

Creative Teaching

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILMINGTON CAMPUS TEACHING RESOURCE CENTER

Volume 5, Number 2

November/December 2003

The Story of the Morale

by Andrew D. Zimmerman

From the hapless worker in the movie *Modern Times*, played by Charlie Chaplin, who, overtaken by a machine he must tend, becomes caught in its mechanism—a veritable “cog” in the machine, to Franklin M. Hart, Jr., the sexist and vicious boss played by Dabney Coleman in the movie *Nine to Five*; from Mr. Dithers, Dagwood Bumstead’s grimacing boss to Dilbert, there has been a constant and familiar refrain: the workplace can be a most unpleasant place.

There once was a prevailing attitude among employers, thankfully discarded by more enlightened organizations, that if one was not happy with some aspect of one’s work, and expressed it, they were free to leave; that they could be replaced the next day. Not only has such demeaning and invalidating treatment of employees substantially declined, but employee morale has become a frequently studied, if not as frequently actualized, work-related issue. Especially at a time of widespread budget shortfalls and hiring freezes, employee morale—what it is, how it might be measured, and what can be done to enhance it—is coming to the forefront of organizations’ efforts to ensure workplace stability and productivity in the face of dwindling financial resources. What follows is an attempt to review what is known about morale, drawing on the established literature.

What Is Morale? Several researchers have focused on faculty morale at colleges and universities. Zeitz (1983) saw it as “a collective trait describing members’ affective [read, *emotional*] responses to the organization.” To Rice and Austin (1988), it meant “pride in the organization and its goals, faith in its leadership, and a sense of shared purpose with and loyalty to others in the organization.” Johnsrud (1996) defined it as “the level of well-being that an individual or group is experiencing in reference to their worklife.”

Employee Retention Strategies, a Phoenix-based H.R. consulting firm, identifies a series of myths about employee morale problems. Among these myths are: “People most often leave [an organization] for more pay;” “People don’t want more responsibility;” “Improving employee satisfaction is

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FOCUS ON...

...TERRY FISHER



Some of the most hauntingly beautiful poetry that I’ve ever been exposed to ushered forth from this issue’s featured colleague. In fact, of the one hundred or so finished poems (and another hundred in varying stages of completion), fifteen have been published in ten different journals. This is quite an accomplishment for someone who teaches students how to work effectively with alcoholics and other drug addicts.



Terry Fisher

But then, Terry Fisher is no ordinary academic. A number of years ago, while he was in the middle of completing his Masters degree, he was restless, so he decided to immerse himself in Ancient Greek literature—works by Homer and Virgil, among others. It wasn’t enough, though, simply to read the English translations. So he taught himself the Ancient Greek language in which these works were originally written. Similarly, he taught himself French, so that he could read *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo in the original. At various times, he has also taught himself Latin and German.

After completing a B.A. in history, Terry earned both his Masters (1982) and Ph.D. (1987) degrees in social work (along with social research at the doctoral level) from Bryn Mawr College. The MSW gave him the opportunity to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), a status which has allowed him to see clients privately and receive reimbursement from health insurance providers. Along the way, Terry also obtained certification in alcohol and drug counseling (CADC), in both Delaware and his native

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Pennsylvania. In addition to his private practice—which he maintained throughout his doctoral work—Terry has also been the assistant director of SODAT (an outpatient drug and alcohol treatment program located two blocks up on Orange Street), and the clinical director for Net Counseling.

Terry joined the Human Services department in 1992 to coordinate the Drug and Alcohol Counseling degree program. When asked what most inspired him to become an educator, he replied: “A few teachers in grad school really made education a fun experience; their influence made me think about teaching.” In addition, nine years in private practice, working with clients one-on-one, had made him feel isolated. “I felt the need to be around people more, in my area of expertise. So it seemed like teaching might be a way of sharing what I knew, and doing it on a larger scale than just one-to-one.” He adds: “I’m a ham, anyway”—something his immediate colleagues and his students can readily confirm.

