Chief Morale Officer: A new position gaining increasing popularity in the working world

Well, okay, it does. But it also stands for a nascent organizational role that's being given more and more consideration of late – the Chief Morale Officer.

For some time now, both for-profits and nonprofits have understood the importance of having an engaged and happy staff to encourage productivity and/or loyalty. Incentives like remote working, flex hours, relaxation rooms, "Google" rooms with games and/or refreshments have been provided to try and ensure a fun, collaborative and caring environment. For many organizations, this has worked…to a certain degree. But when all the bells and whistles of incentivizing start to wear thin on an organization's more long-serving staff, what's left to do?

It boils down to people.

Your waking hours

Most people in the workforce spend the majority of their waking hours at their workplace. So going to work in an environment where morale is good can make all the difference.

There's an old adage in the HR world: "Hire for character then train for talent." And these days, the "character" side of the equation is being researched and scrutinized more intensely than ever before.

Lisa Taylor, founder and president of <u>Challenge Factory</u>, a human resources/ employment consultancy and think tank in Toronto, agrees that morale is critical to any organization's success.

"Studies by Gallup and other [leadership] researchers demonstrate a positive correlation between employee engagement and morale on productivity. In most organizations, people costs – salaries, benefits, etc. – comprise 70% of overall expenses. Any service-focused organization or business is at its core a people business, making poor morale costly," Taylor says. "Employees who are at best neutral about their employer or their work will be focused on doing what's been asked of them, rather than uncovering opportunities for the organization to improve, to be more effective."

While morale is important, Taylor says it's not always necessary to create the position of Chief Morale Officer.

"There are specific circumstances where it might make sense to have a dedicated position focused on morale, such as when an organization is going through a merger or there is a significant change that is being navigated," she says. "In those circumstances, the position should work with all leaders and employees to ensure opportunities to enhance morale are kept top-of-mind and that culture-building skills become part of everyone's leadership competencies. They should work themselves out of this role by normalizing morale-building as a core competence."

However, she notes that in her work she has advised organizations to create what she callas "Culture Champions" among staff. Identifying those individuals who have a natural gift to raise the enthusiasm of their colleagues can play a role in ensuring success of a project – or of the organizational mission overall.

Those staff members "intuitively know that they will be more successful when others around them are successful," she says.

And the CMO says…

<u>Kirk Weisler</u>, an Arizona-based executive coach, international public speaker, workplace culture guru and self-described Chief Morale Officer, says the position is one that is more crucial to a company's success than ever before.

"There is a popular quote that goes, 'culture eats strategy for breakfast.' A great market strategy executed by a less-than-stellar culture will be executed in a less than stellar way," he says. "But you don't just get a great workplace culture because you want one. So having someone who helps to create and execute a strategy for the culture to become great seems like more than just a good idea, it seems essential."

Weisler lays out an interesting example of how low morale can be directly attributed to financial losses for an organization.

Trickle-down culture-nomics

"Consider the cost of losing one of your mid-level or senior managers. Research from both Forrester and Gartner analytics says that the cost to replace them is 150% of their annual salary. When you factor in the cost to recruit, interview and properly vet, extend offer, hire, integrate into your current culture... it costs on average their salary plus half, at least," he says. "So if you lose even a few employees and a couple of managers, you most likely have already blown through a quarter million dollars. The cost of turnover can be horrific and it's only one measure. We aren't even talking about what the people that are leaving are saying to others about why they left. It can be brutal for companies who aren't thinking culturally."

Weisler adds that one of the greatest obstacles to attaining good overall morale in any organization stems from a disconnect between frontline staff and those in the C-suite.

He says that sometimes "leaders don't understand the importance of being intentional with their culture and just sort of hope a great workplace will happen and improvement will be ongoing."

Beyond that, leadership sometimes forgets to actually speak to their staff and articulate all the reasons why they are counted on for success in their mission.

Leaders, Weisler says, need to create clarity and connection so that everyone understands exactly what the organizational goals are and how people's daily tasks and energy are helping to achieve that goal. [That] must be priority number one.

"When people have clarity on what they are doing, why they are doing it... then they are confident that what they do matters. And the impact of confidence on culture and morale cannot be overstated," he says. "I see more and more organizations having some version of a daily huddle. In football, the huddle serves to help people to quickly get clear about the goal... and to establish what each player needs to do to execute the next play. Short huddles to connect, get clear [and] get it done... can help overcome the obstacles of feeling disconnected and disengaged."

Boost in morale

A last word goes to Taylor, who reiterates that morale is not something to be taken lightly, nor is it just another thing to mark as complete on an organization's task list.

"Morale is hard to measure, multi-faceted and deeply impacted by internal, external and personal factors," she says. "Many small businesses and charities have leaders who are already stretched for time, required to wear many hats with little time or funds to invest in their own development and that of their employees. In most organizations, direct managers underestimate the impact they have on how their staff [members] feel about their work. A kind word, an uninterrupted, 10-minute conversation and a demonstration of genuine interest require just a few moments and can have a more significant impact that pricey, time-consuming training and team-building activities."

Andy Levy-Ajzenkopf is a professional writer living in Toronto. He can be reached at aajzenkopf@yahoo.com.