

## **Introduction**

This paper arose from discussions between students on the IAM Certificate in Educational Administration course in 2006 and 2007. It became clear from these discussions that for almost every one of our students (all of whom were full time administrators) there were morale issues. Indeed even those who began their contributions, “I love my job...” had some issues that caused them to have a lower morale at work than they might otherwise have had.

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### **1. What affects morale in school administration and management?**

It is fairly obvious that, whatever job you are in, where morale is high then more work is done, efficiency and effectiveness are higher, stress is lower, and generally everyone is happier.

So it is reasonable to start by saying, “What sort of answers do we get when we ask what raises the morale of an employee?”

One of the most common answers is pay – the more you are paid the better you feel about your job and thus the higher your morale. But is this common belief that money enhances morale actually valid?

At first this may seem a particularly compelling argument. However many business managers would argue that pay is unrelated to employee morale. They argue that pay may simply be what you have to offer someone to get them to do the job at all. In other words, if you place an advertisement for a member of staff at a salary of £30,000 a year and you do not attract anyone whom you would like to employ, you try again at £35,000. Or you may well find you attract some applicants who openly say at the interview, I quite like this job, but I wouldn't take it unless you offered me a higher salary.

Such an example suggests that pay may not be related to morale at all, but is simply something the employer gives to get the staff – it is a retention factor not a factor which makes people feel better about their job.

We can see this more clearly if we ask questions such as, “Would you really feel better about your job if you were paid a lot more? Would you enjoy the work more? Would you work harder, and willingly take on more than you are taking on at present?” The answer throughout is probably “no” for most people. Some people work hard and do their best wherever they are and whatever they are paid. Often they feel good about the job – their morale is high. Other people do not. Many people have a high level of morale when starting a new job, but this may decline when they have become accustomed to the new post. Where it does decline it does so irrespective of the money – something else is changing which is reducing the individual's morale.

We might explore this in a different way by asking this question: if administrators' and managers' pay were doubled overnight would everyone feel a lot better about their work? Would they really have a higher level of morale? The general consensus, again drawing on evidence from business where large pay rises can occur, is probably not. What happens is that those people whose morale at work is already high maintain that high level of work morale. Those who feel bad about the job continue to do so, because nothing in terms of the job itself has changed. What has changed is the compensation for doing the job – not the job itself.

The only exception could be where people are paid by results – but since that is rare in education we'll let that pass for now.

This is, of course, not an argument against paying managers and administrators in schools a lot more. It is simply an argument that says that doing this will not raise morale. It may get a lot more applicants per job, and this may be a very good thing, but it will not, by itself, raise morale.

Worse, rather than being a raiser of morale, pay can be a significant force in lowering morale. The findings of most research show that it is not that people who are paid more have a higher level of morale at work. Rather it is that people who feel that they are not being paid enough are demoralised because of that.

There is a lot of evidence that this is a factor in education – where administrators and managers feel that their pay is so low that it is not reasonable for them to be asked to take on more work. They feel undervalued – their morale is low.

Perception here is the key – it is not a case of how much people are actually paid; it is the perception of their role that affects how high or low their morale is.

Looked at in this light we can identify a range of demoralisers that affect administrators and managers in schools.

- **Changes imposed without discussion or consultation.** Nothing demoralises people more than a feeling of not being in control of the situation. For administrators this amounts to being treated as second class citizen and not being consulted at all on how to make the school work more effectively. When a new task is required of an administrator who already feels overworked there is no discussion as to how it might be fitted in, or what other work should be set aside to allow it to happen.
- **Condition of service.** Likewise changes in the conditions of service of administrators can be demoralising if the administrator feels that the changes are not for the best, or have not been introduced with proper consultation. The person doing the job invariably feels that he or she has some knowledge of how things work – and this is perfectly natural. Changes made from on high will invariably lead to a lowering of morale among the work force where those on high are not respected. If those on high are perceived as thoughtless it very hard to see how such respect can be gained.
- **Poor working conditions.** Again perception is the key. If people perceive the world of work as one where conditions are poor, this will demoralise them. The change to a new and much better working environment can raise morale, but this does not always last for long. As with money, people become accustomed to what they have and

quickly want more. Good working conditions alone are not enough to keep morale at a high level – but they are certainly helpful if other steps are taken to raise morale.