Terry cites his expertise in psychological theory and theories of addiction, as well as his practical experience as a clinician, his ability to communicate effectively, his love of students, and his sense of humor as his main strengths in his work with students. Moreover, he says, “I’ve learned a lot from them—especially the ones from other cultures.” As an example, he points to how he has greatly deepened his understanding of African American culture, something that, as a product of the predominantly white Philadelphia suburbs, had largely eluded him prior to coming to Delaware Tech.

Since he began teaching, there have been two major challenges that Terry has had to overcome: an excessive need to be liked, and a tendency to fall into the trap of using testing and grading approaches which, while convenient, may not adequately assess how well students are learning the material. To address the first challenge, he has sought to inject more structure and discipline into his courses, to make them “a little tougher.” This has led him to stick more consistently to his expectations and demands of his students, and to not always try to accommodate everyone’s needs when it comes to, for example, scheduling make-up exams.

Among Terry’s many assets, his skillfulness in facilitating and working with groups is considerable. (Groups are frequently utilized in the therapeutic approaches taken in the field of drug and alcohol counseling.) These skills are of potentially great value for educators in other subjects who organize students into work groups to accomplish specific tasks, or who would like to explore the possibility of doing so. Perhaps he can be persuaded to share his expertise with us.

The Story of the Morale, continued

expensive;” and “Employee satisfaction is ‘fluff.’” To counter these myths, the firm offers the following rebuttals: employees who are leaving may *claim* that it’s the pay, but more often than not the *real* reason is dissatisfaction with the job or organization. When it comes to added responsibility, of course employees who are already overworked have no interest in additions to their workload. But “opportunities to grow and develop their skills, advance their careers, and have the opportunity for greater variety”—even with no promotion involved—are usually enthusiastically welcomed. As far as employee satisfaction is concerned, improving it does not depend on “the trinkets and prizes given in recognition and rewards programs,” but instead depends on a “management

that listens and responds to employee ideas about improving service, supervisors who support people’s growth and initiative”—*things which cost nothing*. And to counter the myth that employee satisfaction is “fluff,” Employee Retention Strategies cites numerous studies which show, among other things, that “the cost of replacing an employee who leaves has been estimated...to be between 70 and 200 percent of that worker’s annual salary.” And, citing the Council on Competitiveness, it is claimed that “a 10-percent increase in education has a more positive impact on productivity than a 10-percent increase in work hours.”

How Can Morale Be Measured? As it turns out, morale is not merely an amorphous *emotional* response to an unpleasant work experience: it has been successfully measured. It should be noted that what should *not* be measured is as important as what should. Robert McGarvey, writing for *Electronic Business* (“Leading in Lean Times: Tips and Tricks to Keeping a Workforce Motivated,” 12/1/02) observes that “many [organizations] don’t even know they have a morale problem,” because the “classic metric” of high turnover is “no longer trustworthy.” This is due to the fact that in an ailing economy, most people will not leave even if they are very dissatisfied. Moreover, as the working population ages, many employees may opt to endure an unpleasant job so as to preserve their retirement benefits.

Some of the best efforts to measure morale not only come from academic institutions, but from actual studies of *faculty morale* at colleges and universities around the United States. For example, James H. Stewart and Rhonda Spence undertook a study of faculty morale at Tennessee State University (“A New Look at Factors Related to College Faculty Morale,” *Educational Research Quarterly*, March 1996). They included such factors as work load satisfaction, working conditions, adequacy of supplies, adequacy of physical conditions, faculty-administration relations, perception of colleagues’ morale, fairness in personnel management, recognition of accomplishments, research opportunities, professional meeting opportunities, and students’ academic behavior.

The factors they found to be most significantly linked to the level of morale consisted of 1) faculty dissatisfaction with work load, 2) working conditions, and 3) relations between faculty and the administration. They found *no relationship* between morale and race, sex, academic rank, or salary. One caveat about salaries: the “perception of inequity” in salaries was postulated to lead to significant dissatisfaction. By extension, it can hypothesized that a “perception of inequity” with respect to *workload* might be similarly harmful.

