

Morale Victories

How Leaders Can Build Positive Energy

It's not difficult to recognize an organization or team that has strong morale, pride, and spirit as opposed to one that does not. In the former, productivity and creativity are high and relationships are strong; in the latter, negativism, dissatisfaction, and friction reign. Here's a look at some steps leaders can take to enhance the characteristics that make for a prolific, efficient, cooperative, and loyal team.

Economic conditions and the churning rapids of change in the business environment over the past several years have delivered a body blow to the morale, pride, and spirit of the workforce. It's hard for employees to stay motivated amid conditions of job insecurity, having to do more work in less time, and reductions or freezes of pay and benefits as corporations seek to slash costs. Surveys show that senior executives and managers have noted a marked decline in employee morale in their organizations since the turn of the century. And that might not be the worst of it. These same surveys show that senior executives tend to have unrealistically optimistic perceptions of morale in their

organizations. If morale is suffering, senior management is often the last to know.

When morale, pride, and spirit are present in an organization or team, productivity is high, relationships are strong, and people find it fun to go to work. Without morale, pride, and spirit, the situation is very different—dissatisfaction, lethargy, negativism, friction, and lack of cooperation increasingly enter the picture.

What exactly are morale, pride, and spirit?

Morale is a reflection of the attitude or mental condition of an individual or group. People with high morale are generally positive, optimistic, cooperative, and supportive of



by **Gene Klann**

the group's vision and mission. They have a can-do attitude, persistence, harmony, and a willingness and determination to do whatever it takes to accomplish the mission. They can quietly but with great confidence in themselves and the group go about the business of completing their tasks.

People with *pride* respect themselves and the other members of the group, delight in the group's achievements, and believe that whatever they must face, they can collectively and successfully handle it. They are proud of the group. They have a justifiable belief in their personal worth and that of the group as a whole. Pride also results in members' identifying with the group and what it represents. The group helps to define them.

Spirit is an animating principle that is reflected in the vigor, energy, vivacity, and courage of the group members. Spirit can be contagious, motivational, and inspirational. It can be generated by the group's leader or members with encouraging words, hand clapping, backslapping, singing, shouting, and so on.

Why is it important for leaders to have the tools to build morale, pride, and spirit in the organizations or teams that they lead? Groups that possess these characteristics are able to multiply their energy, achievements, efficiency, and productivity. High morale, pride, and spirit have a positive effect on the way members

relate to one another and create tangible benefits for the organization. When an organization and its various teams have elevated morale, pride, and spirit, the following benefits can be realized:

- Satisfied customers
- Improved quality
- Increased productivity
- Lower operating costs
- Increased competitiveness
- Increased profits
- Improved safety
- Reduced waste of all types:

material, time, and human and organizational potential

- Reduced absenteeism, tardiness, turnover, recruiting costs, complaints, grievances, security risks, and substance abuse

The techniques for building morale, pride, and spirit outlined in this article are applicable to groups of any size—from two people to an entire organization—although the focus here will be on the team level. These ideas can also be implemented in global and cross-cultural settings. They meet universal human needs and thus cross over lines of race, gender, ethnicity, and age.

VALID POINTS

People have a variety of needs: physiological, safety, and social. Social needs generally have two components: the desire to be validated by others and the desire to be part of something that is greater than oneself. Building morale, pride, and spirit helps to meet these social needs.

People are naturally drawn to other people and to situations and organizations that validate them. What does being *validated* mean? For many people, being validated means

- Being appreciated, recognized, and treated with respect, trust, dignity, and fairness

- Being encouraged to feel special, valued, important, significant, cared about, and worthy
 - Receiving attention, acceptance, affirmation, and loyalty
 - Getting support and being treated with courtesy and understanding
 - Being encouraged to feel that they belong, are affiliated, and are key members of the group
 - Being encouraged to feel good about themselves and having their self-esteem boosted

For many people such treatment can be motivating and inspiring. It can create a positive emotional connection between the person offering validation and the person being validated. Characteristically, the person offering validation gets a positive response from the person being validated: more cooperation, support, loyalty, and productivity. The validated person identifies with the validating source—the leader—as well as with the group and the group's vision. He or she gains a new sense of purpose and works harder. There is a new sense of belonging and emotional support and a blending of attitudes. Group members commonly assume more ownership, buy-in, and identification in relation to the group's goals. The group then experiences greater trust, harmony, goodwill, cooperation, and accommodation. This results in greater productivity and efficiency, and more of the group's potential is met.

