

# Improving Morale in Tough Times

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

One of the casualties of recessionary times is the devastating impact on employee morale. Layoffs, hiring and pay freezes and budget cutbacks all lead to increased employee insecurity, worry and stress. To determine more exact reasons for this decline, Accountemps conducted a recent survey of executives that asked: "Which of the following has the most negative impact on employee morale?" The findings of this survey were:

- 33% reported "a lack of honest communication"
- 19% reported "failure to recognize employee achievements"
- 17% reported "micromanaging employees"
- 16% reported "excessive workloads for extended periods"
- 14% reported "fear of job loss"

They followed up by asking executives: "In your opinion, which is the best remedy for low morale?" Following in order of greatest frequency are the responses to this question (with the percentage of those responding) along with my commentary as to how each element could be more readily implemented in your workplace.

**Communication (48%)**—The single most important element for improving employee morale and motivation at work is a seemingly simple one: honest communication. Employees need information in order to do their work, but they need and want information about so many other things as well: What's going on in other parts of the organization? What strategies are planned for the development and marketing of new products and services? They also want more and better communication on a personal level from their manager, such as asking employees for their opinions or ideas for improving processes or saving money and employee input on decisions that are pending, especially those that affect them.

**Recognition Programs (19%)**—Certainly having recognition tools and a well-designed recognition program are important, but even more important is getting managers in the organization to use those tools and programs. In my experience, this comes from a concerted effort to raise the awareness on the part of managers as to why employee recognition is critical today, why employees expect to be recognized for having done good work, how that recognition can further drive the goals of the organization, and the manager's role in making recognition happen, showing managers what recognition looks like in practice. Even a well-intended manager will not be able to make recognition happen if they are not sure how to do it well.

**Monetary Awards for Exceptional Performance (13%)**—Yes, money is still important, perhaps even more so if there has been a salary freeze or cutback.

Employees want to see the money as the finances of the organization improve and, like recognition, they want it to align with performance that matters, not in an across-the-board gesture to make everyone feel better. Providing rewards just for being present regardless as to the quality of the job one is doing is a sure-fire way to further erode employee morale. Top performers will feel slighted, whereas average and even marginal performers will be reinforced for being average or marginal—and that's the performance you'll likely continue to get from them.

**Unexpected Rewards (11%)**—It pays to be spontaneous! Most people think spontaneity means acting without planning, yet it is very possible to plan for spontaneity. For example, have the resources ready for spontaneous celebrations: party supplies, confetti, balloons, or phone numbers for how those things can be quickly obtained. Consider hosting an ice cream social, a pancake breakfast, a barbeque or potluck lunch on short notice to celebrate a milestone or group success. Have management make or serve the food and use some of the time together to talk about the success and identify and acknowledge individual efforts that made the success possible.

**Team Building Events or Meetings (3%)**—Part of building the morale of your group comes from spending time together, getting to know one another on a personal basis, doing some type of non-work related activity. This can be as simple as having everyone in your group share two things that motivate them at your next meeting, which gives everyone the chance to learn more about those they are working with. Of course doing a group activity that is fun—bowling, laser tag, paint ball or a fieldtrip to the local fair—can go a long way as well. When possible, try to link these events to some element of success or performance the team has achieved.

**Additional Days Off (3%)**—Don't overlook the use of time itself as a form of reward. This is an especially good option when more costly forms of recognition and reward are less available due to budget constraints. For example, Los Angeles-based JS Communications recently gave employees two free "I Don't Want to Get Out of Bed" days in the current year and, even better, Boston-based Greenough Communications started offering "Winter Fridays" earlier this year in which high-performing employees are awarded by being able to leave at 3 pm on Friday.

# # #

Bob Nelson, Ph.D., is president of Nelson Motivation Inc.; a frequent presenter to management groups, conferences and events; and a best-selling author of *1001 Ways to Reward Employees* and *The 1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook*. His latest book is *Keeping Up in a Down Economy: What the Best Companies do to Get Results in Tough Times*. For more information or to order visit [www.nelson-motivation.com](http://www.nelson-motivation.com) for more information.