- **The way others treat you.** Imagine a scenario in which teachers regularly drop work into the school office at the last minute, saying “could you type that up for me – it will only take you five minutes” and expecting it to be done at once. To the administrator this can easily be sheer effrontery – a view that the administrator has nothing to do all day but sit there waiting for a teacher to pop in. Or imagine a head who is regularly out of the school at meetings but who never consults with his/her deputies or administrators in advance. Those affected by the head’s absence will constantly feel imposed upon, unable to do their planned work because they don’t know if the head is going to be there or not.
- **Feeling the incompetence of others rebounds on you, not on them.** In the SEA report on handling School Attendance we reported on a situation in which a small minority of teachers were found to make regular mistakes in the filling in of their class registers. Administrators then found the errors when checking on unauthorised absences – and this could sometimes make for unpleasant conversations with parents. The administrators were demoralised because the original error was clearly on the part of the teachers – and yet the teachers did not have to sort the matter out or suffer the unpleasantness of facing an irate parent.
- **Public and media perception.** Many would agree that the public and media perception of schools is often not positive, and this too can have a demoralising effect. Some administrators like being called school secretaries; others want to be called “administrators” or “bursar”. A failure by the school to understand how the administrator wishes to be called can lead to a lowering of morale.
- **Sudden changes to the job.** Suddenly telling a person that their job now includes x or y can be thoroughly demoralising – and yet in the School of Educational Administration we have come across cases of administrators being told to do playground duty or to change their hours to suit other matters. Consultation and explanation generally avoid such problems – administrators are not normally known to be militant – but simply walking over people (metaphorically) can lead to significant downturns in morale.

These then are the factors that can demoralise. These factors will not have an effect in every situation, but rarely however do they work in reverse to raise morale.

Herzberg looked at this field and put together a number of factors which can be morale boosting or morale lowering. :

- **Achievement.** Many people speak of their pleasure at seeing progress in their work as new systems are introduced and tasks are completed in less time – especially where they have been instrumental in introducing changes to the systems.
- **Interpersonal relations.** Herzberg (in *Motivation to Work*) found interpersonal relationships at work to be either neutral (“a nice bunch of people to work with”) or de-moralising (“I’m leaving because I can’t stand working with X.”).

- **Recognition.** Recognition arises from society at large, from the government recognising the work of administrators, from one's superiors or the parents, and as mentioned above, from the teachers.
- **Responsibility.** Responsibility can raise morale especially where the manager or administrator feels that he or she is able to use that responsibility in order to make improvements in the teaching and learning in the school.
- **Promotion.** This is a particularly interesting thought, since it seems that it is not the pay rise associated with promotion that increases morale, but the recognition granted in offering the promotion itself that is the biggest boost to morale.

What research repeatedly shows is that for many administrators and managers, the work is an enjoyable activity, which does have some significant rewards within itself.

But we should note that this may not be enough. As Evans (*Teacher Morale, Job Satisfaction and Motivation*) points out, an individual might be satisfied with his or her job, but that is not the same as being satisfied by (as in having one's morale raised by) the job. When we speak of administrators and managers who have a high level of morale we are normally speaking of those who are more than just satisfied with the work they do. What we are looking for is a situation in which people are satisfied by the job, find the work they undertake motivating and stimulating and thus in every regard feel good about their work. They don't want to bore everyone else with talk about their profession, but if the opportunity comes up they openly say, "I'm a school administrator and proud of it."

So we begin to form the opinion that a high level of morale comes not from pay but from such elements as recognition, consultation, interpersonal rewards, feeling in control of one's own work and approval.