A team provides an excellent context in which individuals can be personally validated. When this validation takes place through the process of shared experience, there is also a personal identification with the team, which helps to meet the social need to be part of something greater than oneself. A shared experience occurs when people live through or observe an event together as it occurs in real time. Examples can be seen in military units during wartime, sports

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teams in important games, people going through a crisis together, and families as they experience births, deaths, marriages, graduations, successes, and disappointments.

Shared experiences are important because they are catalysts for emotional connections. Individuals who live through the same event now identify with and receive a new sense of worth from being a member of the group. Their social need to be part of something that is greater than themselves is met.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

If the tools and techniques to build morale, pride, and spirit are to be effective, a two-part foundation is needed. These two components are essential in building a team. If they are not part of the team's culture, the efforts suggested here will have only limited success. The leader plays a key role in establishing both of these components, and ideally so does the team.

The first component has three easily understood and routinely emphasized parts: a vision, a mission, and goals. The process of casting and selling a vision is viewed as one of the most important actions any leader can take in any setting. Team involvement at this stage provides an excellent opportunity for a meaningful shared experience. The vision, mission, and goals should be written, constantly reinforced by leadership, and clearly understood by every member. Many teams have a vision, a mission, and goals, but if these are never emphasized they might as well not exist. A clear vision, a mission, and goals

- State the reason why the team exists, and make clear what it is expected to achieve
- Define a focus toward which all efforts are directed
- Increase efficiency and productivity because team members waste

less time, effort, and resources on secondary issues

- Empower the team members
- Promote cooperation and reduce friction among team members
- Tend to weed out those who don't support the stated vision

The second component is a uniform and clear set of operating rules, standards of performance, values, norms, boundaries, and conventions of behavior. Involving the team members in establishing these rules provides another excellent opportunity for a meaningful shared experience. These rules, standards, and values should be written, constantly reinforced by leadership, clearly understood by every member, and consistent with the vision. Many teams have such rules, standards, and values but fail to highlight them. As with vision, if rules, standards, and values are not emphasized and well known by all members, they might as well not exist. Clear operating rules, standards, and values

- Provide clarity by acquainting team members with what is important to their job functions and what is not
- Endorse and reinforce the expected and ethical way of doing business
- Eliminate ambiguity and confusion by providing operating borders and restrictions
- Make it simpler to integrate new members into the team
- Provide red, yellow, and green lights regarding what to do and what not to do within the cultures of the team and the organization
- Produce a quiet subordination of individual members to and for the greater good of the team

THE LEADER'S ROLE

The leader is an important factor in the success or failure of a team. People choose to follow particular leaders because of who those leaders

are and what they represent. Effective leaders create an environment in which team members can function well. They ensure that needed resources are on hand, remove rather than create barriers and distractions that hinder the team's operations, don't generate problems but instead address and solve existing problems that are beyond the scope of the team members, and accept responsibility for everything the team does and does not do. They set a positive example at all times and in all areas, protect their workers from external interference or criticism, and are wise enough to know that they cannot focus solely on achieving results.

In today's world, leaders must simultaneously do three things to be successful: achieve the desired results, develop and take care of employees, and conduct themselves in an ethical manner. Ethical conduct includes having community, social, and environmental consciousness. To create an environment in which morale, pride, and spirit can thrive, leaders must have the capacity to do all these things. Any gaps in these areas will limit the success of the effort.

