

What to Do When A BAD



Administrators can bolster school morale by expressing empathy and focusing on strengths.

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In this age of accountability, schools are often not happy places. Educators may feel frustrated and resentful over the ways in which they're being asked to generate ever-greater results in a context of scarce resources. Hardworking and successful teachers may feel undervalued and underappreciated by new evaluation systems designed to identify and deal with underperforming teachers. And rapidly evolving curriculums are placing teachers in a constant state of flux.

These and other factors leave educators reporting higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction with their jobs than at any other time in the past 25 years; indeed, more than half of all teachers today report feeling great stress at least several days a week (Harris Interactive, 2013).

For many educators, morale has been declining steadily, and work has become



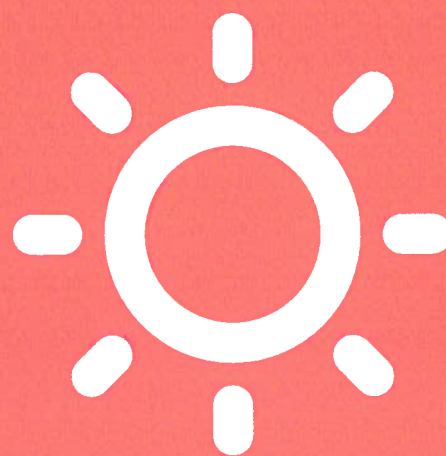
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more of a chore than a calling. That makes bolstering school morale a primary school-improvement strategy. But to begin, we must first understand the nature of morale.

Morale as Mood

We can think of morale as an organizational mood, and we can view a school with low morale as a school that's in a bad mood (Solomon & Flores, 2001). Moods are different from emotions. Emotions are intense, intrusive feelings tied to particular events or circumstances. Moods are less intense, more generalized, and more long-lasting. Anger, for example, is an emotion that arises in response to a specific action or circumstance, and it often results in a set of palpable physiological changes. Cynicism, on the other hand, is a more diffuse mood that reflects one's orientation toward the world.

Moods are not things that just come over a person and over which a person has no control. They are, rather, habits of mind or ways of being in the world. The same can apply to organizations. The faculty of a school can evidence a collective mood, either good or bad. Some of the more common bad moods include feelings of suspicion, resentment, cynicism, resignation, and despair. Such moods influence people—and what they're ready, willing, and able to accomplish. As Ramsey (2000) noted,



“people with low morale tend to see obstacles as potential opportunities for failure, while people with high morale see obstacles as challenges which need to be solved” (p. 93). Although all bad moods are problematic, the most devastating of all bad moods is resentment, or wounded pride, because it tends to be clandestine and can sabotage both organizational leadership and objectives (Solomon & Flores, 2001).

Building and sustaining school morale are essential functions of school leadership. Education leaders can use three crucial strategies to turn a school's bad mood into the kind of good mood that promotes student learning and success.

Strategy 1. Mind Your Manner

For a start, school leaders would do well to manage their own mood and way of being with people because these are contagious. If leaders convey a sense of frustration at the many demands confronting them, these feelings can easily spread throughout the organization. On the other hand, if leaders do a good job of managing their personal presence and energy, those good vibes, too, will spread.

School leaders must, therefore, take the responsibility for showing up every day with positive energy and presence. This doesn't mean they should be inauthentic in how they engage with their faculty and staff. Rather, good self-care practices should give them the resources they need to genuinely keep their own morale from sagging.

One simple strategy that many leaders have found helpful is to take at least one short break during the day for rest, reflection, and renewal. An elementary principal we knew made it a daily practice to visit the preschool class in her building because it never failed to lift her spirits. Another principal made a point of going outside



and taking a brief walk around the grounds during the early afternoon. In addition to breaks, many leaders have expressed the value of connecting with colleagues for advice, support, and counsel around the demands of the job. External resources, such as leadership coaches, can also help school leaders find fresh perspectives, muster new energy, and develop new strategies for moving forward.

The key is for school leaders to engage in these practices intentionally and regularly, rather than letting them get squeezed out by their busy schedules. Such renewal strategies aren't included in a school leader's job description, but neglecting to develop them and do them well may undermine the quality and influence of a leader's work. When leaders do a good job managing their energy, they convey a sense of creativity, optimism, and hope—the very energies that make for and undergird successful schools.

Strategy 2. Cultivate Empathy

Empathy, properly understood and expressed, is a beautiful gift. Empathy

is neither sympathy nor pity. Rather, it's expressing a respectful understanding of another person's feelings and needs in any given situation. It's particularly powerful when school leaders express empathy to teachers and staff members who are frustrated by, discouraged about, and distressed over circumstances they cannot fully control. When school leaders express empathy in this way, they create a positive sense of connection, foster cooperation, and evoke the willingness as well as the courage to try new things.