### **Moving towards job satisfaction**

It is clear from this discussion that there is a strong link between high morale and job satisfaction on a day to day basis. It is hard to conceive of one existing without the other. Evans gives an eight stage progression for moving from a modest level of job satisfaction towards a higher level of job satisfaction which is helpful here:

1. **Being aware that there is a problem.** Peters, the management guru, has repeatedly argued that being aware that there is an issue, and agreeing what that issue is, is by far the most important aspect of seeking to change a situation. This is certainly a message that could be adopted by all leaders, both in schools and in industry. Announcing the problem is a significant step towards solving it.
2. **Devising a strategy.** Once we know what the issue is that we are addressing we can start work on devising a strategy to solve it.
3. **Effecting the new strategy.** Once we have decided what to do, we have to start work on implementing this strategy. It should be a strategy that commands general acceptance, with most people directly affected by the strategy not only agreeing to go with it, but also agreeing that it is likely to work. Such a strategy might be something as simple as the headteacher being much more visible to members of staff and regularly motivating them through commending staff on work well done. Taking an interest is one of the most simple ways of raising morale – as long as

the staff believe that the interest is genuine and that the headteacher's view is worth hearing. (This incidentally explains why a new head is often able to raise morale quite readily – he or she has no history in the school and so tends to be given the benefit of the doubt – at least at the start.)

4. ***Awareness of having made changes work.*** Everyone needs to be aware that the change programme is happening and working. This implies that there is excellent communication within a school. A school manager who has the view that “I put it in the weekly newsletter – it’s not my fault if they don’t read it” is not making any significant contribution to raising staff morale at this point.
5. ***Perception that this is all worthwhile.*** By this stage everyone needs to start feeling better about the work being undertaken. Everyone involved needs to believe that this project is going somewhere and that that will be beneficial to them.
6. ***Each employee needs to feel good about his or her own contribution to the scheme of change.*** In this way everyone becomes not only positive about the change programme, but they also see their contribution as being significant. This is a major contribution towards raising staff morale.
7. ***A sense of achievement.*** This comes from the feeling of a job well done. The comment is, “we did this all by ourselves,” (even if that is not strictly true!) and that is an extremely motivating factor.
8. ***Job fulfilment and job comfort.*** By this stage individuals feel good about themselves and about the job, and most importantly about their ability to affect their working lives in a meaningful way. They recognise that where there are problems they can improve the situation through concerted action. This then motivates them to try it again with the next problem in the school. When people share the view that they can solve most of the problems within the school then the morale of everyone within the school rises dramatically. The feeling that “everything is possible” is incredibly powerful. It is the exact opposite of “we’re doing our best but in a school like this there is a limit to what we can do”.

## **2. Raising morale in the school**

The above section suggests that it is possible to raise the morale of all teachers in a school in a fairly simple way, by engaging staff in a school improvement programme.

But many writers – Evans included – have found that teachers do not share a set of group goals, and have expressed concerns that a school improvement activity might not be possible if it requires all the teachers in the school to go along with it. This immediately leads to a broader problem – if the teachers don't share in the goals, how can anyone build an administration and management system that works across the school?

Poor leadership, both at the school-wide level and the departmental level can be a demoraliser, and good leadership can raise the morale of all the staff affected. An administrator who feels that her or his efforts are wasted because the head never comes to look at what is being achieved quickly becomes demoralised. Worse, such an attitude can spread very quickly among the staff, almost like a virus. Those who come to a school with a high level of morale can quickly find that morale slipping away, as they sink to the level of despondency of their colleagues. But once the word is out that the head (or maybe the deputy head, or the bursar or any other figure whose authority is considered high enough) is seriously interested in how the school is administered, then everyone starts working a bit harder simply because no one quite knows who is going to be the next focus of attention. The senior manager who undertakes this much higher profile approach will quickly find you don't have to be available all the time – you simply have to be perceived as being available.

Therefore we may reach the conclusion that morale is responsive to the dominant management style of the school. To give but one example, a manager who is open in discussing issues relating to his or her staff is liable to generate an open attitude which can lead into a development and improvement plan. But managers who have the attitude that all staff activities are beyond questioning will never generate the type of thinking necessary to generate such changes in morale. It is true that administrators like managers who have confidence in their work, but that confidence must not be given unconditionally. It must be based on reality – confidence expressed in a senior member of staff who is clearly not performing simply undermines the position of the manager.

This is a matter of significant difficulty for many head teachers who have not undergone any serious training in personnel management. Just what do you do when an administrator has the temerity to come to you, as headteacher, and complain about the way teachers treat the school's administrators?