BUILDING BLOCKS

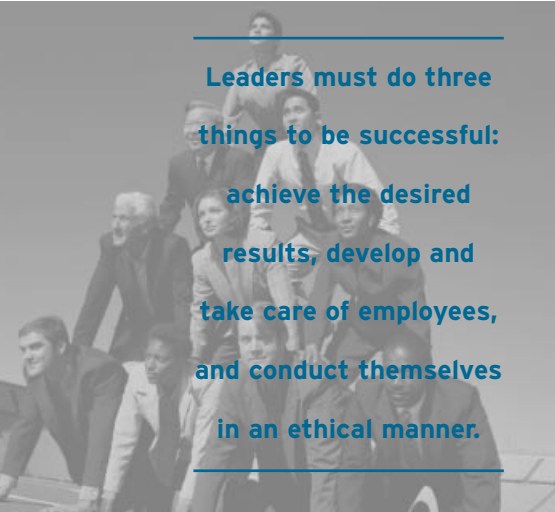
There are two key factors in the building of morale, pride, and spirit: shared experiences and effective communication among team members. The quality and the quantity of shared experiences and effective communication are both critical to success. And it's important to remember that building morale, pride, and spirit doesn't happen overnight.

Shared Experiences

Team members should be collectively involved in many shared experiences, both personal and professional. Shared experiences cause team members to shift from focusing on themselves to identifying with the team.

Spending time and sharing experiences with one another can be

accomplished in a social context. Some may view such interaction as a waste of time, but it can be a very effective means of building morale, pride, and spirit. The time spent is an investment in the team and its vision. Rather than spending more time working, spend some time in social activities. This may sound counterintuitive, but it goes a long way toward achieving increased productivity and teamwork. Shared social activities improve communication, understanding, and relationships among team members. They also cause members to identify more



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closely with the team. They are therefore critical to the process. Many leaders actually budget for social activities, and this is money well spent. There are many creative ways for team members to spend quality time together other than in meetings or other official capacities. The personalities of the team members and the situation of the team should be considered when determining which social activities would have the highest positive impact. Sound judgment must also be used because some social activities could backfire and have a negative effect on morale.

The following ideas have high potential for building morale, pride, and spirit:

- Holding a meeting focused solely on new ideas to improve current products, practices, and procedures
- Holding a problem-solving meeting focused on solving a key problem the team is facing, with one person designated as a devil's advocate
- Holding a decision-making meeting focused on making decisions that will affect the entire team
- Holding a weekly meeting, preferably on Friday afternoons, during which team members share their key accomplishments of the past week and their key activities for the upcoming week, followed by a social time, on or off site
- Sharing a monthly or quarterly breakfast or lunch with no work agenda
- Ordering pizza or other take-out food for Friday lunch, bringing doughnuts on Monday, having a popcorn break in the afternoon, or something similar
- Celebrating team members' birthdays, even if it's just with cake and coffee
- Sharing potluck lunches on special occasions (just before the holidays, for instance, or to celebrate summer)
- Having a social chair and committee to plan parties, outings, and picnics with the aim of promoting cohesion
- Gathering to watch broadcasts of big sports events such as the Super Bowl or the World Cup
- Going to local sports events, with team members' families invited
- Taking a field trip to a similar organization, a relevant historical site, a training or research institution, or an important customer or client
- Doing something as a group for the community, such as adopting a stretch of highway, working on a Habitat for Humanity house, helping with the Special Olympics, or serving a meal at a homeless shelter
- Choosing relevant books or articles to be read and then discussed by the team

- Attending monthly professional development classes on relevant topics
- Watching a movie related to the team's mission
- Doing team-building activities such as golf, volleyball, softball, sailing, paintball, laser tag, and obstacle courses
- Completing personality assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Change Style Indicator, FIRO-B, or 360-degree instruments to improve individual self-awareness and provide insights on how best to interact with one another

Communication

Communication is a key link that bonds a team. It is fundamental to positive and lasting relationships. People want information about things that affect them; this is particularly true in the workplace. When team members have information communicated to them by the leader or by other team members, it makes them feel important and provides a sense of emotional security. This in turn increases their buy-in, sense of ownership, and identification with the team and its vision.