This understanding of empathy has led Marshall Rosenberg (2005) to develop a process for expressing empathy in ways that can help school leaders improve school morale and win cooperation. The process, known as *nonviolent communication*, focuses on four distinctions that can shift your communication in ways that will garner greater cooperation.

Observe, Don't Evaluate

When speaking with a staff member, it's important to convey only clear observations of what you saw or heard, *without including any evaluative language or overtones*. This skill takes commitment as well as practice to master. For example, instead of saying, “Your comment was rude and inappropriate,” describe what you witnessed—for instance, “I heard you say ‘Shut your mouth,’ and then I saw you turn and walk away.”

Although this may not sound as though one is expressing empathy, it is, in fact, a crucial first step. Evaluative language interferes with the communication process before it even gets started. Instead of establishing a sense of partnership, it sets up a defensive dynamic that doesn't facilitate cooperation, learning, growth, or change. Making clear, matter-of-fact observations of what you saw or heard

minimizes argument and maximizes the possibility for cooperation. This practice alone can begin to shift a school's mood in positive directions.

Acknowledge Feelings, Don't Judge

Having expressed a clear, neutral observation of what happened in a particular situation, it then becomes important to try and identify the feelings that were stirred up in that situation. The key is to identify those feelings, both in oneself and in the others involved, without taking on the thoughts that accompany those feelings.



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For example, instead of asserting, "You stormed off in a huff because you thought you were right and she was wrong," you might say, "I'm guessing that when you walked away, you were feeling hurt and frustrated and perhaps even overwhelmed by the intensity of your emotions."

Separating feelings from thoughts can be more difficult than it seems because the English language is structured in ways that disguise thoughts as feelings. Sentence structures that begin, "I feel like...", "I feel that...", or "I feel as if..." are often followed by words that convey an opinion or judgment rather than an authentic emotion, as in, "I feel that what you said was unprofessional."

Recognize Needs, Don't Offer Solutions

When staff morale is low, it's an indication that one or more universal human needs are not being met. These may include the needs for recognition and acknowledgement, respect, harmony, and self-efficacy, or the need for a sense of meaning and purpose. Although different people have different strategies for meeting these needs, the needs themselves are what we hold in common and what can create a basis for empathy.

For example, when someone complains, "Oh, great! Not another last-minute change!" instead of pushing

rather than demand it be done in a particular way. Asking, for example, "Would you be willing to tell me what's bothering you?" rather than saying, "Come back over here and apologize!" is more likely to generate a positive response.

This small shift in language can make a huge difference in outcomes. Asking, as opposed to telling or demanding, acknowledges and respects people's need for autonomy and makes instigating change far more likely. Such expressions of empathy are not signs of giving in to poor practice or expressing weakness in the face of opposition. Rather, they're signs of cooperative engagement in seeking mutual understanding and collaboration.

Strategy 3. Focus on Strengths

Keeping conversations constructive takes great care and a sound, structural framework. *Appreciative inquiry* provides just such a solid, research-based model (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Appreciative inquiry is both a philosophy and a process for fostering whole-system change by focusing on strengths and what's going well rather than on problems, gaps, or discrepancies. Although it may seem counterintuitive to focus on strengths when things are going poorly, this approach has been found to be surprisingly effective, especially when dealing with issues like low morale in the workplace.

The thesis of appreciative inquiry is simple: Explore and amplify strengths—that is, find examples of what you want, then design and execute strategies that replicate and expand on those strengths. It's far more effective than ferreting out examples of the things you don't want and designing strategies to eliminate them.

Appreciative inquiry was developed

back, it's helpful to acknowledge that perhaps the person's need for consistency has been stirred up. When leaders recognize such needs, even when they're being expressed as complaints or with sarcastic or hurtful comments, it invites a more empathetic and often more constructive response.

Ask, Don't Demand

Because the work of leaders is to win cooperation with organizational goals, it's important for leaders to learn to communicate in ways that avoid generating resistance and resentment. Winning cooperation becomes more likely when we ask whether someone would be willing to do something

as a transformational change process for organizations and groups by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987). Its practices revolve around five principles (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011):

1. *The Positive Principle* asserts that the real power to transform problems stems from identifying, appreciating, and amplifying people's strengths and the things they're doing well rather than trying to identify, analyze, and fix weaknesses.

2. *The Constructionist Principle* asserts that positive energy and emotion are constructed when people have positive conversations and interactions.

3. *The Simultaneity Principle* claims that conversations and interactions become positive in new ways the instant we ask new, positive questions. Asking about aspirations and possibilities—as opposed to searching for root causes of problems and engaging in the finger-pointing that can ensue—directs attention to the things that cause people to look up, lean forward, and feel good.

4. *The Anticipatory Principle* asserts that our questions and reflections flow from the outlook we hold. In the absence of hope, it's hard to seek out, much less celebrate, the positive. When we anticipate a positive future, however, everything tilts in that direction. An underperforming school that can catch hold of a vision of itself as a vibrant learning community can cultivate a sense of hope and an increased sense of collective efficacy in moving forward toward that vision.

