



As an Employee Assistance Counselor with The Village Business Institute, **Darren Carter** helps clients better cope and overcome life stressors to achieve their goals and promote wellness. He is trained in and implements evidence-based practices for a variety of mental health concerns into his practice with individual and couples counseling.

Darren received his Master of Science in psychology and Master of Education in counseling degrees from North Dakota State University in Fargo. He is a Licensed Associate Professional Counselor and National Certified Counselor. His specialties include anger, anxiety, depression, grief, obsessive-compulsive disorder, self-esteem, stress, and trauma.

In his spare time Darren enjoys spending time with his wife, Elizabeth (Betsy), and their two cats, running, reading history books on U.S. presidents, attending church, watching Bison football games, and spending time with friends and family.



## STRENGTHENING MORALE IN THE WORKPLACE

By Darren Carter • The Village Business Institute

The holiday season can be a particularly stressful time for a business. The demands of fulfilling end-of-year productivity goals can put additional stress on supervisors and workers. The holiday season also presents unique and personal challenges. Whether caused by increased spending on gifts, preparations for holiday plans, or painful reminders of those we have lost, the added stress and grief can weaken workplace morale. You rely on your employees for productivity. Yet, the personal problems they may be experiencing can get in the way of meeting the goals you are relying on them to accomplish.

Let's imagine the following example. Joe has been married to his wife for 12 years. They have three children together.

Recently, Joe's wife separated from him and is in the process of filing for divorce. Joe is now responsible for buying gifts for his children this holiday season, a responsibility that he did not have prior to the separation. Because of the impending divorce, Joe is also struggling financially with legal expenses, the mortgage, and student loans, in addition to holiday expenses. He is also worried about child support. How will he be able to afford all of this?

Joe is also experiencing grief. This will be the first holiday season he will not share with his wife since their marriage. His time with his children is limited as he and his wife are dividing their time with them. He also worries what impact this will have on his children.

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The stress that Joe is experiencing has started to influence his mood and productivity at work. Joe usually is optimistic and gets along with everyone. He has begun to keep to himself. You have begun to notice a dip in Joe's output and efficiency. He appears to be going through the motions and becomes easily distracted. He secretly begins to wonder his own value in the company. Joe's mood is noticeable to others who work closely with him. You worry that his mood will begin to affect other employees' productivity.

This anecdote illustrates how grief and loss combined with the unique stresses of the holiday season can impact job performance. As a supervisor, you have tremendous influence on workplace morale. As with any leadership position, employees will look to you during stressful times. A supervisor's mood and outlook can go a long way in determining employee productivity. Here are some suggestions to strengthen workplace morale:

**Be on the same page.** In any organization, it can be easy to get lost if expectations are not communicated. Be proactive and hold meetings with employees to clearly lay out expectations for the holiday season and any anticipated challenges. Utilize these meetings to create a sense of togetherness in the workplace. Being easily accessible to your employees for any questions and concerns will tell them that you are all in this together.

**Show that you care.** Being valued is a fundamental need. We spend the majority of our waking hours during the week at work. Showing you care about your employees and that they are a valuable part of the team goes a long way. Let them know how much you appreciate them through small acts, such as a conversation or modest gift.

**Reinforce success.** Similarly, acknowledgment of what employees do well is important. Take our example. If the only time Joe interacts with his supervisor is when he is being told what he is not doing well, you can imagine Joe will begin to lose incentive to make those changes. When you see your employees working hard and accomplishing productivity goals, acknowledging it may bolster self-esteem and lead to greater productivity. Employees who are getting positive feedback may influence others to aim for similar productivity goals.

**Check-ins.** If you notice an employee struggling, check in with him or her. Inquire about what is preventing them from doing their job to the best of their ability. Do so in a caring manner, not confrontational. If personal problems are getting in the way, encouraging your employees to see a counselor will show that you genuinely care about their well-being and will strengthen morale.



