

Employee Morale in the Law Office



From the Editors at Law Office Manager

Employee Morale in the Law Office

3 MANAGING STAFF

A six-question oral survey can help the manager and improve morale

5 TIPS & TRICKS

Tackle silly problems with silly solutions and boost morale

7 EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Proven ways to build staff morale fast

10 TEAM SPIRIT

6 easy ways to boost employee morale and your firm's productivity

13 MANAGING PEOPLE

Don't turn your employee awards into an office morale disaster



Special Report:
Employee Morale in the Law Office

Copyright © 2022 Law Office Manager

Managing Editor
Barbara Manning Grimm

Layout & Design
JG Pearmain

Sales & Member Services
Andrea Stowe
andrea@plainlanguagemedia.com

Law Office Manager is a 2022 copyright of Plain Language Media, LLC, 15 Shaw Street, New London, CT, 06320. All rights reserved. Distribution, translation, or reproduction in any form is forbidden without written permission.

Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Law Office Manager. Mention of products and services does not constitute endorsement. Advice given is general, and readers should consult professional counsel for specific legal or ethical questions.

Managing Staff: A six-question oral survey can help the manager and improve morale

The people closest to the work are the ones who have the best suggestions for improving it.

You can take advantage of staff ideas by getting their recommendations in an informal survey. Not only will it generate usable ideas for the manager, but it may help morale because when people are asked for their opinions, they become committed to the organization. There's a sense of, "They trust me enough to solicit my ideas."

Keep the discussion positive. Don't open with, "Let's solve some of our problems" but with "Let's talk about what would make this an even better place to work." That keeps the meeting from becoming a slew of demands for things like longer breaks and more time off.

To make sure the quiet staffers get heard, tell everybody to write down two ideas for each question and then ask what each person has written.

Here are the questions:

1. What can you do to enhance your role in client service?

To keep the remarks positive, ask too, "What is it that makes our clients think we are the best?"

Expect some standard ideas such as answering the phones promptly and pleasantly, but also expect some surprises because staffers often see aspects of client service that the office manager doesn't. The receptionist, for example, may have suggestions for making the reception area more comfortable.

2. If you were footing the bill, what would you do to achieve a better bottom line?

People are much more conservative when spending their own money. Looking at it from that standpoint, they start to expand their thinking.

Staffers are likely to come up with simple but effective money-savers, such as buying supplies in bulk to get a price break.

3. What procedures would you do away with?

Every office has its operational sacred cows in procedures, paperwork, and meetings. There are also redundancies. Perhaps one person fills out forms by hand and then someone else enters it into the system.

As a business grows and evolves, tasks and procedures come to be tired and outdated and need to be updated or even eliminated. And staff are the ones who know what those items are. Then turn the picture around: "If you had \$10,000 to improve operations, what would you spend it on?"

4. Are you getting enough information and instruction on your job?

In one office staff said they weren't getting clear instructions on work assignments, so they drew up a list of the directions they wanted and asked their bosses to follow it. It included factors such as when the project is due, who the contact is, and whether the boss wants progress reports on the work.

5. What would make this a better place to work?

Break down the discussion into how to enhance office efficiency, teamwork, and morale.

Efficiency: Suppose staff have complained about overtime. Ask, "How can we reduce overtime and still get the work done?" Expect good ideas. Someone with technological skills might recommend a computer enhancement.

Someone else might suggest it would be cheaper to outsource a task than pay overtime.

Teamwork: Staff might want to learn more about each other personally or about what each department does. Or they may want to hear other staff give an overview of their jobs and responsibilities.

Morale: Ask what would make everybody feel even better about being part of the organization. The answers will show what makes staff feel good about the work they do.

If somebody says a pay increase would do the job, acknowledge the comment but move on: "We would all be pleased with a raise, but for the purpose of this conversation, let's talk about other ways to improve morale."

6. What is working well and how can we make it better?

Ask staff to make a list of all the things that make their jobs easier or help them successful and then ask, "How can we make these items even better?"

Management doesn't always know the details of what's working well for particular positions. Sometimes staff will mention features they like—maybe a membership in a fitness club—that the office thought nobody cared about and is planning to get rid of. Or maybe there's an automated telephone system that doesn't provide clients with clear instructions.



Tips & tricks: Tackle silly problems with silly solutions and boost morale

For the small problems inherent in any office's staff, one manager has two easy solutions: humor and once-a-day positive notes.

The humor comes in the form of silly contests to solve equally silly—though very human—problems. "They're nonsensical, but they reduce tension," says the Georgia office manager.

