

MANAGING HOPE IN THE WORKPLACE

Five Simple Strategies Can Help Transform Organizations

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"Hope is perhaps the very substance our soul is made of."

Gabriel Marcel¹

In spite of a booming economy and an unemployment rate at a 28-year low, many American workers struggle with the pressures of their jobs, coping with the effects of downsizing, layoffs, and increased work demands.

Healthcare employees are far from immune to such pressures. After a wave of mergers, acquisitions, and organizational restructuring, morale is plummeting in many American hospitals. A 1996 survey taken for *Modern Healthcare* found that 81 percent of hospitals reported morale problems among staff, up from 59 percent in 1993.² In another survey, 36 percent of all physicians said that they would retire if they could, and another 14 percent were uncertain. The sources of the frustration? Dealing with insurance companies, coping with regulations, and the fear of malpractice litigation.³

How do you restore hope in organizations where optimism has eroded? What can be done to recapture the loyalty that once existed between employer and employee? And, perhaps most important, what can you do to maintain optimism in your career, when working conditions change? Five strategies for restoring workplace morale can help.

HAVE A DREAM

First of all, *organizations that have high morale are those that have a dream.* What might the dream be? It might be providing new services that capture the enthusiasm of the staff. It might be enlisting the support of employees in lowering costs and heightening productivity, or it might be identifying innovative ways to

reward employees for their accomplishments. Whatever the reason, if your organization has a dream, you have planted the seeds of hope.

Unfortunately, it is easy for organizations to lose their dreams, especially when battling budget constraints. Dreams, however, are generally not lost due to economic circumstances. Dreams are lost because the philosophical underpinnings of the organization move from idealism, to realism, to cynicism. This regression to the mundane is not inevitable, but cynicism can creep into the heart of the most idealistic organization, destroying its optimism and hope for the future.

How do you avoid this regression? Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*,⁴ has an important suggestion: Lift your organization out of the mundane. To do this, you must ask questions that address the heart of your organization: Are we *really* making a difference in the life of the community? Has cynicism replaced optimism and, if it has, how do we reverse that process? How do we position ourselves so that the first decade of the new millennium will be the best of all? When you ask these questions, the process of organizational renewal begins in earnest.

UNLEASH INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

The second strategy for building hope is to *unleash the intellectual capital in your organization.*⁵ Organizations have two sources of capital—intellectual and financial. Most administrators spend a great deal of time managing financial capital. But the intellectual capital is equally important, for if your organization is to thrive, it must fully utilize the talents of every single employee.

Unfortunately, many organizations fail to do so. In a study of 1,400 employees, two-thirds of

the workers stated that their employer was operating with less than half the available brainpower.⁶ In another survey, 40 percent of all Americans indicated they were bored with their jobs. Most employees believe their talents are not sufficiently utilized.⁷ The result? Employees are under-performing, not because they are lazy or lack ambition, but because no one has taken the time to discover their talents and consider what expanded role they could play in the organization.

Consider a Minnesota company that hired a Latina secretary. She was terrified that her English wasn't adequate and that employees would make fun of her accent. But in spite of self-doubts she did her job well.

Upon learning that her company was going to market products to Spanish-speaking Americans, she presented the company leaders with a plan of action. They were so impressed with her work, they encouraged her to go back to school, and then they promoted her to a managerial position. In short, they did everything possible to reward this outstanding employee. With the blessings of her supervisors she moved back to Texas to be closer to her family, taking her blossoming international division with her.⁸

Innovative, profitable organizations reward talented employees. To put it another way, most profitable organizations share one thing in common: They manage their employees well.⁹

BE FAMILY FRIENDLY

The third step in building hope is to *adjust work schedules so they are family friendly.*

Employees today are stretched to the limit, not only by work demands but also by personal responsibilities, and they desperately want to work in organizations where the leaders are sensitive to their needs. Fortunately American employers are making dramatic progress in this area. Paid time-off banks, which award employees days off for any purpose, grew as much as 20 percent in 1998; sabbatical policies continue to grow at a brisk 10 percent to 15 percent annually.¹⁰ Furthermore, a growing number of organizations encourage employees to work out of

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their homes. A health commissioner of a large urban health department told me:

We established a policy that allows certain employees to do a portion of their work at home. We provided a laptop computer, an e-mail address, and access to the information they need. Morale improved dramatically and productivity did not

decline. An additional benefit, however, was that we were able to diminish the costs for office space no longer in need. It's been a breath of fresh air for our organization.

