



By KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D.

# Top Seven Morale Killers in Your Department

## *How to Make the Positive Changes Necessary to Improve Morale*

Facilitating high morale in tough economic times is a real challenge for any fire service organization. I have conducted a variety of studies and surveys on fire departments all over the United States and Canada. There have been common themes in what hurts morale in career, combination and volunteer fire departments.

Take a look at these top seven morale killers and see if your department needs some improvement in any of these areas:

**1. Lack of discipline.** I have discovered that this is the number-one cause of low morale for many departments: having to drag around deadweight firefighters who no one will discipline. Instead of dealing with the disciplinary issues, the firefighter gets ignored, transferred or promoted. This kills morale as other firefighters wonder why they put in so much effort to do a great job. Whatever your type of department, standards must be set and everyone must be held accountable for those standards. Proper mentoring, training and coaching will alleviate the need for a lot of discipline, but there is always going to be that one person who pushes the limits and, no matter how great the leadership, is going to be a jerk. That person needs to be disciplined.

**2. Lack of communication and transparency.** The communication is-

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sue is prevalent in every fire service organization. There is a massive hoarding of information going on. While all information cannot be shared, you can certainly be as transparent as possible and communicate effectively as to why certain in-

formation cannot be shared. Information that can be shared needs to free-flow up, down and across the chain of command.

**3. Lack of input.** Many chiefs wonder why they cannot get buy-in for certain policies, change, missions or visions. Firefighters will always find it very challenging to buy into these things if they weren't allowed input. This is especially true of decisions that are made that directly affect the firefighter. Getting input throughout the organization is a key to creating buy-in. Ignoring the input of your firefighters is surefire way to kill morale.

**4. Lack of integrity.** Morale will take a rapid decline when you breach integrity. This is a very simple concept: do what you committed to do, when you committed to do it. Broken promises not only deteriorate morale, they also set up a pattern of distrust among the firefighters. If you have ever made the mistake of breaching integrity, the best thing you

can do is take full responsibility for it, show some humility and demonstrate a long pattern of changed behavior.

**5. Lack of accountability.** It is incredibly frustrating for firefighters to be held accountable to a certain standard by management, and then stand by and watch management violate those standards with zero accountability. This is a huge morale killer. If you want to see morale skyrocket, you will make yourself accountable, up, down and across the chain of command. I wrote about a 360-degree evaluation in my previous column. Using that tool will help make you accountable and will raise morale.

**6. Lack of passion, humor and fun.** Firefighters want leaders who show passion and purpose for their jobs and in the process, have a great sense of humor. This allows people to have fun in their jobs, which is a huge morale booster. People who focus on all the things that are wrong with their jobs miss the opportunities to see all the things that are right. This type of negativity will hurt morale.

**7. Lack of mentors and role models.** Firefighters want to be mentored by strong role models from the day they walk through the door. Many firefighters feel there is a lack of strong role-model examples in their department and a lack of leaders who recognize what true leadership really is. This is often due to all of the items listed above.

Keeping morale up in any fire department takes strong leadership and enough humility to admit you can improve. Send out a short questionnaire to firefighters asking them how morale could be improved in your department. Those closest to the problems will always have the absolute best solutions. Take their input seriously and make the positive changes necessary to improve morale.

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- 5. Lack of accountability**
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