

Principals must face morale issue

by Bambi Betts

Whatever a principal engages in should add value to student learning. This is the assumed starting point for any discussion on the practices of an international school principal.

Keeping this premise as the organizing principle, we examine an issue that has come to be as central in our schools as the learning of our students -that of faculty morale. Virtually no principal or school head is a stranger to the "low morale" syndrome. And a syndrome it is, not necessarily based in reality, but rather a series of perceptions which form a powerful rationale for all kinds of behavior on the part of many. Those looking for jobs probe for a sense of this "morale," and those recruiting for their schools rank "effect on faculty morale" at the top of their lists of criteria for selection of new faculty.

What is morale? Different authors characterize it differently. One source defines it as the feeling a worker has about his job, based on how the worker perceives himself in the organization, and the extent to which the organization is viewed as meeting the worker's own needs and expectations (Washington and Watson). Another describes it as 'the professional interest and enthusiasm that a person displays towards the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation (Bentley and Rempel).

Whatever the definition, teachers routinely describe low morale as a primary cause for not doing their best in the classroom. So principals HAVE TO deal with this. In a fairly recent survey of both private and public school teachers in the US (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997), participants identified five primary factors affecting faculty morale (no order stated)

- Administrative support and leadership, or "treatment" by administrators
- Student behavior and attitudes
- A positive school atmosphere
- Teacher autonomy
- Parental support

In a similar study in Texas, these same factors emerged, with student behavior and treatment by administrators nearly sharing first place as the most important factors. Financial issues ranked last, meaning that, according to these teachers, pay issues were the least likely to have an impact on how they felt about their jobs.

Let me stick my neck out here. In my 20 years of experience in international schools, many people WILL stay in a school that pays well, even if those same people claim the morale is the lowest ever. In other words, extrinsic motivating factors are actually driving the broad decision to remain in a workplace, although "studies" (teacher completed surveys) almost always indicate that such "extrinsic" factors, although present, are less important. Confusing paradox?

Doug Heath in *Faculty Burnout, Morale, and Vocational Adaptation* attributes this to the fact that today teachers are less intrinsically motivated by their work. He posits that teachers in the past drew greater intrinsic rewards from helping children develop, receiving community and parent respect, and achieving personal fulfillment in an ethically concerned profession. Teaching has become more demanding, kids are harder to teach, parents (especially in fee-paying schools?)

have higher expectations and teachers are generally less well respected in the community. These intrinsic rewards diminished, teachers turn to higher expectations from extrinsic rewards such as administrative support, someone else disciplining the kids, "working conditions" (class size, personal days, etc.) to seek the "feeling" that they are valued in the school's attempt to meet its goals.

In international schools there is another layer of factors that play into the morale picture. International schools are often responsible for more than just the teachers "job." Housing, vacations, check cashing, all things which are generally in control of the individual are suddenly relinquished to an "Institution." This loss of control makes teachers even more vulnerable to "low morale," as the potential for the school to make mistakes which affect their personal lives increases.

As several studies have concluded that teacher morale and student achievement are related, it is in the interest of all to pursue ways to improve it. While morale may actually be just perception, it continues, apparently, to bear on teacher performance. So how can administrators approach this slippery issue?

1. Build the notion that "positive" morale depends on the behaviors and attitudes of both teachers and administrators. There is an erroneous conception in many of our schools that "low" morale is caused by the administration and "high" morale is caused by the teachers.
2. Build pride. We need to find ways to help teachers see that no one benefits from their bad-mouthing of an institution through improper channels. This is the school they chose to work for; if the perception at large in the community is that it is poor, they, too, as employees, have everything to lose.
3. Above all, do your job. Maintain a clear vision and steps for achieving it. Keep the students at the center for your decision-making. Although all may not agree, this is the only way you keep student learning as the central issue. Practice playing out the implications of any decision all the way through to the students.

Remember that you are not solely responsible for the morale of the school. It is a joint responsibility of all community members. It is not something one set of people does to another. Given that the morale of an organization is a shared responsibility. What are some things teachers can do to address the issue?

1. Reexamine and critically analyze the reasons for their low morale.
2. Use legitimate channels to help administrators see another point of view.
3. Define what is energizing and uplifting to them personally and do more of these things
4. Be honest about what really matters to them in their work; what are "deal-breakers."

As "morale" is largely a socio-psychological phenomenon, everything we do as an organization will contribute to it. At worst, we can ignore it; at best, we can raise awareness that it truly is a shared effect to which all contribute.