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ABSTRACT

Bad or low morale exists wherever people are dissatisfied with themselves in relation to their environment. In recent years, there is evidence that declining morale has become a problem of national proportions in education. Dwindling enrollments and funding, a changing student body, and curricular adjustments, compounded by the inability of schools to attract and hire new young scholars with fresh ideas, have combined to be extremely unsettling factors. Teacher distrust of and conflicts with administrators have been intensified by collective bargaining and the rise of more militant, professional unions. These recent developments are usually blended with more traditional elements of faculty dissatisfaction, such as bureaucratic routine. Ideally, morale problems would be most desirably and successfully addressed as a joint effort of faculty and administration. The reality of the situation, however, is that administrators should take a leadership role, restraining both their enthusiasm and impatience, sorting the causes from the symptoms of low morale, and considering the following: (1) morale is often misperceived as an institutional phenomenon, but organizational morale is really a collective expression of individual feelings; (2) the quality of corporate morale is relative and lies in the eyes of the beholder; (3) good morale must be preserved by ongoing programs, while bad morale can only be corrected by a unified, collective, methodological, and extensive schedule of problem identification and response; and (4) administrators, staff, board members, and the community have a morale factor, as well as faculty. (EJV)

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"Morale Is Bad!"

by

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"MORALE IS BAD!"

So said the respected counselor of many years to the rest of the planning committee.

"It's really bad around here and we need to do something about it!"

"It's nothing new," responded the math professor. "It's been bad since 1969!" (two years after the college opened its doors).

The college president, and committee chair, interjected that morale is an ongoing concern of all healthy organizations and recognized the need to address its current level of intensity.

"How would you propose we go about this?" he queried.

A silent response was broken with the president's decision. "Let's look into this and see what we can come up with."

Sound familiar?

As the math professor and president noted above, morale is something that has been around for a long time, probably since the beginning of time. In fact, it probably began when Adam began to have some feelings about himself in relation to his environment and then, later on, to his compatriot, Eve. His morale probably wavered when his wardrobe was limited to clean air and a fig leaf. Morale most certainly was plummeting when he and Eve interacted over resolution of the apple and modesty matters. This relationship between morale, people, groups of

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people, and their environment is perceived by many if not most, students of the subject (Allen & Beel p. 6; Daggett, p. 4; Moracco p. 6; McFadden, p. 61; Milstein, et.al., p. 293; Bedley, p. 7; Mikkelsen, pp. 3-4; Bolding and Van Patten, pp. 1-2) and clearly emerges as the nucleus of the concept in textbook definitions (Eysenck, p. 284; Heyes, p. 329; Webster, pp. 1460-9).

The intersection between these elements (people and their environment) emits, among other things, a feeling about the relationship. The value placed upon this emotion translates into morale. (Milstein and Golaszewski, pp. 4-6). As with so many other instances in society, negativism tends to taint this value judgement and morale, therefore, is usually only spoken of in un-positive terms. Consequently, "morale is bad" or "morale is low" are phrases that tend to permeate organizational banter. A similarly negative connotation of morale was noted by Garland when he observed that,

"Like the states of one's health, it becomes important when it is lost. It becomes prominent when it is conspicuously absent." (Garland, p. 113).

There are a few (Mikkelson, p. 4; Corcoran and Clark, p. 103; DeHart, p. 12) who approach the phenomenon in positive terms. Good for them! They speak of "vitality" and avoid the concept of morale, not to mention "low" or "bad" morale, altogether. These iconoclasts and their compadres are to be complimented. If the issue is to be successfully dealt with, what better way than to address it in an un-negative, constructive manner?

Symptoms and Causes

Bad or low morale does not discriminate. It exists wherever people are dissatisfied with themselves in relation to others and/or their environment. The causes of bad morale are similarly widespread. Be it in medicine, military, elementary school, or public service organizations, collective bargaining, burnout, stress, and money recur as perpetrators. (Dannemiller, Lippitt, Rogers, pp. 193-206; Moracco, McFadden, pp. 59-66; Allen, Bell, pp. 3-8; Sartor, Bauman, pp. 28-35). Sometimes it is difficult to tell cause from effect. A strike can be the result of factors which in whole or part were manifested in low morale. On the other hand, the lingering effects of a strike can retard recovery to a positive work climate. (Garland, p. 114; Dannemiller, et.al, pp. 193-206). Although cause-effect elements may vary somewhat, educational organizations are no different from others. They too have morale problems. In fact, Mykletun found that twenty to eighty percent of the faculty in compulsory schools have symptoms of the affliction. (Mykletun, p. 19). Melendez and Guzman diagnose its symptoms as having reached epidemic proportions. (Melendez and Guzman, p. 1).

There is evidence in recent years that declining morale has become a problem of national proportions in education. Dwindling enrollments and funding, a change in the composition of the student body, and curricular adjustments to meet new student needs and demands have combined to be extremely unsettling factors. These problems have been compounded by the

financial inability of schools to attract and hire new young scholars with fresh ideas to address the new challenges. A stagnating, greying faculty has led, consequently, to overall declining productivity. Traditional staff development programs, sabbaticals, etc. appear to have been unable to save the day. (Corcoran, p. 506).

Rothstein feels that teacher distrust of and conflicts with "administrators has been intensified by collective bargaining and the rise of more militant, professional unions." Faculty response has been more concern for their involvement in the decision-making process in order to exert more control over their working situation.

