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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

8 Steps to Increase Morale

By Deputy Chiefs Joseph and Frank Viscuso

It's hard to conceive that there may be firefighters who would trade their career in the fire service for a 9-5 desk job. We are fortunate in our profession that the majority of firefighters are happy to be on the job and thoroughly enjoy coming to work; however, there is a minority who are dissatisfied and disgruntled. Unfortunately, in most cases the disgruntled always seem to be the most vocal. Over time, those voices seem to multiply (after all, misery loves company) and morale begins decreasing to obviously low levels. Take for example, a 100 member fire department. If that department has ten chronic complainers, thirty happy (but less-vocal) firefighters, and sixty who are caught in the middle, the ten complainers typically have the edge on converting the middle sixty. Even though this is as much a problem in any organization as it is in the fire service, there is a solution. A strong leader, regardless of rank, can take charge of the situation and begin to take actions that will ultimately raise your department's overall morale level.

Why is high morale important?

When firefighters are happy and morale is high, customers receive better service; accidents and injuries decrease; and grievances, discipline and absenteeism are minimized. When morale is low you'll see signs of reduced work ethic, increased violence, increased absenteeism and sabotage, and some may even express a desire to quit all together, which ultimately leads to a decrease in customer service and an increase in complaints. Poor morale will make employees turn on one another and play the blame game. Firefighters blame captains, captains blame chiefs and chiefs blame firefighters. While many want to improve organizational morale, there are those who simply say, "It is what it is." Although it may be difficult for a probationary firefighter to increase the morale of others, every firefighter is responsible for his or her actions, and every individual's actions are part of the overall level of morale around the workplace. I recently read that the #1 cause of low morale in the workplace is when people have to "drag around" dead weight; otherwise known as firefighters that no one will discipline. To solve this problem, everyone must step up to the plate, especially officers and senior firefighters, who should begin to develop an atmosphere where all members enjoy coming to work.

So, where do you begin? On the following pages are eight proven steps that organization leaders can take to increase morale.

1. **PRAISE OFTEN AND IN PUBLIC** – It's okay to catch firefighters doing the right thing, and when you do, it's also okay to let them know. Your words make a difference. Outside of financial security, one of the biggest reasons why an individual takes on a job is for recognition. Hearing the words, "you did a great job" or "that was a nice stop," can mean more to a firefighter than you think. Especially when those words are spoken in the presence of others who overhear the compliment. When a firefighter performs well, tell them so that everyone knows what was done correctly and they too can strive to accomplish similar tasks. In the book *'How to win friends and influence people,'* Dale Carnegie says to praise even the slightest improvements, and do it openly. When criticism is in order, it should be done in private. Don't be fooled by the term constructive criticism because even firefighters who sincerely ask for constructive criticism are secretly looking for and hoping for praise. As a leader it takes energy and commitment to deliver consistent uplifting service, but don't ever forget that when it comes to success in the fire service, praise is the spark that lights the fire.
2. **SET GOALS** – Business leaders, sports leaders and the National Fire Academy would all agree that a true leader adopts a Vision. A vision, which can be defined in a mission statement, cannot be met without clear and precise goals. Establish and define clear goals you want to reach as a unit, team and/or department. Once the goals have been defined, take actions that are uniform with accomplishing them and encourage your officers and firefighters to do the same. Establish expectations up front and measure performances accordingly. Be sure to praise members as goals and objectives are being met. Think of it this way, not having a goal is like jumping in the car with your family for a road trip and not knowing which direction you want to travel in. If you don't know where you're going how could you expect to get there?
3. **LEAD BY EXAMPLE** - Demand the most from yourself as a leader. Provide the best training you can for your group. The better trained everyone is, the more confident and less worried they will be. As with goal setting, get others involved so they can be part of planning important training evolutions such as the one shown in the photo to the right where firefighters from Kearny, NJ organized a full scale technical rescue drill. Confidence in yourself and your team is a morale builder. A leader should also establish and maintain consistency in areas such as vision, reward, discipline and attitude. It's essential that a leader be consistent with his/her mood. Don't be a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. If you have personal challenges happening at home, seek professional help and solutions if you must but don't let problems enter the workplace that negatively affect your mood or the mood of others you work with.



4. **DON'T BE A MICRO-MANAGER** – in Ken Blanchard's book, *'the one minute manager'* he tells the story of a boss who effectively manages a large team. One of his secrets is to begin the day by getting together with his key players each morning for one minute meetings. During those meetings he communicates what he wants to accomplish for the day and leaves it up to those individuals to get the job done. He doesn't constantly look over their shoulders, keep them in unnecessary hour long meetings or criticize the way they accomplished the goal. He simply gives them direction and sets the ball in motion. The moral of the story is 'do not micro-manage.' Respect the talents and abilities of your subordinates and co-workers and they will rise to meet your expectations of them. It's okay to give directions on how you'd like it to be done, but remember that it's the end result you are looking for. There is more than one way to tie a knot and there is also more than one way to accomplish a task. Let them do their job and report to you at the end of the shift or in the timeframe you wanted that task accomplished. Some firefighters in leadership roles don't even realize that they treat their subordinates as liabilities rather than assets. Let managers and firefighters do their job, learn and make mistakes on their own. If you constantly criticize and micro-manage they will begin to lose confidence in themselves and respect in you.

