

As a manager, I've worked hard to address morale issues and culture dynamics, and it's not an easy thing to overhaul, but this is what I've learned. The people who are talking about it are usually part of the problem. When someone comes into my office and tells me that morale is low or gossip is running rampant, I immediately pay attention. It's more than likely that their morale is low. If that is the case, then their negative perception feeds into their own behavior and interactions with others, which creates the gossip, hurt feelings and overall poor morale.

It's a vicious circle and hard to pinpoint. There are many reasons to feel low and defeated in this line of work. One call, one fat finger mistake, one missed transmission, one conversation with a co-worker or supervisor, or one verbally abusive caller can take down all the good affirmations and intentions for the day.

Agencies spend a lot of time training and developing communication skills as it pertains to customer service. They often fail to promote the importance of interpersonal communications among co-workers. Telecommunicators can often be the hardest on themselves and each other, especially after they share a dim confined space for 8-12 hours. There is often no give for their co-worker, no pass for the misspoken comment or the unintended mistake that put comments in the wrong call.

Most communications centers experience new hires who cry during training. It's almost an expected and accepted part of the process. Why is that? The crying usually happens because of the way a trainee is being treated and spoken to or, even worse, spoken about, on shift. The gossip escalates when the trainee has a bad day or bad call. Unfortunately, good people get lost, because they can't get past the culture that prevails within communications.

So, what do we do about it? Is it *really* possible to change the culture and morale in a communications center? Yes, of course it is! It's not rocket science. The people in these very centers do extraordinary things every day. They literally talk people down from a ledge. They are exceptional individuals. They are the chosen voice for those in need.

All that is needed is a little guidance and self-control. This is really where change begins. Telecommunicators need to give the same level of care to each other that they give to every caller. The change in culture

and morale really begins with you. In fact, it starts and finishes with you. It's all about you!

Here are some good thought practices to establish. They take concerted effort but if applied can change your thoughts and personal morale:

Someone's bad behavior doesn't dictate your own. In other words, bite your tongue! No, not literally, but the adage, "if you don't have something nice to say, then don't say anything at all" applies here. More so, don't rise to the bait. Many times, the person on the other side has no idea that they are upsetting you, or, if they are aware, acting as bad as they are will only feed into the negative reaction they are trying to get out of you and make you feel bad because of it. Just don't do it!

When you're not getting the result you want, look at what you're doing, and then you make the change. Often, we expect others to change their behavior or actions, because they are not doing what is expected and it's their fault, right? We blame the other person because *they* are not doing, saying or reacting the way we think they should or expect them to. Try changing your approach, tone or body language. It may not be what you're saying but how you are saying it. At the very least, what you are doing is not working, so re-evaluate your approach and make the change.

Know your audience. In other words, make sure you are speaking in a manner that is appropriate for your audience. The way we speak to each other depends on the relationship and knowledge base. We all get the idea of "Mom/Dad voice." We have either been subject to it growing up or used it as a parent. We know instinctively not to use it on anyone other than a child because it's not appropriate. When we speak to our superiors, we monitor our

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behavior and our words, because we want to make a good impression. The same applies when we are training someone, we don't assume they come in knowing the terminology and technology, so we adjust our training and techniques to their level of knowledge. Take care, and think about who you are speaking to before you speak.

You can't control anything outside of your own thoughts. This is important. The one thing that we have control over is our own thoughts. Let's face it, telecommunicators are taught to control the call(er) and the incident. This is an important skill and very necessary in this line of work. But this is where it ends. The truth is, we have very little control over our working environment or any environment for that matter. It changes on a dime. The way we speak to ourselves is very important for mental health and personal morale. If you are saying to yourself, "I hate my job, I hate this place or I hate working with this person," then you are most likely projecting those thoughts through words, deeds and actions. You're also allowing someone or something to control your thoughts and giving them your power. You are the only one who can stop and change the conversation in your own mind. It takes practice and conscious effort, but it can be done. It's the corner stone to mediation, which isn't about clearing your mind, it's about controlling your mind.

To recap, emergency communications is a hard field to work in. The people who answer the call for help are exceptional individuals. They deserve a lot more recognition regarding this occupation and its value to society. At the same time, they deserve to work in an environment that promotes good interpersonal practices. It's important for agencies to adapt interpersonal communication training in their curriculum and address morale from a completely different approach. It doesn't happen overnight, but that change starts with you. If you control your thoughts and change the conversation you are having with yourself, it will change everything, including your working environment. Remember, it starts and finishes with you! ●

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