One, for example, was an ongoing complaint that nobody replaced the toilet paper rolls in the lavatory. So the manager told staff to write their names on every empty roll they changed and drop it in a bag in her office. But she didn't tell them why.

At the end of the month, she made a crown out of the rolls and named the staffer who had the most Queen of the Toilet Paper.

The prize was a package of toilet paper and a gift card to Walmart.

Then she read out the number of rolls for each person. And that, she says, identified the culprits—without naming anybody. Problem solved.

As for the positive notes, the manager has hung a board in the break room. One side is dry erase, and the other is cork.

On the white side, she writes a positive quote every morning,

always focusing on teamwork and appreciation. A recent one, for example, was "first we make our habits; then our habits make us."

Underneath she writes personal notes such as "I appreciate each one of you for what you do every day." Or, when someone does an outstanding job, she'll write a thank-you to her.

Underneath that, staff members are free to add comments. Sometimes there's a compliments. Sometimes there's a thank-you. But it's always positive.

When staff members walk into the break room, they see something positive, and when someone is under stress, that ongoing positive effort is uplifting.

For the cork side, there's a stack of note paper for staff to fill out and post. The notes have to be something to be thankful for, and staff can sign them or not. When a storm knocked out the power in a large part of the city, the manager noted that she was thankful the office had electricity that day.

Staff like the board. In the mornings, some stop to read it before they even go to their desks. And when the manager is out, someone invariably puts up a positive quote for the day.

The manager tells her staff, particularly anybody experiencing difficulties at home, that "this is the one place you are safe from your personal problems." And the board emphasizes that, she says. "When staff members walk into the break room, they see something positive, and when someone is under stress, that ongoing positive effort is uplifting."



Employees benefits: 2 proven ways to build staff morale fast

What builds staff morale? Letting staff participate in the office's operations, getting their ideas, and using their suggestions are good for morale.

And there are two ways to achieve these ends: One is to survey staff on their attitudes and opinions; the other is to set up a suggestion program.

These simple actions work because people want to be listened to. Your staff want to know their thoughts count. They want that so much, in fact, that just the act of asking questions can immediately improve attitudes.

Method One: The survey

The survey needs to be writing, but beyond that there are no rules. It can be anonymous or not.

An anonymous survey will bring out more candor, but be aware that it can be nastier, because the anonymity allows people to spew venom. Use it only if the manager truly wants the glaring ugly truth.

Start the survey with general topics, and give choices that translate to poor, adequate or excellent. For example:

- pay and benefits—if they are below par for the position, adequate or excellent
- workload—too much, OK or just right
- performance reviews
- staffer's relationship with the other staff
- hours
- training the office provides
- physical environment—whether it's bright and pleasant, adequate or depressing.
- guidance from lawyers—whether lawyers offer praise and constructive criticism, criticism that's sometimes helpful or little or no feedback.

Then ask about the office's individual situation.

For example, if staff rotate between two offices, ask if that's the most efficient way to operate or if there should be two different

staffs. Or if there's a new computer system, ask if there's been enough training.

To keep people from getting lulled into a mindset, make some questions positive ("what's the best" or "what do you like most") and some negative ("what's the worst" or "what do you like least").

End with open-ended questions such as asking for suggestions to use the new computer system more efficiently. Or if the firm specializes in an area such as family law, ask for ways to cope clients in tough situations. End with a wide open question: "Is there anything else you want to tell us?"

Acknowledge what you've heard

There's no need to report the results. Nobody cares that 43.2 percent said X and Y. Just take the results to the next staff meeting and use them as a springboard for discussions. Say "here are some things we have learned," and ask for comments and suggestions.

Later, when changes get made, tell staff that it was their input that brought the changes about.

Or, if something can't be changed, say "thank you for your remarks, but we have to continue doing it this way because ..."

Later, when changes get made, tell staff that it was their input that brought the changes about.

Or, if something can't be changed, say "thank you for your remarks, but we have to continue doing it this way because ..."

If the surveys reveal problems, talk about solutions.

For topics that could lead to an unpleasant group discussion, talk one-on-one with staff and then tell the group "thank you for your input. This is what we are going to do about that."

What staff want to know is that the manager hears what they said, even if the response is "nothing can be done about that, but thank you for bringing it up."

Method Two: The suggestion program

After the survey, it's the suggestion program that will keep the momentum going.

To set it up, tell staff the office wants their suggestions “to ensure the best possible experience” for both employees and clients.

Emphasize that they should not hesitate to recommend “even the smallest thing,” and point out that the field is wide open, from a better way to arrange the furniture in the reception area to recommendations for providing service to clients.