If you want to build hope into your organization, develop family-friendly employment policies. Pay particular attention to the tacit rules about how many hours employees should work. A new corporate model dubbed "High Commitment" has sprung up in some organizations that suggests your life should revolve around your job and not much else.

Actually shortening the workweek can be a win-win situation for both employer and employee. According to a *U.S. News/Bozell* poll, 62 percent of the managers surveyed indicated that a short workweek would give employees an incentive to be more productive and would have little impact on the country's overall standard of living. When Metro Plastics Technologies in Columbus, IN, diminished the number of hours employees worked, customer returns in the second half of the year dropped 72 percent compared with the first half. At a company where job openings stood unfilled for months, hundreds of highly qualified applicants now regularly submit their resumes.¹¹

Organizations that are not sensitive to the needs of employees pay the price. Today unscheduled absences have reached their highest levels in seven years. In fact, from June 1997 to May 1998 employee absenteeism jumped 25 percent.¹² The cost to employers? Two hundred billion dollars per year, according to the American Institute of Stress, costing the employer \$757 per employee per year.¹³

REWARD OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE

The fourth strategy for rekindling hope might be the most important: *Recognize employees for outstanding work.* Consider a pediatric nurse who just completed her 20th year in a large children's hospital:

I have always been loyal to my employer. If there was an extra shift that needed working, I'd volunteer. If there was a hospital committee that needed a nurse, I'd be there. But after 10 years of work there was no recognition, and when I hit my 20th anniversary not a word was said. A simple thanks would have been nice.

Does expressing appreciation really matter? In an analysis of 19 organizational behavior modification studies on the effect of financial and non-financial rewards on worker performance, "attention, recognition and feedback [were] just as effective as money," according to Fred Luthans, a management professor at the University of Nebraska.¹⁴ Recognizing outstanding work resulted in a 15 percent rise in productivity.

If you want to build hope in the workplace, remember this important fact: What employees want most is feedback—honest, objective, and well-timed communication. When American Express employees were surveyed, 46 percent indicated that what they wanted most from their employer was personal feedback. That compared to 32 percent who said they most wanted financial rewards.¹⁵ The ideal organization provides honest feedback and pairs it with appropriate financial rewards.

SEIZE "UPSIDE SURPRISES"

The final strategy for creating hope in the workplace is to *seize the "upside surprises."* I first understood this concept through the writings of economist Julian Simon, who wrote a book, *Good Mood*,¹⁶ based on his own battles with depression. A turning point for Simon was to make a disciplined effort to project optimism. He saw each new human being as an emergent brain and soul, not simply a mouth to feed. Without leaving his scientific footing, Simon developed a basis for optimism that permeated his life and his work.

If you want to retain your optimism, you must seek out the upside surprises. And they are everywhere. While I was writing these words, the wife of an employee gave birth to a healthy boy. A colleague received a major award. A new employee was hired whose dedication brings joy to everyone associated with him.

In your unit, there are upside surprises happening as well. If you are a clinician, you see it in the recovery of a patient whose prognosis was guarded. If you are a middle manager, you might see it when one of your employees goes the extra mile and makes your department look good. If you are an executive, you might see it when a board member comments favorably on your facility and your work.

True, there are disappointments that can harm morale. But if you look carefully at the world around you, small, happy surprises take place every day. It may be the kind word of a colleague, or the quiet recognition that you are doing your job and doing it well. Whatever the circumstance, being able to identify the upside surprises is one of the best ways to restore hope to our lives. □

NOTES

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3. *American Medical News*, October 19, 1990, p. 1.
4. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday, New York City, 1990.
5. According to a yearlong McKinsey study of 77 companies and almost 6,000 managers and executives, the most important corporate resource over the next 20 years will be talent: smart, sophisticated business people who are technologically literate, globally astute, and operationally competent. Charles Fishman, "The War for Talent," *Fast Company*, August 1998.
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7. Stephen Franzmeier, "Bored Sick? Here Are Some Solutions," *Star Tribune*, February 20, 1989, p. D3.
8. Syl Jones, "Whatever Your Job, Here's a Strategy to Make More of It," *Star Tribune*, March 13, 1998, p. A23.
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10. Sue Shellenbarger, "Future Work Policies May Focus on Teens, Trimming Workloads," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 1998, p. 31.
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14. Cheryl Cormeau-Kirschner, "Improving Productivity Doesn't Cost a Dime," *Management Review*, January 1999, p. 7.
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