**Make the workplace fun.** What does your company do for fun? You can be as creative as you want. Whether it be jeans day on Friday or office holiday parties, those who have fun at work tend to be more productive.

**It starts with you.** It is critical that supervisors are emotionally well in order for the company to be successful. What stressors are you experiencing? Are there personal issues that need attending? Remember to take time for personal self-care. Like your employees, you are a valuable asset to your loved ones and to your company. Take time to take care of yourself. You, your loved ones, and employees deserve the best you.



# MEASURING MORALE IN THE WORKPLACE — AND HOW TO IMPROVE IT

Productivity and profitability are king in most businesses, and the highest levels of both come when there is high morale in the workplace.

Employee satisfaction surveys, focus groups, and studying internal and external complaint trends are good ways to discover the degree of morale in your business. If time or resources to conduct these sorts of measurements are limited, this snapshot of the three levels of morale may be useful.

## LOW MORALE

Low morale is a concern because it means that your workforce is not just unhappy, it also means they are unlikely to be performing to their best capability. Some indications of low morale are:

- **Low productivity** – If you are noticing that otherwise competent staff are having trouble getting work done in a timely manner, you likely have a morale problem. It may be that your team does not feel appreciated, or they may think that their efforts aren't being fairly compensated. Increasing pay rates isn't the answer.
- **High turnover** – A stampede of people applying for jobs outside your team or your organization, or few people applying for internal spots on your team, could be an indicator of low morale in the workplace. The best people don't stick around in teams or organizations that don't fulfill them.
- **Inter-personal conflicts** – Are you regularly acting as referee rather than leading your team to high performance? Discontent within the workplace leads to conflicts and frustrations spilling over.

## MEDIUM MORALE

This category is a gray area where determining the level of morale can be extremely challenging. A workplace with medium morale may seem to function quite well, but there are often underlying issues that crop up from time to time. Indicators that you've got problems include:

- **Social reluctance** – If your team members are performing their basic work tasks OK, but hesitate to show up at office parties or other non-required events, this may indicate that workplace morale is at a medium level. Low social activity is often an indicator that you are on the slippery slope toward low morale, particularly if previously there had been good socialization within the team.
- **Putting in the minimum requirements** – A workplace with high morale is characterized by staff that are happy to go the extra mile. Create better incentives to take your workplace to the next level.

## HIGH MORALE

High morale is the goal of any workplace. Team members with high morale display these traits:

- Dedication to the company
- Enthusiasm about their work responsibilities
- Confidence in their performance
- Willingness to do more than required
- Desire to associate with coworkers outside the office setting



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## IMPROVING MORALE

There are four key elements your organization should address in order to inspire and motivate people toward high-performance. Understanding the “4 Bs” and what goes into them will help you get and keep people engaged.

- 1. Believing** – In the organization and the role
  - Connect people to their purpose
  - Design people’s roles so they can play to their strengths
  - Create a culture that inspires high-performance
  - Make sure base needs are met (money, safety, security, job conditions)
  - Provide challenging and meaningful work
  - Celebrate success
- 2. Belonging** – A sense of belonging and being valued
  - Promote a sense of community, social interaction and teamwork
  - Ensure regular face-to-face contact
  - No culture of politics, competition, and in-fighting
  - Give regular, direct yet supportive feedback
  - Keep it fun
- 3. Behaving** – Clarity on the behaviors that will enable success
  - Enable input and choice in how work gets done
  - Offer opportunity for learning, growth, and advancement
  - Avoid unproductive meetings, withholding information, tolerating poor performance, or punishing people for making mistakes
  - Provide the systems, tools and information to do the job well
- 4. Bottom-line** – Tools, resources and context to help achieve results fast
  - Set clear targets and expectations and measure performance
  - Reward fairly
  - Utilize people's capability and strengths

Morale in the workplace is critical to the success of any organization. By recognizing the signs of high, medium, and low morale, you can work to create a more positive and productive work environment so that everyone wins – you, your team members, your organization and your customers.

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