Make it a requirement that the suggestions be in writing. All that’s needed is a short form with one space to describe the suggestion, another to tell why it’s needed, and another to tell how the office can implement it. Thank each person who turns something in, even if the suggestion is outlandish.

To keep the program from fading out, go over the ideas at every staff meeting. Or give staff a topic at each meeting and ask them to turn in recommendations before the next meeting.

Credit where credit is due

Make a hoopla over every suggestion that gets used. As long as staff can solve the problems and know their opinions matter, they will see the office as a good place to work.



Team spirit: 6 easy ways to boost employee morale and your firm's productivity

By Elizabeth M. Miller

Employees' attitudes have changed over the years. Good, loyal employees want more than a paycheck and health benefits.

Studies have shown that compensation does not even rate in the top 5 of what makes an employee happy with their job.

I believe happy employees are productive employees and anyone who believes otherwise is overlooking the effects that office morale has on efficiency and productivity. I can just hear someone now mumbling, They get paid, don't they? Isn't that enough? The short answer—No. It isn't.

With many law firms operating under the philosophy of "doing more with less," it is more important than ever that there be a team spirit in the office that draws the staff together to work as a cohesive team.

Law firms are very busy and the goal is good service to the client and billable hours. HR "tricks" that work in other companies might not work in a law firm. The environment is different, time is scarce, and the firm concentrates on billable hours.

But there are things that law firms can do that will not break the budget or interfere with the productivity of the office that will go a long way to boosting morale and laying a foundation for a cohesive legal team:

1. Provide breakfast once a week or once a month on Fridays.

It's the end of the week; everyone has worked hard and, while there is still one more day of billable time ahead of them, a few minutes to grab a bagel and a cup of coffee will jump start everyone to bill a few more hours before leaving for the weekend.

2. Have a staff lunch once a month.

Order some pizzas or sandwiches or organize a potluck. Everyone has to eat lunch anyway. Sit down with everyone and socialize with your staff. It takes the edge off and humanizes everyone.

3. In the kitchen getting a cup of coffee? Bring your legal assistant or paralegal one.

Sound silly? Maybe to you. But you may be surprised how much it will be appreciated and noticed that the boss brought a staff member a cup of coffee. Don't be surprised if employees start paying it forward.

4. Employee did a really good job on a project?

Leave a sticky note on their computer thanking them for their hard work.

5. Celebrate an employee's birthday.

Fifteen minutes in the kitchen or conference room to sing Happy Birthday and have a piece of cake is not going to affect the billable hours that much.

6. Send your staff a motivational email in the morning.

It takes less than one minute to do this, but people do notice and appreciate it. For example, I had gotten in the habit of doing this, but one day I was busy and simply forgot. The senior partner sent me an email asking me where my inspirational email for the day was. (One of my favorites is, "We take care of our employees so they take care of our clients.")

I believe that managing staff is all about relationship management and good people skills. I could make an endless list of the gestures that cost little or no money but go a very long way.

Every attorney or firm I work with I encourage a culture of team-building and good morale. I really believe that it is the backbone to a solid organization in which everyone works together for a common goal—to provide outstanding service to the client.

I am sure someone reading this is shaking their head and thinking I do not have to stroke my employees' egos, encourage them, or do more for them than give them a paycheck and the benefits that I agreed to provide. Remember, you give what you get—and the reality is that employees want to do a good job and be appreciated and the return will trickle down to outstanding service to your clients.

Since the practice of law is all about good service to your clients (so they will be repeat clients or send you referrals), this is a win-win for your firm. What goes around really does come around.

Still not convinced? I will leave you with one final thought: How did you feel the last time a client went the extra mile with a heartfelt thank you for doing a good job—the job you got paid to do?

Elizabeth M. Miller, MBA, is a successful business executive and leader with 20 years of experience in all areas of business management including finance, financial analysis, budgeting, human capital management, legal and non-legal recruiting, technology, information systems, client relations and operations. She has a passion for working in the legal industry and serving as a key member of a firm management committee. After more than 15 years in law office administration, Liz now provides independent firm administrator and management consulting services to law firms.



Managing People: Don't turn your employee awards into an office morale disaster

Done right, an employee-of-the-year award can be an effective productivity and teamwork promoter. Done poorly, it can be a morale disaster. The cautions are many. Don't make the award a surprise and don't award it without setting specific criteria for winning.

Here are helpful instructions for making an employee award program a success.

Whatever the office wants

Any employee award is most commonly given to an individual, but it can be just as effective when given to a group of employees or to a department or office site. Individual departments can have their own employee-of-the-year or there can be an award for individual job groups such as secretaries or records staff.