5. *The Poetic Principle* involves becoming mindful of what adds richness, texture, depth, beauty, significance, and energy to life. By doing so, life becomes a work of great poetry, filled with hopeful meaning and movement toward positive growth and

change. That's because we get more of what we focus on. To quote a maxim from appreciative inquiry, "What we appreciate, appreciates." When we focus on problems, we get more problems. When we focus on possibilities, we get more possibilities.

Tackling Your School's Morale

When we've worked with schools to improve morale, we've had great success implementing the appreciative inquiry process using the Four-I cycle (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Here's how the process looked in one school we worked with.

Initiate: Focus on Strengths

The first *I*, *Initiate*, involves the choice to use a strengths-based approach to address a concern, such as school morale. Take Peabody Elementary School,¹ a most unhappy place after the new principal, Sandy, replaced a principal who had led the school for nearly two decades. The old principal had allowed teachers to do pretty much as they pleased, and the school was adrift when Sandy came on board.

Charged with the task of raising test scores and turning around this underperforming school, Sandy energetically dove in, trying to fix the school's many problems. But after a year and a half of escalating tension and plummeting morale, Sandy took a different tack. She decided to cultivate a shared vision for Peabody that focused on amplifying the school's strengths rather than on overcoming its weaknesses. Appreciative inquiry always starts with that first, fateful decision to focus on strengths.

Inquire: Share Uplifting Stories

The second *I*, *Inquire*, begins with conducting paired interviews in which people tell stories and explore the experiences they've had in contexts with high morale. In paired interviews,



the teachers at Peabody explored such questions as, "Tell me about one of your best experiences working in a school or organization where morale was high; what contributed to your high spirits and sense of purpose?" or "Imagine you could transform the quality of the working relationships in this school in any way you wanted; what would that look like?"

After each pair had explored its stories, pairs joined together to form small groups. Each person briefly recounted his or her partner's story, values, and wishes. As the sharing unfolded, participants identified three to five themes that energized them. Some of the themes that emerged at Peabody included keeping the focus on the students, making learning meaningful, treating one another with respect, valuing honesty and openness, being appreciated, having clear and concise expectations, letting go of the past, and having a positive and warm working environment.

Imagine: What If?

The next phase in the process, *Imagine*, involves developing vivid images of what the school would look and feel like if it honored the themes selected and if the relationships in the school were just as people desired. Participants then share those images—

When we **focus on possibilities**, we get more possibilities.

but not by coming up with a set of bullet points.

One group at Peabody developed a skit with a bumblebee theme to suggest how people would “bee” together in terms of the behaviors and attitudes they would evidence at school. Another group created a pyramid of trust. A third group created a gigantic collage of images and phrases cut from magazines of the kinds of working relationships and care for students they envisioned. There was much laughter and camaraderie as the groups worked, with both Sandy and the assistant principal joining in on the fun.

After the groups developed their images of the future, they tried to capture them in a set of claims for the school, framed as though those new images were already present and expressed fully in the organization—claims such as these:

- We’re happy, safe, unified, welcomed, valued, positive, clear about expectations, and free to communicate openly without fear. We come to work every day with a clean slate, ready to accept new ideas.

- We work in an environment in which communication is open and nonjudgmental, positive feedback abounds, and everyone is treated respectfully as equals. We always

demonstrate a willingness to meet and listen to concerns with an open mind.

Innovate: Take Action

In the fourth and final phase of the process, *Innovate*, small groups convene to design and plan action steps for moving the school closer to the beautiful, vivid images that participants developed in the *Imagine* phase. People designate responsible parties, schedule activities, identify locations, and plan the logistics of getting things done.

Strategies over which team members have control are listed as *commitments*. Participants listed such items as, “We commit to greeting one another in the hallways with eye contact and a smile” and “We commit to giving positive feedback to at least one staff member each week.” Strategies that require the involvement of, permission from, or resources from another party are called *requests*. Participants requested, for example, that the administration make quarterly visits to their classrooms for the sole purpose of celebrating what’s going well.

The process isn’t complete until all these steps are captured in writing. Once the school has tried the suggested innovations, the process can begin all over again. It’s an iterative, ever-evolving process of organizational learning, growth, and change.

A Goal That Matters

Logistically, the four phases of the appreciative inquiry cycle could be completed in a daylong planning and development summit or across several shorter meetings over a longer period of time. Either way, the appreciative inquiry process provides a constructive way for staff members to engage in productive conversations concerning what they want their school to be and how they want to move it forward. The process fosters higher morale, even if

the current reality is one of distress, distrust, and pain.

We all need schools that are in good moods—schools that are upbeat and positive, that display collective good humor and a determination to succeed, that abound with constructive relationships, where the extraordinary becomes possible. This should be the goal of every school and every school leader. ■

¹The Peabody Elementary School example (a pseudonym) is actually a synthesis of two schools with which we worked.

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