Leaders are, of course, responsible for the communication processes of their teams. They should set the example by being more facilitative than directive. They should also ensure that each individual's thoughts and ideas are heard, be respectful and open to diverse and opposing points of view, and skillfully guide discussions with well-timed questions and explanatory comments.

The best way to ensure effective communication in a team is to have shared agreement on the team's communication guidelines. Such guidelines serve as a covenant between team members regarding how they will communicate with one another and with key stakeholders outside the team. Establishing these guidelines requires time and effort, but the investment brings high returns, as

many potential problems will be prevented or solved before they become major issues. Moreover, team members will be personally validated by their involvement in the creation of communication rules.

The following communication practices can effectively encourage morale, pride, and spirit:

- Communication should be continual, open, honest, and safe. No opinion should be discounted, no idea should be dismissed, and maximum dialogue should be encouraged.
- Expectations and explanations should be clearly communicated.
- Every meeting, scheduled or unscheduled, should be used to pass relevant information to team members because such information validates the team.
- Conflict must be dealt with effectively. When a team member has an issue with a colleague, it should be dealt with directly and as soon as possible. Failure to do so will generally escalate the conflict. Team members should be held accountable for working out such problems. They need to be able to both apologize and forgive; this is enormously important to effective team functioning. Few things can undermine morale, pride, and spirit more quickly than unresolved conflict between or among team members. If conflict is allowed to go on unchecked, cliques will evolve, and morale, pride, and spirit will dissolve.
- Feedback—not only from the leader to the team members but also vice versa and among the members—should be ongoing and routine. Such feedback is valuable in the process of building morale, pride, and spirit because it offers assessment, support, and accountability. Feedback should be encouraged and institutionalized by outlining the ground rules of the process in the team's standard operating procedures. Having ground rules and a specific feedback model greatly increases the openness and reduces

the defensiveness of those receiving the feedback.

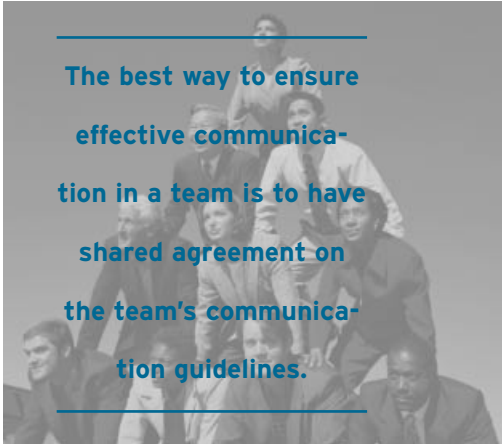
- How communication is handled in meetings is extremely important to effective team functioning. Time limits need to be established and strictly followed for all meetings. The meeting agenda and background material on all the key issues to be discussed should be distributed before each meeting. Meetings should be held at appropriate times, and some should be conducted off site. Some meetings should be held *on the hoof*—with everyone standing during the entire meeting (nothing keeps meetings shorter than this). It needs to be clearly established that meetings are not the forum for one-on-one coordination between team members; such consultation should be done before or after meetings. The types of information to be shared in meetings and types to be shared through e-mails, memos, or phone calls should also be clearly established. These rules promote morale, pride, and spirit by eliminating the negatives that can result from disorganized meetings, such as inefficiency, wasted time, poor communication, mismanagement, and reduced confidence in the leader.

- Guidelines for interpersonal communication between team members should be established. These could include agreements about active listening, asking questions, clarifying responses, requesting information, providing information, appropriate and inappropriate body language, meeting deadlines, ensuring closure, and so on. Having these shared understandings is critical to increasing efficiency, productivity, understanding, tolerance, and patience among team members.