The idea can even be expanded to include all organizational levels within the office, from individual practice areas to the entire practice. Using this approach is a good way to encourage teamwork. Employees can be rewarded for reaching individual goals and also qualify for a department award.

Lay the ground rules

How the award is to be given is up to the manager, however it's important the criteria for choosing the winner be clear from the outset. Letting staff know what they have to do to win ensures the process is fair.

Again, the manager chooses the criteria. A good basic requirement is that the winner has to achieve goals set at the beginning of the year. Then other requirements are added.

One way to identify criteria is to ask "what do we expect the most excellent employee in this position to look like?" or "what do we expect the most excellent department to look like?"

When establishing group awards, make sure the requirements are achievable by everyone.

Don't include anything that would make it easy for one person, but difficult or even impossible for someone else. For example, if the billing department has a goal of speeding up collections by so many days, it's not fair to include the billing secretary in the running, because that person can't influence the outcome.

Figure out how to break ties

While it's unlikely that two or three staffers will make it to the end of the year with equal achievements, it's still a possibility. So along with the criteria, decide how ties will be broken. The deciding factors might be attendance or seniority. Whatever they are, tell everyone ahead of time. At best, the award may look arbitrary and generate bad feelings. At worst, it could fuel a discrimination claim.

For example, don't break a tie by adding criteria at the last minute. And never put the decision to a staff vote. Although staff are on the front line and know who is working beyond-the-call-of-duty, people are human. They will vote for people they like and when that happens, it becomes a popularity contest that kills morale.

Without an objective way to break a tie, the only fair option is to give both winners an equal award. Similarly, if everybody does equally well, give the reward to everybody. Say, for example, "You have all done a great job. We don't have an employee of the year. You are all employees of the year." And then give the same award to everybody.

Lay out the deal breakers

Parameters for qualifying for the award are also needed. Make it clear up front that anybody who is cited during the year for performance problems will not be eligible. Somebody who has been disciplined for tardiness, or who has brought about client complaints, can scarcely be seen as the best of the best. What's more, if the manager gives the award to someone undeserving, the rest of the staff will laugh at the award and the award process.

And that's not the worst of it. If the office has to terminate that employee later for unacceptable performance or behavior, the employee can use the award to support a claim of wrongful termination.

In addition, don't let the award insulate anybody from being cited for inadequate behavior later on. If the winner starts coming to work late or doing poor quality work, don't shy away from disciplining that person the same way the office would discipline anyone else.

Not earned? Not given!

Another caution: give the award only when somebody earns it. There's no need to find a winner simply to fill in the blank. That only makes the award meaningless.

Suppose the requirement was that everybody had to complete 10 goals and the top performer has completed only seven. Nobody has achieved the desired result, so nobody has earned the award.

Let it sit until next year. Whoever gets the prize needs to be someone whose accomplishments everyone respects.

One for all and all for one

Management agreement is also a requirement.

That can be a problem in an office where lawyers are in contact with a limited number of staff and may tend to promote the ones they work with regularly.

If lawyers are going to participate in the selection, then the decision needs to be made during a private meeting. What's more, the discussion needs to end when the doors open.

Tell the lawyers that everybody has to stand behind the decision, which means nobody can tell a staffer, "I thought you should have gotten that award instead of so-and-so." To do that is to invalidate the recognition. Again, at its worst, that remark can support a discrimination claim.

What's the prize?

And what should the award be? That's another choice for the manager.

It can be as elaborate as a weekend trip or as simple as dinner at an upscale restaurant, theater tickets, or a plaque. It's up to the manager.



Law Office Manager

™



PREMIUM MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS



FREE Registration to ALL Webinars. Join Leading Law Office Management Experts for "How-to" Help on Critical Topics.



Law Office Manager Daily. our eNewsletter will Keep You Up-to-Date on the Latest News, Trends & New Developments in Law Office Management.



Law Office Manager, our Monthly Newsletter. Practical Law Office Management Help Delivered to You Every Month (available in digital, print, or both).



Discounts on Products & Services For Law Office Managers.



Hundreds of "How-to" Articles on Law Office Management. Organized & Searchable by Topic.



Law Office Policy Center. Ready-to-Use, Legally-Compliant Law Office Policies You Can Download & Modify to Fit Your Needs.



Relevant Laws. Regulations, Court Cases & Legal That Affect Your Law Practice, Searchable by Topic.



Law Office Toolbox. Download Model Forms, Checklists & Other Practical "Working Tools".



Special Reports & White Papers. Practical, Fast-Reading Overviews of New or Urgent Law Office Topics & Issues.



Call **888-729-2315** for more information on how **Law Office Manager Premium Membership** can help you enrich your career.