

Small Unit Leadership: Part 3 of 12
Morale: Whose Job is it anyway?

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Karl Von Clausewitz, a Prussian military general and military theorist, identified morale as a fundamental military principle. Since Clausewitz published “On War” morale has developed into a concept seen as critical to organizations, including law enforcement. Unfortunately, morale is difficult to define and in many circles has become somewhat synonymous with motivation. In this article we will look at a very different definition of morale, its potential effects and how the first line supervisor can affect it.

The beatings will continue until morale improves

Often times, people consider morale the same as motivation. But, morale is not about motivation. If it were, negative discipline could improve morale. There are times negative discipline is used to improve performance. Negative consequences can be a powerful tool in shaping behavior. So, if morale were about behavior or performance, negative discipline might be a tool for improving morale.

That is not to say that improved morale does not improve performance; it does. The point is that there is a clear separation between morale and motivation. High morale can be very motivating. High motivation can improve performance. There is a linkage between morale and motivation but they are not the same.

It’s not about individuals

Traditional definitions of morale include: the mood of individuals in the workplace; attitude or spirit; how a unit feels about itself and its abilities; and even, a state of individual psychological well-being. As you can see, these definitions go back and forth between the individual and groups. We all have good and bad days. Yet, as individuals who occasionally

wake up on the wrong side of the bed we generally don't affect the mood of the entire unit. As our personal attitude ebbs and flows, the morale of our unit is marching to a different drummer.

Morale is about groups and it might be defined as how a group feels about what it does. For instance, this group feeling can be an expression of how high or low the group values an activity. If a group of detectives has their job suddenly changed and they find themselves working in uniform and issuing traffic citations they may have lowered morale because they place a low value on working in uniform and issuing citations.

For the detectives, their normal working conditions do not involve uniformed activities nor issuing citations. The activity is outside their group norm and not highly valued. Morale is about sub-group norms and values and their alignment with larger organizational norms and values. For our hapless detectives, working in uniform and issuing citations is not the norm nor highly valued by the group. Therefore, when the larger organization imposes new norms and values, if the group maintains its previous norms and values there is a misalignment which manifests itself as low morale.

Norms, values and morale

Let's explore how a well delivered "pep talk" before the big game can improve morale. What coaches tell players is that they can win, they are the best, winning is important, etc. During a "pep talk" a coach is not motivating players, rather he or she is reinforcing that the norm is victory and that it is highly valued. The job during a "pep talk" is to align team attitude with the larger organization norms and values. Again, morale is expressed as high or low alignment of norms and values between an organization and its sub-groups.

Of course, if the team doesn't win it reverts to the norm of a losing and is out of alignment with the larger norm. The team's morale is lower after the loss. Conversely, a win

could serve to reinforce the team belief in the norm and value of victory. After a win, we would expect high morale.

A norm is the behaviors expected within a group of individuals. It is a belief shared by the group about what is normal and acceptable. In groups we establish norms so that we can anticipate and judge the actions of other group members. In law enforcement we have a strong safety norm. We expect our peers to be tactically sound and safe. We place a high value on this norm. Value is an expression of worth we place on an activity. In other words, groups can have many norms (safety and productivity) and they can place differing values on those norms. For instance, we generally value safety over productivity.

Changes from the top, within and outside

If your organization developed a new rule, policy or procedure that seemed to value productivity over safety morale would be lower. Employees would have the previous value scheme wherein safety was more important than productivity. They would not feel good about the change. Also, like the detectives who were asked to issue citations, if the organization rapidly changes the norm, employee morale falls. It is the imposed change in the value or norm that lowered morale.

Changes and challenges to sub-group norms sometimes come from outside the organization. If a police officer is killed, especially in the line-of-duty, many group norms and values are challenged. Daily, police officers face dangerous situations. The norm is that we, as individuals or members of a team overcome those dangers. The death can represent an inability to overcome danger thereby challenging the norm. Moreover, we value human life, the individual person who died and safety. An on-duty death can shake all three values. This outside challenge to the norm can lead to a lowering of morale.

Sub-group changes from within are somewhat more subtle. A sub-group with high congruence to organizational values can find itself drifting towards new sub-group norms and values and experience lowered morale. As an example, weak small-unit leadership can lead to deviant peer group behavior becoming the norm. Perhaps the leader allows a clique to grow within a watch. A clique will develop its own norms and values. Typically, it will value clique membership more than watch membership. This change in values leads to a change in normal behavior which manifests itself as a reduction in watch morale.

Alignment is more than motivation

When groups feel good about what they do, they experience high morale. Certainly, high morale can lead to improved productivity and quality. If we accept the proposition that morale is an expression of sub-group alignment with larger organizational norms and values an increase in productivity and quality makes sense. As an example, if the sub-group and the larger organization both value traffic citations, traffic citations will be issued.

For law enforcement, sub-group alignment with larger organizational norms and values is even more critical. Police officers work in a high discretionary environment. Basically, we choose when to intervene and what to do. The use of discretion is driven by our norms and values. In other words, our decisions will reflect our alignment with organizational norms and values. Consider the impact of norms and values alignment on high discretionary activities like the application of reasonable suspicion, probable cause, use of force, and vehicle pursuits. Simply put, high morale leads to greater group and individual integrity.

How small-unit leadership impact morale

Because morale is an expression of how well your unit has incorporated organizational norms and values morale is critical part of your leadership. First, you should seek clarity in

understanding your organization's norms and values. You should understand how your organization's mission, goals or objectives support the norms and values. After it is clear to you, express it to your unit. Use your roll call time to incorporate a discussion on norms and values.

To lead a small unit you must be a story-teller. When you train or debrief during roll call emphasize how actions reflected your organization's norms and values. Be specific. Every action can be interpreted through your organization's norms and values. Let your people know specifically how their actions reflect positively or negatively on the overall norms and values.

The next time you offer praise consider that you are not praising the action so much as praising how much the action reflects the norms and values. In law enforcement, your unit is performing much of its critical work without the benefit of your on scene leadership. The only way you can influence them at critical moments is by reinforcing their understanding and commitment to your organization's norms and values. It must be in their heart and only you can put it there.

You don't have any control over outside influences. You are going to face the implementation of an unpopular change in the norm. Somebody is going to dictate a new policy or procedure. While you can't control the outside influence you can control your unit's interpretation of it. Minor changes are fairly simple. Introduce the new policy or procedure, provide your employees with as much background on why the change is necessary, train them and then follow-up with praise or sanction. Larger or dramatic changes are more difficult.

As with smaller changes to the norm, you must first seek clarity. Find out as much as you can why the change is necessary. Make sure you know as much as possible. I am always honest with my people. When I don't like something or think a change is going to be difficult I admit it. As a follower, I have sat through too many gratuitous roll calls where the sergeant or

lieutenant is giving us happy talk. I recommend you say something like, “I don’t like this anymore than you do. But, this is how we are going to do it.”

This admission is actually an emphasis of the norm of obedience to orders and the value of you place on it. After you have made this admission, adopt the new norm and place the appropriate value on it. Don’t undermine yourself or your organization by rolling your eyes or somehow expressing that you don’t believe the new change should be implemented. As with the minor change, provide your employees with background information, training and follow through.

It is very likely that by addressing difficult issues head on you will improve morale. Your leadership is a reflection on your ability to maintain alignment between your unit and the larger organization. By praising actions as an expression of organizational norms and values you will be providing your employees with leadership during whatever situation they face. Morale is your job.

About the Author

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