

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE CASE MANAGEMENT SOCIETY OF AMERICA

# CASE IN POINT

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# EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

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## MANAGEMENT FOCUS



### Sustaining Team Morale A fundamental strategy when times are tough

BY VERGIL METTS, PH.D.

Conventional wisdom says that health care is a safe place to toil in a bad economy. While no sector can escape the pain entirely — diminished public funding and private philanthropy are of great concern — the demand for services and labor remains fairly steady.

But you do not have to lose your job or face a foreclosure to feel the pull of a downturn. It may affect you in the form of lesser fortunate family members and friends, or in declining asset values to which none of us is immune. While your staff may remain intact, they may feel uneasy or distracted and may be prone to performing less than optimally.

By focusing on morale enhancement now, you can reap both immediate and long-term dividends for your staff and yourself alike. Such a situation can bring forth optimal traits in good managers and a chance to develop new skills in the art, more than the science, of leadership. At its core, it requires getting more involved with people.

But first, start with yourself, answering four questions that management theorists Jack Mayer and Peter Salovey identify as useful in practicing emotional intelligence:

1. How are you feeling?
2. How would you like your team to feel (to get the best outcome for yourself and the organization)?
3. Why do you feel the way you do?
4. Given the answers to the previous questions, what action can you take to influence the way you feel?

These questions are meant to inculcate specific measures, ideally: to heighten your perception of emotion; to effectively use emotion to facilitate thought; to better understand emotion; and to manage emotion.

Understanding how you feel can sensitize you to others' feelings and power your discussions to produce concrete outcomes. Think of a surgeon preparing for an operation, feeling frustrated and distracted by a fight she had that morning with her husband. Considering these questions can help her acknowledge negative thinking that could affect critical job performance, letting her focus on the objective and take deliberate steps to alter her feelings and performance.

After you have gone through the exercise, apply it to your staff. How might they be feeling? In times like these, they may be uneasy, uncertain of the future, perhaps even frightened. How would you want them to feel to be most effective?

Additionally, why do they feel the way they do? It may have something to do with the

## BEST PRACTICE

plummeting value of their retirement account, the “sky is falling” headlines, or friends or relatives affected by the economic downturn. Maybe that vacation they were planning no longer seems prudent.

Given the answers to the first three questions, what action can you take? You might start by assuring each individual or group they have your and your organization’s support. Tough times can bring about a reversal of sorts, where home may become the less comfortable place and work the safer haven. With that come new, if not explicit, needs and expectations.

Providing a few words of assurance to the extent you can responsibly do so or extending an invitation to talk can go a remarkably long way. We spend more waking hours at work than at home. Knowing we have healthy, supportive relationships where we spend most of our time gives comfort in uncomfortable times.

Do it in a way that best fits you and your situation. If you have a naturally tight-knit group, talking as a group may work better. If your culture is more individualized — or if you are more comfortable talking one on one — take the other route.

Regardless of the meeting’s form, set your goal to instill a sense of purpose. Explain precisely how the work of each individual matters to you and to the organization overall. Be explicit. Start by explaining the meeting’s purpose. If talking individually, take a fresh look at each staffer’s most recent review and discuss the steps they’re taking to get to the next level. It will help to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.

Do the unexpected. Small measures that surprise and delight can work on every level, from junior management up to the executive suite. Again, do what’s right for your situation. If you can build in regularity — an every other Friday lunch, Monday morning coffee — that’s all the better. Buckingham and Coffman’s classic *First Break All the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently* posited that it is the actions of a manager that primarily determine satisfaction and turnover of talented employees — not pay, benefits or big company perks.

Of course, your organization’s personnel policies still apply, but know it’s OK to go beyond purely technical discussions and listen to concerns that may reach beyond the formal workplace. You may be surprised to hear people open up with personal details they would not otherwise share. If that happens, you are succeeding.

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Most of all, be a good listener. Offer advice and personal experience where appropriate, but be careful not to promise what you or your organization cannot deliver. If you feel a line is being crossed, remain quiet and let the moment pass, or suggest other resources, perhaps within HR. All told, this involves investing little time relative to expected returns.

Short term, expect to see a more confident, more focused staff. If reaching out and opening up mean showing your staff an unexpected new side, you might even find yourself more connected, more privy to conversations and information that could prove beneficial.

Longer term, actions like these build loyalty — the kind that bonds people to an organization and reduces the kind of turnover endemic to health care. While crises always seem to resolve, I'm bullish on the power of relatively simple actions to impact fundamental beliefs and attitudes.

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All of these stratagems reinforce what we call the "three R's" of trust: *revealing*, *receiving* and *respect*, the very foundation of team effectiveness. Revealing meaningful aspects of yourself can reset the table, while receiving involves listening in a nonjudgmental way. Respect incorporates what has been called the *platinum rule*: treat others not how you would like to be treated, but how *they* would want to be treated.

Put the "three R's" into action in your organization, and you can build a strong foundation to help people thrive in what are otherwise difficult times. [CIP](#)

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