

THE UNASHAMED GUIDE TO

Virtual Management



Virtual Workforce

Virtual Teams

Virtual Meetings

Virtual Office Romances

Ben Bisbee and Kathy Wisniewski

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Maintaining Morale

Maintaining good morale in any workplace setting can be a bit of a challenge, so it's important as a virtual manager to do what you can to create an environment where morale is high, but also recognize when it's not—and then do something about it. And frankly, doing both is equally important. We understand that sometimes there is nothing you can do to stop morale from decreasing, but if you keep your finger on the pulse of your team's morale you can act immediately when you see it starting to decline to keep it from going further. Don't be like the orchestra on the *Titanic*—continuing to play as if nothing was happening around them, despite the fact that the ship was literally sinking. We're sure the fish were impressed, but the guests still suffered.

Let's Level Set, Shall We?

Morale can be a very abstract concept to try to wrap your head around. It's not always easy to define, but it's typically fairly easy

to gauge, especially by your employees. They know when things are not right as they interact with their co-workers and discuss how they feel about the current temperature of the organization. In a stationary workplace, low morale can be difficult to see until it's a problem. But in a virtual setting it can be more than difficult—it can go undetected until it's palpable and destructive. So you need to keep your radar up and your morale-building skills intact and ready to go!

Work hard, play hard was a frequent mantra of mine leading a consulting practice with more than 90 percent virtual employees, including myself. So, if we were planning a practice or department meeting, I would incorporate a theme to enhance the experience regardless of whether the individuals worked at headquarters, another office, or from home.

I still remember one department meeting after a multi-team restructure, during which we were discussing ways the teams would need to work together to implement the new solutions on the horizon. It was during the 2016 election season, so it felt fitting to incorporate a debate theme. The twist was that each team could only debate “views” (products) that other teams would normally deliver. We scheduled the debate for the end of the meeting, appointing managers as “moderators” and asking each team to nominate their “candidate.”

The activity not only encouraged the teams to learn about each other, but it was apparent many also had fun with the theme. One candidate even created a podium in his home office, which everyone could see via Skype! True political views were off limits during the meeting, ensuring everyone could have fun learning about other products.

—Jena Blaustein, Nonprofit Business Management,
Senior Consultant, Blackbaud, Inc.

Virtual Morale

In your virtual setting, there are four different levels of morale you need to recognize and respond to. Each one requires you to be constantly proactive in your approach. Those areas are:

- creating good morale
- maintaining good morale
- noticing and triaging sinking morale
- rebuilding bad morale.

Good morale begins with happy employees. Happy employees are those who are treated well and fairly; have meaningful work to do; work with a team that they know has their back (and doesn't talk behind it); and have a manager whom they can trust and is easy to approach no matter the situation. Some of these will be out of your control, but most are not.

Creating Good Morale

Creating good morale starts at the very beginning during the initial hiring process. Do your best to conduct conversations with prospective employees using video conferencing so the person can see your facial expressions and body language. Then be sure to portray your enthusiasm for the organization and communicate the best parts about being employed there. This will excite them and make them want to be a part of your team. Even if this isn't the candidate you ultimately end up hiring, you've at least raised some positive awareness about your organization. And if it *is* the person you hire, continue to create a good foundation for virtual morale by offering a thorough online orientation and onboarding process (see our chapter on this for ideas). Make sure you also express your open-cyber-door policy—they should know that you're available to them whenever they need you (for anything work-related, of course). Establish this positive relationship right from the get-go and you've laid the foundations for good morale.

But what if you're managing an existing team? How do you create good morale within a team you inherited? Great questions! In this situation, you want to make sure that you either create or continue to build on the strong, sturdy foundation of open dialogue, constructive conversations, goal setting, and helpful performance reviews with each employee. We talk about each of these in other chapters of the book. Ultimately, just follow the golden rule—treat others the way you want to be treated.

Maintaining Good Morale

Once you release your new employees into the cyber realm, it is a little more difficult to maintain the fuzzy feelings they got during the hiring and onboarding processes, especially after the novelty of a new job wears off. But it is certainly not impossible. There are a few things you can do in the virtual world to help maintain good morale. For instance, hold weekly or bi-weekly staff meetings (on camera preferably) to check in with one another. Make these meetings upbeat and fun. Even if something somewhat negative comes up, direct the conversation to focus on the positive aspects of it, or at least some positive steps you can all take toward rectifying it. You want your team to leave these meetings feeling like they were heard and that they have actually accomplished something. One of the fastest ways to kill morale is by having pointless meetings. (See our chapter on meetings for more.)