Sadly, many headteachers respond by either defending the teacher, or by saying something to the effect that he or she may not be doing very well, but has the position and so there is nothing to be done about it. Both approaches are highly demoralising for a more junior member of staff. All such issues should be taken up seriously and discussed with the accused and with other senior staff who might be able to offer an insight into the situation. From this the headteacher should devise a course of action to rectify any problems found, and this course of action should be reported back to the administrator who instigated the complaint. In this way everyone knows that her or his comments are taken seriously and lead to a proper investigation.

As we try to pull these various issues on morale together we can start to draw these conclusions as to what one is likely to see in a school where staff morale is of concern...

- The ability of the managers, and ultimately the head teacher, to pay attention to the day-to-day detail of the operation of the school and have an eye on the overriding parameters at the same time.
- The belief among senior managers in the fact that it is perfectly possible to raise staff morale in the school through taking the appropriate action.
- The most important factor affecting morale in the school office in every school is the way in which the managers treat the administrators. Where they are treated with enthusiasm and genuine interest and support, morale goes up.

From these simple points it follows that it is not that hard to raise morale among administrators in schools. And yet when I have discussed this with school administrators on the IAM Certificate in Educational Administration course I have often been told that these ideas are all very well, but they “won’t work here”. This view can have its origins in the belief that because it is not happening now, and because attempts to get a dialogue going between managers and administrators failed once or twice before, the situation is unchangeable.

I do not accept this position. I do recognise that where both sides (administrators and managers) are inexperienced at negotiation with each other the problem can seem difficult. But as soon as one remembers the potential reward (much higher morale in the school administration, without any extra cost) it is inconceivable that the management will not ultimately take the matter on.

I recall in one scenario put to me by a student on the course, the head of the school’s administration asked the head for a half hour meeting once a week to discuss issues that had arisen and forthcoming events. The head looked dubious, but ultimately agreed, only to cancel each of the first four meetings because other issues came up – such as seeing a parent, attending a county hall meeting, etc.

Now, of course these other factors are important too, but what happened here was that the meeting with the administrator was cancelled, not rearranged, and no alternative time was set up. The result of course was a rapid decline in morale, and ultimately the departure from the school of an excellent administrator.

But this was not just about keeping an administrator in post – it was a potential to make the whole school run much more smoothly with a much happier administrative staff – and it was just thrown away.

Of course some people are harder to deal with than others – and we often see this in terms of what is known as a “personality clash” – something reported by researchers as being a central feature in most cases of underachieving members of staff with low morale. As an example, an office worker who is perceived as being dominating, aggressive, or unresponsive to new ideas can reduce staff morale. One then begins to hear comments such as “what is the point of my trying to do this when we have X in the school. I can’t imagine X changing her approach in a million years.”

The question at this point is – who deals with this unresponsive employee? If the head does not deal with the issue then the head will become the subject of criticism as much as the unresponsive administrator, and staff morale will decline further still. Indeed the

thought that, “I am doing my bit but he or she is not” is perhaps the most commonly heard comment in schools in which staff morale is consistently low.

Immediately we can see that the term “personality clash” is simply a polite way of encapsulating a problem at the heart of many schools. Person A believes that Person B is not pulling his or her weight, or not being flexible enough, and the head refuses to do anything about it. Unfortunately, because we have been taught to believe that personalities are unchanging and unchangeable, we then accept the situation as unfortunate but irresolvable. This is quite untrue. Investigation, followed by action, can resolve every personality clash and can have a dramatic effect in raising morale.

In this regard schools are no different from other work places. People in all types of work become dissatisfied with the injustice of seeing another member of staff not pulling his or her weight or deliberately being obstructive, with the inconvenience this causes, and with the perceived irrationality of the management’s approach to this issue.

What most organisations find, however, is that the moment staff believe that such problems will always be dealt with, the problems tend to become lessened in the mind of the work force. That is to say, the refusal of management to handle personnel problems can undermine morale more than the personnel problems themselves. Where people work in environments in which personnel problems are handled quickly (although of course always with due regard for the people involved) the perceived problems inevitably appear to be less than might otherwise be the case.

Thus a central point here is that people respond to perceived problems. Now since it is almost certain that in most cases members of staff do not have all the facts, one can readily see how such matters get out of hand. This is why we find that most schools which have high morale among the staff also have excellent open internal communications. People get the facts, everyone is open and perceived problems are constantly tempered by reality.