In a more recent study of faculty morale (Linda K. Johnsrud and Vicki J. Rosser, “Faculty Members’ Morale and Their Intention to Leave,” *Journal of Higher Education*, July/August, 2002), the authors assessed the strength of various indicators of morale at a ten-campus system of public higher education in a western state. They used four major categories, each containing several specific indicators. One of the major categories, perceptions of faculty work life, which included professional priorities and rewards, administrative relations and support, and the quality of benefits and services, turned out to be the most significant. Moreover, the *type* of institution (e.g., four-year as opposed to two-year institutions), did not materially alter their findings. They then noted:

“Perceptions of worklife [sic], however, had a direct effect on morale....In short, it is the quality of faculty worklife that matters most to the morale of faculty members.”

Various studies have consistently identified faculty-administration relations, particularly opportunities to participate in institutional decision making, as a critical factor in high faculty morale (see, for example, Rice and Austin, “Faculty Morale: What Exemplary Colleges Do Right,” *Change*, 20(2), 1988). Conversely, other studies have identified perceived inequities in reward systems and work loads as critical factors in *low* faculty morale (see Kerlin & Dunlap, “For Richer, for Poorer: Faculty Morale in Periods of Austerity and Retrenchment,” *Journal of Higher Education*, 63, 1993).

What Can Be Done to Enhance Morale? In a recent article on faculty morale (David A. Probst, “A Six-Step Approach for Improving Faculty Morale,” *Academic Leader*, April 2003), the author recommends that administrators redouble their efforts in the following areas:

1. Open the lines of communication. Each administrator needs to let the rank-and-file faculty members know the issues facing the campus. You will be surprised that faculty often have a reasonable solution to many of the problems facing a campus if they are just given the opportunity to comment. Try soliciting input or feedback from the faculty to your suggestions for changes in the way that the campus operates....
2. Stay visible. Look for opportunities to be seen on your campus as much as possible. “Management by walking around” can enhance morale, especially if you cheerfully greet those faculty members you encounter and pause to chat with them as one human being to another....
3. Develop and clearly define a sound faculty reward system. ...[L]ook for ways to develop a sound faculty pay schedule that is not overly influenced by market conditions at the expense of equality. Also look for “non-traditional faculty rewards” (such as “...providing extra clerical support, granting travel or faculty development money...”).
4. Thank everyone for everything. Let your faculty members and others within the college...know you appreciate the work the faculty is doing. Send personal thank-

you notes....Finally, during times of financial difficulty let the faculty know that you think they are productive and thank them for helping you identify ways to address budget concerns.

5. Whenever you hire a new faculty member, always remember to pay as much attention to the new faculty member’s colleagues as you do to the new faculty member....
6. Develop consistent procedures. ...Whenever you have a major budget or curriculum decision to be made, be sure to seek faculty input. Nothing will affect morale more than if the faculty hear that you are considering a change in evaluation processes, reducing faculty health care benefits, or increasing the teaching load without consulting with them. While most faculty dread serving on committees, most want to provide accurate feedback when the issues hit close to home....

The “Moral of the Story.” From the great wealth of studies of employee morale, whether in the private or public sector, whether in high tech or higher education, one stark fact emerges: organizations whose leaders give employee morale a high priority are significantly more successful at what they do. Not only do they tend to have lower turnover, but they tend to have employees that are more loyal, more productive, and more innovative.

Within higher education specifically, with respect to faculty morale, two primary factors dwarf all others: 1) the extent to which faculty are able to participate in the key decisions about such issues as their work—how it is to be done, *how much of it* is to be done, etc.—and the terms of their compensation, and 2) how much equity faculty members perceive with regard to how their institutions carry out some of these same items—workload and compensation, in particular. The greater the opportunities for meaningful participation in decision making, and the greater the degree of perceived equity, the higher faculty morale tends to be overall. Conversely, the fewer the opportunities for meaningful participation, and the lower the level of perceived equity, the lower faculty morale tends to be overall. And *that* is the moral of the story...the story of morale.

A VERY HAPPY HOLIDAY
TO ALL!!