Another tip might be to have one-on-one chats with your team members every few days to ask how things are going and if you can be of assistance in any way. Put reminders on your calendar so you don't forget to have these chats. What can seem very spontaneous to the employee can actually be something very intentional for you—and that's OK. They don't need to know that. Employees who feel cared about and who feel like their manager is

on top of things and knows and understands what is going on in the organization are happy employees indeed.

In our chapter on educational growth opportunities, we speak about the importance of incorporating education into your virtual team's benefits. Did you know it's an excellent way to maintain morale too? Especially if education is offered, as opposed to something they have to request with fear and trepidation. If you are investing in your employees in this way, it helps them feel valued and respected, which are two important pillars of good morale.

One last tip in this category is to celebrate the team's accomplishments and milestones—both personal and professional. We have a chapter on this, as well, with a plethora of ideas, so check it out! When you acknowledge someone for a thing they have accomplished, it makes them feel good. Morale is all about feeling good. So make them feel good!

Noticing and Triaging Sinking Morale

Sometimes moral slips. It happens. No need to feel guilty; management is hard and morale can slip for a number of reasons. Maybe it's just an extra busy time for your organization and your staff are feeling the pressure. This makes the gauge on the morale-o-meter start to tick down a bit, but you likely just need to ride out the season and morale will improve on its own. Other times, there are things you can try to keep morale from sinking lower.

If you're asking yourself how diminishing morale might show its ugly head in a virtual workplace, you are asking exactly the right question! While low morale often shows up in exactly the same way it would in a stationary workplace setting, it may be a little more difficult to identify. Morale might be low for one single employee, for example, which could present itself as an act

of insubordination. If you can catch it and address it with that one person before it spreads, that's awesome! Remember, the hallmark indicators of good morale are cheerfulness, confidence, and productivity—it's how your employees feel about the organization, and certainly one employee can have negative feelings about the workplace.

But low morale is like an invasive plant that spreads rapidly throughout the ranks. So quickly, in fact, that by the time you start to see the symptoms, it's already set in. This is even more true in the virtual setting. So how do you recognize it? Perhaps you notice an increase in gossip—if the ole grapevine seems active, it's a good bet there's something going on. Or perhaps it's a sudden decline in meeting participation. If you notice that several or more people are not interacting with the group or offering ideas or suggestions in your team meetings, this could be a good sign that morale is low. Other indicators include a general lack of care and enthusiasm, increased call-offs, or, worse, turnover.

So be vigilant! During these times it's important to notice low morale, catch it, and stop it in its tracks. Even in a virtual world, you should make every effort to recognize when someone or several someones aren't acting right. Trust your gut and investigate the details. It is perfectly acceptable to have a meeting and ask your staff to explain their perceptions and feelings. Tell them you've noticed that things seem a little off and then ask if something is going on that you can help with. As a manager, always treat your team as partners and be there to serve. As always, it's important to hold these meetings on video conference. Your team needs to see your concern and willingness to help. This will lend itself quite nicely to building or rebuilding good morale. If you've created an open and approachable environment, they will likely not have any trouble answering your questions.

Rebuilding Bad Morale

What happens when something big goes down and your team's morale is shot? Or what if you've been handed a team whose morale tanked right before you took over? Either way, it's a bad situation that's never beyond repair. This is when you to swoop in and do what you do best—you build, you create, you talk, and you invite others in.

Your efforts at rebuilding bad morale can benefit from many of the tips we shared about creating good morale, because you truly are starting from the beginning. Actually, you're often starting from below zero in these situations. And that's not always a bad thing. Starting from the bottom means the only way to go is up and forward. Clearly there is rebuilding that needs to be done—and you, confident virtual manager, are just the one to do it. We encourage you to set up individual phone or video calls with each member of your team to really get to the root of the morale issue. Ask them questions such as:

- What do you think is and is not working within our organization?
- How do you think the situation can be improved?
- At what point did you start feeling this way?
- Was there a single event or circumstance that caused your engagement in or view of the organization to decline?
- If you were in my position, what is the first thing you would change?
- Are you willing to hang in for x amount of time to give me a chance to turn this around?