- Guidelines should be established on how team members communicate with one another by e-mail, memo, and phone—that is, what kinds of topics, with what level of importance and what sense of urgency, should be communicated by what means.

- Team members should communicate with customers and clients with a strong sense of urgency, courtesy, cooperation, and goodwill. Without customers or clients the team would cease to exist, along with its morale, pride, and spirit.

There are ways other than quality shared experiences and effective communication to build morale,



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pride, and spirit. Here are some additional ideas:

- By consensus the team could select a logo, motto, colors, and mascot. T-shirts, golf shirts, jackets, ball caps, pins, patches, and decals could be obtained.
- Having a team conference room can be very effective. Such a room can provide a sense of continuity for the team. The room could be given a name consistent with the team's logo and motto. It could display a gallery of photos of former team members, a case for team awards and other recognitions, framed news articles about the team and its achievements, a photo album of team activities and social events, motivational posters or quotes, or any other items related to the team's history and culture. The room could have audiovisual equipment to be used for briefings and training. It could also be used for

social activities such as Friday pizza, Monday doughnuts, potluck lunches, and afternoon popcorn breaks.

- The team could have a tasteful and socially appropriate initiation ceremony for new members. This should never include hazing or any other sort of harassment.
- The team could publish a year-book capturing the successes, activities, and highlights of the team each year.

JUMPING HURDLES

Good leaders are always anticipating. When trying to build morale, pride, and spirit, leaders must consider anything that could keep the process from realizing its full potential. Then they need to react appropriately:

- When trying to build morale, pride, and spirit in an existing team, negative team dynamics and dysfunctions may have to be dealt with first. These can be addressed by improving communication and relationships among team members.
- Some of the current team members may not be open to the initiative. They may want to remain detached. They may think the morale-building process is impractical, simplistic, unsophisticated, idealistic, an invasion of their privacy, or a waste of time. Some may have a wait-and-see attitude. The leader must be tolerant and patient with these individuals. This is an evolving, sequential, building-block process that cannot be implemented overnight. Once the resistant or reluctant members understand and see the process in action, the majority of them should come around.
- Because of their history with one another, team members may feel it is unsafe to open up, be self-disclosing, become vulnerable, or freely share with one another. This can be overcome by time, changes in personnel, and the leader's positive

example. The leader is responsible for creating a secure environment in which individual risk and vulnerability are reduced, personal validation is high, and members feel like parts of an important whole.

- Individual agendas, competitiveness, and ambition may hinder open communication. This can be dealt with in a number of ways: setting ground rules that discourage such behavior, giving feedback when the behavior does occur, and rewarding supportive behavior with bonuses or in the annual review process.
- The toxicity of some organizational cultures and office politics may inhibit the morale-building process. This problem can be difficult to deal with and may not be totally overcome. But leaders should not be discouraged by culture or politics from attempting to implement steps to improve morale. There are no perfect organizational cultures, and leaders must play the hands they are dealt.
- A leader may find that members of other teams in the organization are growing envious of his or her team's new, improved, and developing morale, pride, and spirit. Some of these people may want to join the team on the rise, or they may react by ridiculing or harshly criticizing the team. The leader may be able to resolve these situations by having heart-to-heart talks with the sources of the jealousy.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

Building morale, pride, and spirit is a challenging process. Leaders have to start with a solid foundation—a clear vision, mission, and goals, and clear operating rules, standards, and values. Group members need to have shared experiences, and good communication practices must be encouraged. Social needs—the desire to be validated by others and to be part of something greater than oneself—must be met. Emotional connections, a greater sense of identification with the team,

and a feeling of community need to be developed. When these factors are in place, morale, pride, and spirit become enhanced, and there is a positive response of cooperation and loyalty from team members toward the leader, the team, and the organization. Productivity and efficiency are improved, with positive economic and relational outcomes at every level of the organization. In all this the leader is the key to success. ✍