5. **ELIMINATE PROBLEMS QUICKLY** – The majority of morale killing problems we have in the fire service revolve around gossip and rumors. If negative and often inaccurate rumors build, they can have far reaching and negative effects on members. Especially if that rumor revolves around transfers, layoffs, wage-freezes, demotions or disciplinary action. When we were probationary firefighters we spent our entire first year thinking that the governing body of our town was going to lay off firefighters at any given moment. We later found out that this was not the case and we learned an important lesson on the 'evolution of gossip.' There have been three waves of spreading gossip over the last 100 years ... "telegraph, telephone, and tell-a-fireman." Gossip and rumors can kill morale and fuel resentment faster than anything else and the sad part is we do it to ourselves. The solution is simple, tell the truth and stop the rumor mill. Don't let group or individual concerns linger. Have an open door policy and listen to the concerns of your co-workers. Serious problems, of course, would require chain of command, correct disciplinary action steps and due process if necessary, however most of what we encounter is not serious at all, unless, of course, we ignore it and let it grow to become serious.

6. **ENCOURAGE PROMOTION AND HELP YOUR MEMBERS ADVANCE IN CAREER** – I bet you didn't see this one coming. This doesn't mean you should provide certain individuals with special treatment or teach a promotional class in the firehouse. This also doesn't mean that you should help others advance in rank at the expense of your own advancement. This means that you sincerely care about those you work with and create a working environment that provides them with time to develop new skills, study, and work toward promotion. As Deputy Chiefs we both have Captains on our tours that we would hate to lose, but they would make great Chief Officers and we would love to see them move up to that rank. When a test is taken and a firefighter or officer on your tour comes out high enough on the list that promotion to a higher rank is a possibility, be sure to help them learn the job duties of that title so that when promotion does happen they can make a seamless transition. Leaders don't create followers, leaders create more leaders. Be enthusiastic about the success of others. Recognize the potential in others and help them achieve it. Treat people as if they were what they should be, and by doing so

you'll help them become what they are capable of becoming. If you do this, you will always have their loyalty and respect.

7. **INSTILL TEAM SPIRIT** – There are a few ways to create a TEAM attitude. You can train together and often, create friendly competition between members and include firefighters in the process of making decisions that impact the group as a whole. Encourage all members to get involved in department related events. When training, take advantage of the strengths and talents of your members. If a firefighter has a background in building construction or teaches classes at a local fire academy, it benefits everyone to let them share their expertise with other members. On that note, a firefighter at any rank should not hold back information that can help educate coworkers and an officer should feel threatened when others do so. Sharing information should be encouraged. You could be the best firefighter on the job but if you're not sharing information and helping probationary and new firefighters on the training ground and in the fire station, you are no more valuable than a door chock. Great leaders know that to lead people, you have to sometimes walk behind them and give them their moment to shine. It's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit. Another great way to instill team spirit is to allow fire companies to create their own identity. This could come in the form of a group logo or motto. Once chosen and approved, a tasteful logo could be put on t-shirts or even on the apparatus the company rides on. This, of course, should only be done with the permission of your department head.
8. **BE CONSISTENT AND FAIR** – This holds true with regards to both Rewards and Discipline. Morale runs low when upper management shows favoritism. It's blatantly obvious when an officer treats his subordinates differently and gives one or two special treatment. You may have graduated high school with one of the firefighters on your shift, and he may even be your best friend outside the fire service, but if his actions call for either reward or discipline, he should receive the same treatment as any other member. Being consistent and fair will assure that no member feels expendable or less valuable than another. Once favoritism is shown, it's a difficult task to regain the trust of the rest of the team. We must maintain a professional and respectful relationship with open and equal lines of communication for all members, and as a ranking officer, subordinate members need to know they will all be treated fairly in accordance with your departments rules and regulations.

In closing, we would like to offer a word of caution to officers. While firefighters need someone to relate to on a personal level, they also need someone to manage them on a professional level. Don't try to be everyone's buddy, like the fictional boss on the television series 'the Office.' Firefighters want a professional, responsible supervisor who knows how to take charge when it matters most. With that said, don't ever forget that even brave Firefighters really just people who share a basic need of wanting to feel respected. When an individual feels like a key player who adds value to a team, that person will begin to perform at their best, which will increase the performance and working environment for all.

Begin implementing these 8 steps today and you will see an improvement in the morale of your department. Once morale is increased, monitor it and don't ever stop pursuing 100% satisfaction among personnel. It may not be possible, but it's a goal worth pursuing.

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