In schools with low morale, on the other hand, the personality clash is seen as being something that cannot be dealt with – it is an unfortunate situation, but there it is. A and B don’t get on, you can’t change someone’s personality, and so there is nothing to be done. The most that happens is that the head might interview the two members of staff separately and try to understand each one, and then mediate.

Thus, contrary to Evans, we argue that there are schools with low morale and schools with high morale. Typically, in schools with a predominantly high morale, conflicts are dealt with in a particular way. The head (or possibly another manager within the school) recognises the problem and investigates the matter thoroughly, gathering information from all sides. He or she then brings the two members of staff together, in the same room at the same time, and says, “I hear there is a problem. Let’s talk it through.” Sometimes it can take several meetings before there is much progress. It is not unknown for supposedly professional people to play all sorts of unprofessional games such as denying there is an issue (“I don’t have a problem – but I can’t speak for Mr X”) or refusing to say anything in the meeting, but if the head is armed with some specific examples of problems this nonsense can be set aside.

After the questioning, and the game playing, the head needs to lay down the law. “Working properly and professionally with colleagues is part of the role of everyone in this school, and I will accept nothing less. If you have any grievances or difficulties you can come and talk to me about them and I will do everything in my power to put them to rights. But to make this quite clear: if you choose not to come and tell me about a

grievance, you are in breach of a direct instruction I am giving you. I am instructing you, in the clearest, most open and specific way that I can, to tell me what is going wrong. Should there be a continuing problem between you, and for whatever reason either of you chooses not to report back to me, then you will be in direct contravention of my instruction. Any argument that you thought it was unprofessional to talk to me about a colleague will not be accepted, nor will any other excuse for not coming back to me with this issue. The only reason for not coming to me in the future will be because there is no difficulty and you are both carrying out your professional duties to the very best of your abilities without any hindrance or interference from anyone else.

“I would add that being aware of problems is part of your work – we are in an environment where everyone is dependent on the goodwill of everyone else. The answer ‘I didn’t know there was a problem,’ is highly unlikely to be very convincing after this conversation.”

What is the effect of this? Firstly, it tends to shock the participants. Then, quite typically they retreat and seek to justify their positions. But very quickly, in most cases it reduces or removes the problem of the “personality clash”. It doesn’t mean the antagonists will be seen having coffee together in the staffroom, but it does mean that they stop fighting their silly battles in ways that disrupt the rest of the school.

As soon as there is a discernable improvement the head should seek out each member of staff in question and ask how things are going. This can be followed by a question about how matters are with the other individual involved in the clash and, if the answer is that things seem to be better, the head will say that he or she has indeed noted that. General good feelings are expressed all round, and everyone knows that the head is staying on top of the subject.

Of course the personality clash is not the only issue that can affect schools. Some feel alienated from their work because they cannot find a like-minded person anywhere in the school to whom they can relate. This might be expressed in terms of a person who feels he or she wants to talk administration at lunch time, but finds the rest of the staff are happier to do exactly the opposite. It might relate to age differences, interests, political differences, or simply a difference of attitude and lifestyle.

Such disparities occur in all organisations and can be hard to deal with – and in a way this is not really an issue for the school. It is not up to the school to provide a jolly social environment for its staff – rather it should be the case that if you find some colleagues you get on with socially that is a bonus. But some do feel unhappy if they don’t make friends in the staffroom. This problem can be alleviated if all newcomers (including administrators) to the school are actively supported by at least one senior manager whose job it is to get to know particular members of staff and listen to problems. Such “getting to know” can be formalised in staff appraisals but, if it is, it has to be made clear to the member of staff that talking openly about all matters is part of the requirement of the meeting. Sometimes when this happens interesting results emerge which can lead to significant developments within the school.

On occasion this feeling of alienation can be taken further, if one individual feels that he or she is adopting the role of being what Evans calls an “extended professional”. Certainly it is profoundly disappointing if a keen, professional employee feels obliged to move on because the rest of the staff are not “extended professionals”. An administrator who sees that one part of the existing administration needs changing and who wants to push back the boundaries of what she or he is doing educationally should be supported, not left

feeling isolated. If anything needs to be done in such a school it is that the management need to understand what changes are being proposed, and see if indeed, as is often the case, they are guilty of administering the school in a specific way, simply because that is how it has been done for the past five years.

