Spotting the signs of employee discontent

Do you know when your team members are happy—or not?

Here are some quick ways to gauge the level of your team’s satisfaction:

• **Listen to workplace humor.** Normally, people who laugh and tell jokes are happy, and humor can help make the workplace more satisfying for everyone.

But when jokes take on a cynical tone, or are made at co-workers’ or managers’ expense, it’s time to stop laughing and start asking questions. Many people feel more comfortable raising issues in what they feel is a lighthearted, nonthreatening matter.

Don’t take a hard line against workplace humor unless it’s truly disrespectful and demeaning to other employees. But trust your instincts. If you think a joke about conditions, or about co-workers, is more cruel or bitter than funny, ask the team member if there’s anything serious you need to know or deal with.

• **Look for patterns among similar team members.** For example, if none of your team members under age 30 participate in team discussions as much as you’d like, there may be a problem with your team discussions. It’s easier to spot patterns by looking at groups of employees who hold comparable positions or share similar backgrounds.

This does not mean that the issues you spot are only problematic for the team members within that group. If one group of employees seems alienated or frustrated, other employees may feel the same way, just not as strongly. And that group’s discontent may itself be frustrating other employees. By addressing these problems, you can improve the overall climate on the team and help everyone feel more satisfied.

• **Behold the sounds of silence.** Have you ever held a meeting and gone over a problem, process or policy and asked intermittently or at the end: “Are there any questions?” And oddly, no one asks anything. Surely they have questions; they just don’t care what the answers are. The discontent is festering at this point. The ambivalence is a symptom of a deeper problem that you need to address. Ask yourself: “Do I take their questions to heart?” “Are my meetings really a group discussion, or am I just haranguing them with my thoughts?” Employees need to know that their input matters.

Peak Performance

**Motivating without extra money**

We often hear questions like this: “My budget's been frozen, and I can't offer salary increases or even bonuses to my team members. How can I motivate my people?”

While nobody should be forced to work for an unfairly low wage, real motivation is almost impossible to buy with even the most generous salary. But we think of money as a motivator because a raise or bonus is an easy-to-understand signal of an employee’s value to the team and the enterprise. Here’s how to send the same message without more money:
Set high expectations — and raise the team’s to match. It’s a rare employee who’s going to perform consistently at a level higher than what you accept or expect. So set your expectations as high as you can, and let your team know you believe it can meet these goals.

High expectations will themselves help spur motivation, but if they’re too high, your team will feel burdened and demotivated. So your ultimate goal is to help team members set high goals for themselves. The way you help is by offering frequent praise and appreciation for the team’s good work — while at the same time focusing on ways to build on that good work and get even better results.

Focus and enable employee strengths. By “building” on that work, we mean to focus on employee strengths rather than weaknesses. Let’s say Tom is a standout on one project but a weak link on another. Telling Tom — no matter how nicely — that you expect him to do equally well at both tasks isn’t likely to be very motivating. Indeed, it sends the message that Tom has failed somewhere along the line.

Instead, work with Tom to find ways he can do even more on the project he’s got nailed. Give him more responsibility and authority, or give him time to explore new ideas for process improvements. This tells Tom loud and clear that you think he’s a success, and the more motivation he builds, the more he’ll have in reserve to bring his performance on the other project up to par. That is, unless you decide that Tom’s time is better spent doing the things he’s better at — a commonsense notion that more team leaders should take to heart.

Know what people want — and where to find it. A basic component of motivation is respect for employees as people with goals, dreams, likes, and dislikes. To not know what these interests and ambitions are — or fail to point the employee toward achieving them — is disrespectful and demotivating.

In our example, which of Tom’s two projects do you think he found more interesting and rewarding? The one he was good at, of course. The more you know about your people, the more easily you can match them with assignments and career paths that correspond to what they want. Even if you can’t always find a perfect fit, the fact that you care enough to try is a tremendous motivator.

The manager’s best motivational tool is absolutely free — employee satisfaction for a job well done. Follow this advice to help build a climate on your team where satisfaction is the status quo, and you won’t need more money to motivate.