offer employees a forum to share their concerns but also demonstrate that leadership was actively seeking to understand their perspectives. Importantly, it was emphasized that these feedback sessions would lead to tangible changes—managers would be expected to follow up on the issues raised. This simple yet powerful strategy helped the leadership team recalibrate their communication, leading to increased employee engagement, improved morale, and a noticeable decline in turnover.

James Rose, strategic organizational psychologist, Cognitive Direction

Stop moving the goalpost

Constantly moving the goalpost is a surefire way to drain team morale. While fresh ideas may seem exciting and innovative to managers, they can unintentionally undermine the hard work and dedication employees have already invested in previous initiatives. For instance, imagine a marketing team tasked with developing a six-month campaign, only for leadership to scrap it midway because a new trend seems more appealing. The team is left with incomplete work, wasted efforts, and the lingering disappointment of never seeing the fruits of their labor.

This pattern can erode trust in leadership and create a culture where employees hesitate to invest in future projects. To prevent this, leaders should establish clear goals upfront and stick to them barring extraordinary circumstances. If changes are unavoidable, communicate openly about the reasons behind the shift, acknowledging the team's previous work and ensuring their efforts are not dismissed.

To maintain morale, offer closure on abandoned projects, such as highlighting lessons learned or incorporating completed components into new initiatives. Additionally, celebrate small wins and milestones within ongoing projects so employees feel a sense of accomplishment, even if

the larger vision evolves. By balancing innovation with stability and recognition, managers can maintain enthusiasm and trust within their teams.

Cynthia Hayes, chief operating officer, Tarkenton

Develop emotional intelligence and self-awareness

One specific way managers unknowingly harm team morale is by lacking emotional intelligence—particularly self-awareness of their blind spots. In high-stress situations, this often manifests as reactive, impulsive behavior that disregards the emotional impact on the team. Without realizing it, managers who react rather than respond create an atmosphere of psychological unsafety. Team members become hesitant to speak up, contribute new ideas, or engage fully because they are focused on self-protection. Over time, this guardedness leads to disengagement, reduced collaboration, and diminished morale.

A manager's emotional state is contagious. When leaders are unaware of how their reactivity influences the room, it sets a tone where employees feel they must walk on eggshells. In this environment, creativity and productivity suffer because people cannot bring their authentic selves to the table. Trust erodes, and with it, the team's ability to innovate and solve problems cohesively.

This dynamic can be avoided by managers prioritizing the development of their emotional intelligence (EQ), starting with self-awareness. Managers must actively seek feedback from trusted peers, mentors, or even their team to uncover blind spots that might hinder their leadership effectiveness. Additionally, investing in practices such as mindfulness, emotional regulation through neurofeedback modalities, and executive coaching can help leaders build the capacity to pause and evaluate their responses during high-pressure moments.

A critical shift occurs when managers learn to pause before reacting, allowing space to consider the broader impact of their words and actions. This intentionality signals to the team that their contributions—and emotional well-being—are valued. It fosters a psychologically safe environment where vulnerability is met with empathy, and team members feel empowered to take risks without fear of retaliation or judgment.

Leaders who model emotional intelligence set a precedent for the entire organization. When a leader demonstrates humility, empathy, and emotional regulation, it cascades throughout the team, strengthening morale, boosting engagement, and creating a culture where people feel seen and supported.

*Natalie Jobity, leadership elevation strategist, keynote speaker, best-selling author, *The Unveiled Way**