Others become blocked if they feel the existing regime needs changing but they personally do not feel able to effect change. This arises because they lack the knowledge of either:

- how to implement change personally
- how to implement change within the school, or
- how to get beyond the state of simply coping with the way things are.

Those who know that something needs to be done because the quality of administration and management in the school is not all it might be can become demoralised very quickly if they feel they are making no progress. Such an attitude spreads quickly through the school and can reach the pitch of demoralising everyone even before they have had time to make their own judgements about the school.

One of the most annoying and debilitating versions of this problem comes when one member of staff tries to push for changes but finds these are resisted by senior colleagues who block change for reasons that do not seem valid to the enthusiastic professional. Only when the head or other managers are able to pick up on this sort of problem through having good, regular and above all open contact with all members of staff, can such difficulties be overcome.

### **Morale management**

In effect what we are saying here is that the “morale management” of colleagues is a specific job which senior managers and the headteacher in particular need to address. It is not enough to appoint staff and simply expect them to act professionally at all times. Everyone has needs and, if they feel that the school is failing to meet them, they may well move on elsewhere. Perhaps most tragically of all, many school employees do make several moves between schools because they feel their needs are not being met and then eventually give up on schools totally. The astonishingly high numbers of teachers who leave the profession within the first three years may well be doing so largely because there is virtually no morale management whatsoever in many schools, and although administrators tend to leave less, it is still the case that most who do leave, do so without the school being particularly aware of the real reason why.

Unfortunately many headteachers and senior managers find the notion of morale management particularly difficult, not least because they have received no training in the area of personnel management. They become frustrated when they try to implement changes only to find that their efforts can be undermined by one or two dissenters.

Such situations can be handled, and indeed must be handled, if morale is to be boosted. Those who become disenchanted by the lack of change and by the way colleagues are able to block change through tactics that some now call “staff room terrorism” will invariably suffer from low morale. Yet these are the very employees who in different circumstances could have high morale in the school and could act as “radiators”, delivering higher and higher morale throughout the whole institution.

What we are seeking therefore is a greater level of involvement from the head and senior managers in issues which affect the morale of everyone in the school. This involves being interested in what is happening in the school office as much as in the classroom, in how individuals are feeling in their work, and in what ideas they have for improvement. It involves engaging with the administrators and the teachers as people who have professional needs as well as a professional attitude. It involves showing that you care. It involves giving attention and encouragement.

Above all it involves senior managers being explicit in terms of what they actually want and expect, and it involves administrators in attempting to engage managers in meaningful conversation about change. Both sides will expect a high standard of work from colleagues and a high level of commitment to the school. Of course you don't have to say it every day but specific comments, especially when given in terms of positive feedback, can be extremely effective and beneficial.

It is one of the responsibilities of management in all types of organisation to enable the growth and development of their staff. In schools this growth and development should take place as much in teachers as in managers and administrators. Once you achieve this, the level of morale will grow at the same time. Everyone will achieve more, and so will want to achieve more and will feel that they have the world of education under their control.

Above all, everyone at this point will feel a sense of achievement – and this sense of achievement will give their morale at work a great boost. Even if they feel they have achieved something against all the odds, they still have that sense of achievement. This is an important point for it reminds us that achievement is an internal concept; it is something that we define ourselves. When someone else congratulates us on what we have achieved we accept that congratulation and feel good about it if, and only if, we value the view and the opinion of the person giving the congratulation. Our sense of achievement only expands if we believe in the outside source. Likewise, if someone is critical of our work, that in itself does not destroy our sense of achievement unless we accept the validity of the criticism. If it comes from someone whom we believe does not really understand what we are doing, we don't accept the criticism.

Obviously the best of all worlds occurs when a member of staff feels that he or she has achieved positive things with the support of the rest of the school and when significant others, whose opinion is valued by the teacher, go out of their way to express support. When this is the case, the higher morale flows outwards from the individual into the rest of the school. That individual – whether administrator, manager or teacher – becomes an ambassador for change and development within the school.