

Bad Morale: The Facts Now Known

New Research Dispels Myths and Offers Solutions

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Thomas Jefferson once said, “We should never be afraid of the truth, regardless of where it leads us.” How true, especially when referring to something that hurts the majority of law enforcement and corrections agencies daily. The definition of workplace morale has evolved somewhat throughout time. Researchers have defined it as “an attitude of satisfaction with the desire and willingness to strive for the goals of a group or organization.”¹

The benefits of enhancing morale are very significant. Decreasing citizen complaints and internal grievances, preventing civil litigation, reducing employee turnover, increasing productivity, preventing misconduct and improving the quality of life for everyone are potential benefits. Combine these payoffs with the indirect consequences of saving substantial money and safeguarding the job security for chief administrators and you have an undertaking worthy of any department.

Why Bad Morale is so Common

Although most departments suffer from bad morale, leaders often ignore it. This indifference can have devastating consequences. Officers who commit misconduct frequently rationalize their behavior by convincing themselves the unfairness within their agency justifies their behavior. To make matters worse, they use the internal problems that everyone is angry about to encourage others to violate policies.

There are two primary reasons administrators do not do more to resolve morale problems. The first reason is not understanding how to determine the extent and causes of employee anger and frustration. Self-centeredness and laziness is the other reason that some top leaders ignore significant department needs.

Lack of Knowledge

In this instance, ignoring poor morale happens because leaders just do not know what to do, even though they have the desire. This lack of ability is usually caused by insufficient training.

The second reason some leaders don't do more about clear ethical problems is that they believe bringing attention to their integrity needs could hurt them personally. Encouraged by the hope they will escape scrutiny and criticism if no one brings attention to the situation, their self-centeredness becomes more important than maintaining integrity.

The administrative indifference to bad morale takes three distinct forms. The first is leaders who do nothing to resolve the anger and frustration of officers, but are not negative role models themselves. The second level is leaders who intentionally look the other way and ignore acts of indiscretion by workers, even though they continue to grow in severity and frequency. The last and most harmful group are those who role-model misconduct themselves.

Intentionally ignoring obvious ethical problems is primarily caused by two problems: a lack of knowledge and self-centeredness. Although these leadership failures usually lead to devastating consequences, they can be prevented and corrected.

¹ Karen Beck, Ph.D., “Is There Really a Police Morale Problem?” Australasian Centre for Policing Research

Three Studies Offers New Insight

The true solutions to morale are usually possible only after a valid assessment identifies the “root causes” of the anger and frustration. Thus, if we never conduct an assessment to identify the causes, we don’t have to face the problem. The majority of law enforcement employees feel more stress from their own organization than from carrying-out their duties. Thus, ignorance then becomes bliss for leaders who don’t care.

The research was conducted during 2003-2004 by:

- The National Institute of Ethics-2,552 officers from 23 states,
- The University of Southern Mississippi-466 officers in 4 states (focus was FTO morale), and
- The University of Southern Mississippi-573 officers in 4 states.

National Institute of Ethics Anger & Frustration Research

The two-year study conducted by the National Institute of Ethics used a confidential survey to ascertain the views of 2,552 law enforcement personnel from over 500 agencies in 23 states. The findings reveal both overall views on what makes personnel angry/frustrated, and stratifies specific findings by gender, supervisor versus non supervisor, and field training officers. The research goal was to identify what circumstances cause officers throughout the nation to feel angry and frustrated about their job. Understanding what prompts these feelings will be valuable for counteracting the reasons officers use to rationalize their own misconduct.

The survey contained 52 factors to be rated from “0” place a number (0–5) that best describes to what extent you feel you have been treated unfairly about that specific issue. The numbers were defined as follows: 0-I don’t feel any anger or frustration; 1-Slightly angry or frustrated; 2-Somewhat angry or frustrated; 3-Moderately angry or frustrated; 4-Substantially angry or frustrated; 5-Extremely angry or frustrated.

Overall Findings (25 Greatest Causes of Anger)

Determining the causes of poor morale creates the opportunity to develop solutions. The findings reveal the majority of the ten greatest sources of anger and frustration among officers have a crucial common denominator, their administrators. The overall greatest source of bad morale is the perception of favoritism committed by administrators.