Listen intently to their answers and take notes. Once you have spoken to each person or department, compile the information, create a plan, and hold a full-staff video conference to roll

out your morale development strategy. This might feel a little like political campaigning, but rather than looking at this as a race you really want to win, change your perception to look at it as a journey you want to take *with* your team. Your goal is to be the best you all can be—collectively and individually.

The remote model at Lockwood allowed us to scale very quickly to meet our clients' objectives and hire the best talent. All of Lockwood's SOPs are based on a remote workforce and making sure our culture embraces this fact. We have embraced technology, which has clearly helped scale the organization. However, we also realize that live engagement is important, which is why we try to get teams live as much as possible.

Some think that having remote teams is less expensive than having everyone come to an office. I would argue that it is a push at best, and most likely more expensive. Yes, you save money on real estate but if done correctly you spend at least as much on engaging the company with live events and so forth. In the end, I would not want to have it any other way.

—Matthew Schecter,
President and CEO, Lockwood

A Few More Thoughts

✓ **Be observant.** It is not often that a staff member will come to you and say, “Hey boss, morale is in the gutter.” If you have a super open relationship and they feel comfortable doing that, then great! But more likely than not, this won’t happen. So, it is up to you to observe the regular behaviors of your staff and notice when things are starting to shift in a downward direction. In a virtual setting, this might mean

asking yourself some hard questions. Is there a staff member that typically chats you at least once a day, but has suddenly gone for days without a chat? Is there someone who is usually the first to speak up in a meeting but now there's nothing but radio silence? These are good indicators that something is amiss. Investigate.

- ✓ **Don't take it personally.** Shifts in morale are normal. If you're going through a lower season, remember that these things are part and parcel to every work environment. You're not the first to experience it. The key is to be proactive—figure it out and turn it around.
- ✓ **Remain open.** If you, as a manager, are closed off, you will never hear the valuable feedback that can help you refine your management skills. So, keep an open mind and invite your team to give constructive feedback. Empower them to be change agents in returning to a state of wonderful team morale.
- ✓ **Evaluate.** Once you get the morale turned around, it's important to evaluate all the information you gathered to figure out why morale fell in the first place. Was it a leadership issue? Is it something you need to look at within yourself? If you remain humble and can see within yourself the areas that need improvement—and then improve them—it will make maintaining good morale all that much easier.

Signing Off

Many of the things we've written about weave together and relate to other things in any form of workplace. Morale is no different. It is just that in the virtual workplace you need to respond more powerfully on the front and back ends, because the stuff in the

middle is likely to get lost in a less stationary environment. More than ever you need to get comfortable on the phone and camera and work with your team to do the same.

If you take our advice on other areas contained within this book you will be well on your way to building or maintaining amazing morale within your organization. Ultimately, your staff wants to feel valued and respected. They want your investment in them to be at the same level as their investment in the organization. They want to be partners in the organization's success and recognized for their achievements. Seem like a tall order? If you work these things into your daily virtual managerial life, you'll find that it's simply your norm.

About the Authors



Ben Bisbee is a dreamer, a doer, a madman with focus; the good kind of dangerous. A multi-sector professional with more than 20 years of experience building successful, award-winning community and development programs for organizations of all shapes and sizes, he is a nationally recognized author, speaker and problem-solver. As the chief vision officer at Rhinocorn, a design house for nonprofit innovation and advancement projects, Ben works to drive the focus and direction of the company's vision and purpose.

Considering himself a social technologist, Ben is quickly becoming known for his work in virtual technology and methodologies, helping to build strengthened relationships between humans and the technology they use to work, play, and engage. Ben lives in northeast Ohio with his husband, Joe, and their 10 cats.



Kathy Wisniewski, CVA, is a nonprofit professional who has been in the sector for nearly 20 years. Currently serving as the executive board administrator for the Histiocyte Society based in Pitman, New Jersey, she specializes in volunteer and board administration. She has a particular love for the international community as she scouts, plans, and executes the society's annual meeting in various locations around the world.

Kathy is also a Certified Health Coach and owner of True and Lasting Wellness. After so many years in the nonprofit sector and seeing firsthand how professionals are in danger of burnout and in need of more balance in their lives, she chose to focus her business on primarily virtual health coaching for nonprofit professionals, helping them discover and reach their health and wellness goals.

Both of these endeavors have honed Kathy's virtual management skills and given her a deep appreciation for the advantages of technology in being able to reach a larger audience in our virtual world. Kathy was born and raised in New Jersey and although she now calls northeast Ohio home, she will always consider herself a Jersey girl.

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