The result of these developments and confrontations has been an ambivalent feeling on both sides. They are uncertain about how to interpret and react to these relatively new developments vis a vis their professional heritage. While the basic needs, demands, and issues are alike, the tweed jacket and pipe can sometimes clash with the blue collar and black lunch pail. Such conflicting attire can strike an even more perplexing scenario to some when complemented by an informational placard jutting from their shoulder or crossed arms slapping one another to keep warm while encircled about a fire. (Rothstein, p. 227; Peterson, p. 99). If not properly implemented, administrative measures to manage this interaction, e.g. hired professional bargaining agents, can sometimes widen the rift even further. (Corcoran and Clark, p. 14).

These recent developments are usually blended with more traditional elements of faculty dissatisfaction. Bureaucratic routine, e.g. committees, meetings, paperwork, remains as an environmental irritant. (Corcoran and Clark, p. 23). Young to middle-aged faculty (and administrators) who are having some second thoughts about their job and re-evaluating education as a career bring something less than a positive contribution to the school environment. Similarly, those close to retirement can be concentrating more on personal rather than organizational betterment. (Corcoran, p. 22).

Responses and Cures

Ideally, morale problems would be most desirably, and probably successfully, addressed as a joint effort of faculty and administration. (Mikkelsen, p. 4). The reality of the situation, however, is that administrators would take the leadership role. (Bolding and Van Patten pp. 1-2). Garland cautions that administrative leadership should not be overly enthusiastic but should be, instead, with emphasis on human worth and dignity and open communications. "Regretably," he continues, "an element of impatience, aggravated by a touch of abrasiveness, has crept into some patterns of administrative behavior with predictable damage to group morale." (Garland, p. 112).

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Just as important as measuring leadership enthusiasm and impatience is the importance of sorting the causes from the symptoms of bad or low morale. Identifying the latter and prescribing a cure does not guarantee healthy individual or organizational morale. The cause of the symptom probably still remains to aggravate the situation at a sooner if not a later date. Burnout (stress at its critical point) is a good example of this analysis. (Milstein and Golazewski, p. 3).

Sabbaticals can allow the person to temporarily escape the problem, but it is still there when they return. Professional development programs can help the afflicted to deal with stress. Schedules of exercise, rest, and diversionary interests can help replace typical responses of alcohol, over-eating, and nervousness. But relief is only limited and temporary. The problems that caused the stress remain. Exercise, rest, and diversionary activities do not provide the distressed with more funds to get the job done; recognition for their efforts; a more effective workload; more flexibility in assignments and tasks; more authority and decision-making power; or a clearer definition of role and responsibilities. (Moracco and McFadden, pp. 59-65).

Other prescriptions for low morale range from the bizarre to the ideal and back again. Corcoran and Clark (p. 11) as well as Hillman and Tepper (pp. 16-17) suggest a well planned and coordinated effort to address individual and hence corporate morale. They would agree with Daggett who found that this process cannot occur overnight and must instead be nurtured over time unto fruition. Sartor and Bauman (pp. 28-34) experienced

success with an orientation session that was intended to remove any ambiguity of role definition, and responsibilities. Rohan would try something more incitive to lift employee morale. He would even go so far as to do something "outrageous" to set an example, make a point, or establish a model for employees to follow (Rohan, pp. 49-50). On a much less dramatic scale, Major would encourage the creation of a climate of cocperation and success through the often overlooked tool of praise. (Major, pp. 28-29).

In more typical educational fashion, Hillman and Tepper reported of their positive experience with task forces and committees to analyze and respond to morale problems. Information was gathered by survey and personal interviews. Responses were evaluated and an action plan developed (Hillman and Tepper, pp. 16-18).

Observations

- 1) Morale is often misperceived as an institutional phenomenon. But organizational morale is really a collective expression of individual feelings. Any redress of grievances must start, therefore, at the personal level. Corporate cures may not meet individual needs and the potential for rekindled bad morale remains. Self-examination and actualization are infrequently sought for resolution of demoralizing ills. This appears to be an untapped reservoir for resolve.

- 2) The quality of corporate morale is relative and lies in the eyes of the beholder. What one person sees as a morale builder may be a demoralizing act to another. Flagrant violators of company travel policies may have low morale following disciplinary action. Other employees may have renewed morale when they learn that the perpetrators have been confronted and brought to task.

- 3) Morale doesn't become bad or good overnight. Good morale must be preserved by ongoing programs and systems that address and respond to the phenomenon. Similarly, bad morale can be corrected only by a unified, collective, methodical, and extensive schedule of problem identification and response. Governance concessions may linger in the bad morale quadrant of administrators forever while faculty may rejoice with the new found power. Bad vibrations between labor and management are not a recent phenomenon. They are not the result of heated discussion and angry profanity. They existed with Samuel Gompers, Jimmy Hoffa, and the like in earlier times. and recur to this very date. Any hope of altering this scene is best tempered with patience.

4) Morale is not unique to faculty. Administrators, staff, Board, and community also have a morale factor. Chances are that this reality would frequently result in a lose-lose situation. No matter what actions are taken in response to morale problems, not everyone's morale will be positively affected. Salary increases gathered in collective bargaining may please employees but displease the Board. Increased class sizes and reduction in staff through attrition may put the budget in the black but shroud the faculty with a spectre of quality education and job security.

"Morale is Morale"

Was the president's report back to the planning committee. "We have it and so does everyone else. It is both good and bad and we can do with it what you will. My recommendation is that we address the issue immediately. Accordingly, I will be hosting a luncheon of the employee advisory committees to explore a plan for identifying and resolving the morale problems at our college. You are all invited. I look forward to seeing you there."

The faculty and staff responded with. (?)

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