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Helping you align your people with your vision



The Four Keys to Influencing Performance and Morale

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

Often I get to work with groups of new managers and supervisors. They are excited about the challenges brought on with their new positions and many are idealistic about how they will make an impact in their organizations. I get the overwhelming sense that they are on a mission to do good work and to help the people whom they will supervise to do good work, too. They arrive at my classes and trainings like this. About half-way through, when they begin to realize what they're up against—long-time practices that seem glacial in their movements, office politics that get uglier the closer you look, staff who are starved for challenge and recognition—they begin to wonder if they can indeed make a difference, if they're up to this challenge.

On one occasion, I had the opportunity to work with a government agency that had had some negative publicity in the media based on unprofessional behavior by former leaders. Trust was damaged. Lines had been drawn. Morale was low. Many of the middle managers and new supervisors had gone to the new leader and pleaded for some kind of solution to help rally the troops, to help get everyone refocused and back on track to do the good work of the organization. They were

surprised to find that instead of being reassured or receiving direction on how to proceed, their new leader said, "I'm not responsible for morale. You are."

At first, I thought this was a terrible response. How can a leader not care about the morale of the organization, of the workers themselves? How can it not be the responsibility of the CEO and the executive team to manage morale issues just as they are responsible for managing productivity and performance?

If morale is the ability of people to maintain belief in an organization or institution, then whose responsibility is it to see that morale is managed? What happens when morale sinks or stinks? Some studies suggest that morale actually has two parts—response and focus. When someone feels good about her work and believes in her organization, she is willing to respond appropriately to her tasks or duties. She is also able to focus on those tasks or duties with minimal distractions from her feelings about her work because she believes in what she's doing and what her organization is doing. Consider all the components to this foundation of organizational morale: First, the organization needs to have something in which people can believe—this is usually a service or purpose identified by an organizational mission statement. Second, she needs to know her place, her part in this mission and what she's responsible for contributing.

Third, she needs regular feedback and praise to help keep her on track and on target. All of these contribute to the internal work, the intrinsic commitment to an organization's mission or vision, but the important

thing is that they directly impact what happens on the outside—the external manifestations of this belief that what she’s doing is worth it. Often, people may believe in a particular work group or office unit with whom they work closely—their team—but they do not believe in the larger organization or in the organization’s leaders. They stay and try to do their best in their work group because they are committed to those people and those tasks or outcomes. However, without a commitment to the organization itself, they are also more likely to falsely represent the organization or to behave unethically. What we need is a commitment to a shared vision or goal.

How do you get a commitment to a shared vision or goal? Here are two initial things to consider: First, does the person understand the vision or goal? Do they know what to do? What part do they play? Understanding is the first step. Second, do their behaviors match with their understanding—this is commitment. Someone says he is invested in a vision—he can understand it and talk about it and make plans, but unless he is demonstrating this understanding—actually performing according to the shared vision with behaviors—he isn’t committed.

Once you recognize a commitment to the shared vision or goal, how do you continue to influence performance and morale?

1. Show respect. To respect someone is to truly see him as an individual with unique, diverse qualities and talents. It is to recognize, that no matter someone’s rank or position or level, he has something to contribute that is essential, integral to an organization’s success and effectiveness. To show respect means that I never talk down or belittle or suggest that you are not worthy of my time and attention. Good leaders recognize that organizations are made up of individual people and that whatever the work is, whatever the mission is; it is ultimately carried out by those people and should be about those people.

2. Demonstrate empathy. Listen with respect and reflect an understanding of what someone feels and why s/he feels that way. Do this without judgment or making it about you. Use the Covey

principle of seeking first to understand, then to be understood. When we listen to understand, we begin to build strong foundations for leadership and trust. This, in turn, sets the stage for developing that commitment to the shared goal or vision.

3. Be specific. Don’t make people guess. They’ll usually try their best, but sometimes, they’ll be wrong, and then everyone’s disappointed. Good leaders must be willing to be specific. In an organization, this manifests in the ability to identify clear expectations for what the vision is, what the work looks like, how we will conduct ourselves with others. Specificity will be outlined in clear policies, accurate performance expectations, true positive feedback and guidelines for improved performance. Being specific means that we offer someone the chance not only to ‘get it right’ but to be excellent based on our clear standards.

4. Be genuine. To be genuine, or sincere, is difficult to define, but most people will tell you when they recognize its presence or its absence. Genuineness requires honesty, vulnerability and accountability. When we are genuine with one another, we ask for help when we need it. We praise one another honestly. We approach our work with a sense of service rather than gain. We build trusting, personal relationships that support one another’s potential and contribute to our shared mission. We are comfortable at work because we are valued for who we are and the ways our creative ideas and skills are utilized. We are safe to question the status quo and we are welcome to the discussion.

Good leaders and managers realize they have two primary responsibilities: to ensure that all employees are consistently performing to standard (or above!), and to ensure a strong, vibrant workplace. Excellent work performance and a supportive working environment directly impact employee morale. Morale is everyone’s responsibility, true, but organizational leaders, managers, and supervisors have a particularly essential role in this. It is their job to make sure that each person understands and demonstrates a commitment to that shared vision—whether it be the numbers of the sales group, the safer communities for law enforcement, the perfectly orchestrated reception for the wedding planners. Because these leaders often accomplish their work through the work of others, their influence on morale is paramount to the organization’s success. ✦

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