Unlock the Power of Positivity – Sustain Performance in Stressful Times

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By Yvonne Nath with guest author [Heath Harris,] Director of Legal Operations Innovation at Fenwick & West

Morale improvement may be the most inexpensive tool we can use to improve law firm performance, and it always starts with what you have: your people and yourself.

Morale is "the confidence, enthusiasm, and discipline of a person or group at a particular time,[1]" and it can make or break an employee's sense of well-being and engagement. During periods of uncertainty and change, we can feel pushed out of our comfort zones and experience anxiety, a dip in morale, and an associated dip in engagement. Prolonged periods of uncertainty can leave us feeling in limbo and out of sorts. By boosting morale, we can boost engagement, and by boosting engagement, we can increase performance.

Per a 2018 Gallup report, increased employee "engagement is highly related to better business outcomes," such as "better customer engagement, higher productivity, better retention, fewer accidents, and 21% higher profitability [when comparing the top to bottom quartiles of employees, by engagement]. Engaged workers also report better health outcomes." Furthermore, "recognition received for work accomplishments; relationships with coworkers; and supervisors…these likely provide the best explanation for improvements in the percentage of engaged employees. Gallup organizational research indicates that at least 70% of the variance in team engagement is explained by the quality of the manager or team leader.[2]"

At LawVision, we found that workplaces with top-rated cultures, which include engaged employees with positive morale, see [faster growth in top and bottom lines and attract talent at a faster rate].

In this article, we will discuss some of the actions we have taken to boost morale in law firms.

Our backgrounds: Yvonne Nath is a Consultant in the Strategy team at LawVision. She has a master's degree in law firm management from The George Washington University and is accredited in organizational culture. Heath Harris is the Director of Legal Operations Innovation at Fenwick & West. He has an MBA from Penn State University's Smeal College of Business with a focus on executive leadership and strategy.

Heath: I believe that great work is simply a side effect of happy people who feel supported. In my work, I build platforms for people to perform, doing my best to remove obstacles that get in their way, design structures that reveal their superpowers, and hopefully inspire them to stand in the light of who they already are. I had the pleasure of meeting Yvonne during a workshop that LawVision held this year in Philadelphia, and we quickly realized we were cut from the same cloth of organizational design and leadership. Naturally, I jumped at the chance to have her work with my team. Yvonne gave them a space to be vulnerable, connect, and ultimately gain focus on the things they can control in an environment that is destabilized and changing.

Yvonne: Helping people around me feel better also makes me feel better — it's wonderful. As a result of COVID-19, people

have experienced a sort of shock to their systems and are disoriented. Many people are feeling scared and weary from being in limbo. Now, more than ever, it is important for people to carve out moments in each day for self-care and to reinforce positive connections with others.

In the ½ hour virtual workshops I run with law firms, participants are provided with a safe space to tackle some of their anxiety, connect with peers, and have fun. Then, they can go back to their day feeling less alone and more confident that they can achieve something. Based on a poll I have conducted at the end of workshops, 9 out of 10 participants immediately felt better after their first workshop. Most people leave smiling.

Heath: Thank you for offering this workshop, Yvonne. Although we've all never been more "connected," it's so easy to feel alone and overwhelmed at the same time. The team loved the opportunity to have fun, be real, and leave with a sense of empowerment to achieve realistic goals that week. It was great to see the ripple effects too. One of our Knowledge & Innovation attorneys, Emily Lippincott, took it upon herself to schedule weekly pick me ups for us all to share strategies on how we gain control over our days, manage our stress, and/or otherwise share stories about what it's like to be a human being trying to navigate this new normal.

Yvonne: Thanks, Heath. As a leader, you fully appreciate how creating authentic connections with your employees during a crisis can increase their trust and willingness to follow you during difficult times. I know you have put a lot of effort into creating a positive-minded culture among your team at Fenwick. Can you please tell us about some of those efforts?

Heath: Absolutely, Yvonne, and thank you. I believe that leadership is about choices, the choices we make in moments of conflict, stress, uncertainty, fear, or great opportunity. You choose to 1) react or pause, 2) limit or listen, 3) leave or learn, and 4) to acquiesce or act. I believe, when you make positive choices in that order, that others see that they can act too. In difficult times, these choices become critically important. I hope when people around us see their leaders making positive choices, that they also choose positivity.

As you might imagine, leadership really matters when change happens. As leaders, our jobs are to make sense of the world around us, and then give people a vision of how we'll get through things together. I believe that when we remain transparent and consistent in this process, inviting our teams in to carve the path we'll walk, we get to the other side stronger, and more glued together. To be successful, everyone needs to see the role they can play and the positive impact they can have to make that happen. This understanding of our role and impact instills a sense of control in an environment of flux. In these moments, we can define where we are, where we think we're going, and what we all can do to get to that destination. There's also some science behind this psychology of change and empowerment, and the positive effects found when you engage and involve those affected by the change, in the design of the response to it.

In the famous 1969 Harvard Business Review article, "How to Deal with Resistance to Change," Paul R. Lawrence examines successful strategies to lead through change. In this analysis, he cites the 1948 study conducted by Lester Coch and John R.P. French, Jr., "Overcoming Resistance to Change," where the two scholars observed workgroups in a clothing factory. Four groups were observed in the context of needing to implement a change in their respective work processes. The first group used the top-down method, the second group was given the illusion of participation in/control of the change, and the third and fourth received full participation/design rights in the change. The first group encountered resistance to change and saw a 30% drop in productivity that remained constant after the change was made permanent. The second group, the illusion of participation group, where there was participation through representation (e.g. a single group member was asked to be involved in some way for the design, etc.) saw no statistically significant change in performance. They effectively just stayed the same. Groups three and four, the full participation groups, saw a slight dip in performance at the launch of the change and then proceeded to outperform their previous production rates. Put simply,

when change is led in a top-down fashion, the group achieved 70% of what the manager hoped to achieve. When the team was brought in to help define the path they'd walk, they outperformed previous markers of success.[3] In conclusion, to outperform, include all of the people affected by the change in the process of designing the response.

I've seen this made true in creating strategic plans for my department, practice groups, and other administrative teams, and in setting a strategy with my team for how we'll navigate this current environment. These approaches help define the concrete things we can all do to navigate change. The hard part though is maintaining momentum and keeping people engaged in these kinds of environments. That effort must be broad and constant. So, it's pretty strategically important that the leader is not the only one practicing the power of the following positivity methods we use on my team at Fenwick.

Positive Things We Do:

1. Seven seconds to breathe.
   - So, I used to be a professional opera singer. Before I went on stage, I used this technique. It helped lower my heart rate. Today, I use it to lower my relative level of stress and clear my head.

     Step 1: Plug your right nostril and breath in slowly through the left for seven seconds.

     Step 2: Hold your breath for seven seconds.

     Step 3: Plug your left nostril, and exhale slowly out of your right nostril for seven seconds.

     Step 4: Take a slow cleansing breath.

     Repeat at least 3 times, notice your heart rate slow, feel your body relax.

2. Pass the Positive
   - When you see the good, say it! Share what you see and call your colleagues out for their goodness. Watch the ripples travel through your organization.
   - I have a standing calendar reminder to see three good things and say it publicly or directly to that person every day.

3. Weekly Pandemic Pick Me Ups
   - One of our Knowledge and Innovation attorneys, Emily Lippincott, took it upon herself to create weekly connections for the team on a video call. We share stories, let ourselves be vulnerable, and share strategies for how we navigate and manage stress.

4. Virtual Team Parties
   - One of our Practice Innovation attorneys, Alicia Ryan, took it upon herself to organize WebEx happy hours, including Netflix parties where we all watch movies together and chat with each other for the duration.

5. Meet the Energy, Not the Emotion
   - As problem solvers, we're going to encounter people "feeling all the feels." It's important that we not let ourselves get emotionally hijacked and waste the opportunity to truly solve a problem. So, we practice meeting the energy, but not the emotions. Asking questions to steady a call and defining paths to give a sense of control.

Yvonne: Those are all excellent ideas, Heath! You've covered a lot of ground. I'll close by adding a few suggestions for how to sustain positive morale and performance over time.

1. Have regular one-on-one meetings between supervisors and direct reports. Use these as opportunities to touch base on a more human level (avoid using these for status updates). Supervisors should encourage direct reports to suggest topics for these meetings.
2. Shape the culture to be purpose-oriented. Help employees understand how they contribute and belong in the micro and macro scheme of things.
3. Evaluate your firm's compensation and rewards systems to ensure they are aligned with the firm's other types of messaging. Remember that not all rewards are financial or cost anything other than a little thoughtfulness.

We hope you enjoyed this discussion and can put these tools to use for creating a positive work environment during stressful times. If you have any tools you wish to share or have questions about anything you have read here, please feel free to email me, Yvonne Nath, at ynath@lawvision.com. We wish you a good day.

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[1] Definition of "morale" in the Oxford dictionary

[2] Jim Harter, "Employee Engagement on the Rise in the U.S." Gallup, August 26, 2018.
https://news.gallup.com/poll/241649/employee-engagement-rise.aspx

[3] Paul R. Lawrence, "How to Deal with Resistance to Change." Harvard Business Review, January 1969 Issue.
https://hbr.org/1969/01/how-to-deal-with-resistance-to-change