Overall Averages (2,552 surveys)	<u>0-5 Scale</u>
1. Administration plays favoritism	2.79
2. Staffing levels are low	2.70
3. Motivation and morale is bad	2.63
4. Communication is very poor	2.57
5. Administration is “out of touch”	2.54
6. Administration does not support us	2.49
7. Discipline is unfair and inconsistent	2.46
8. Fellow employees have bad attitudes	2.44
9. Accountability is unfair or inconsistent	2.29
10. Supervisors play politics	2.29
11. Employees aren’t listened to	2.29
12. Criminal Justice system is frustrating	2.26
13. Bias influences leaders decisions	2.20
14. Training (internal) is poor	2.16
15. Respect isn’t demonstrated	2.07
16. Teamwork is pitiful	1.99

17. Planning is non-existent	1.70
18. Safety is a low priority	1.63
19. Salary is not high enough	1.95
20. Criticism – there’s too much of it	1.93
21. Don't go to enough training seminars	1.86
22. Cooperation among workers is poor	1.85
23. Goals and objectives are never used	1.82
24. Supplies are inadequate	1.76
25. Sincerity - a lack of it is prevalent	1.76

Comparing Morale by Sex of Employee

Females are slightly angrier than males. The number one cause of anger for both sexes is the perception of favoritism within their department.

Females (454 surveys)	2.67 (0-5 Scale)
Males (1,955 surveys)	2.58 (0-5 Scale)

Supervisor and Non-Supervisor Comparison

Comparison by Rank: Non-Supervisors, Supervisors and Field Training Officers
Of three major groups, field Training officers are the most angry.

Field Training Officers (732 surveys)	1.69 (0-5 Scale)
Non-supervisors (1,595 surveys)	1.62 (0-5 Scale)
Supervisors (698 surveys)	1.41 (0-5 Scale)

	<u>Non-Supervisors</u>	<u>Supervisors</u>	<u>FTOs</u>
Administration does not support us	2.67	2.03	2.67
Staffing levels are low	2.76	2.53	3.02
Discipline is unfair and inconsistent	2.55	2.20	2.58
Fellow employees have bad attitudes	2.46	2.38	2.50
Administration plays favoritism	3.00	2.24	3.02
Administration is “out of touch”	2.67	2.16	2.77
Communication is very poor	2.64	2.33	2.75
Motivation n and morale is bad	2.47	2.32	2.83

Comparing Morale by Type of Agency

Overall Averages

Police Departments (732 surveys)	1.74 (0-5 Scale)
Sheriff Offices (152 surveys)	1.46 (0-5 Scale)
State Agencies (452 surveys)	1.39 (0-5 Scale)

Partial listing of specific findings (0-5 Scale)	<u>State</u>	<u>Police</u>	<u>Sheriff</u>
Accountability is unfair or inconsistent	1.90	2.51	2.18
Administration does not support us	2.26	2.65	2.25
Staffing levels are low	3.25	2.67	2.57
Discipline is unfair and inconsistent	1.87	2.68	2.46
Fellow employees have bad attitudes	2.19	2.65	2.67
Administration plays favoritism	2.58	2.70	2.57
Administration is “out of touch”	2.33	2.69	2.40
Communication is very poor	2.17	2.77	2.84
Criminal Justice system is frustrating	1.88	2.56	2.13
Motivation and morale is bad	2.35	2.93	2.63

University of Southern Mississippi Research

The Criminal Justice Department at the University of Southern Mississippi conducted a study of field training programs from April 2003 through May, 2004. Researchers used a confidential survey during seminars to collect data from 573 sworn personnel from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas.

Motivation and Morale Findings

1. Respondents stated in response to the statement “**I have not received sufficient training on motivation techniques.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 57.6%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 25.3%.

2. Respondents stated in response to the statement “**I believe bad morale is a major problem within our agency.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 73.7%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 13.9%.

3. Respondents stated in response to the statement “**I don’t understand even basic motivation strategies or theories.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 12.3%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 63.8%.

4. Respondents stated in response to the statement “**I don’t understand how to help employees have a sense of pride in their work.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 13.7%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 68.3%.

University of Southern Mississippi FTO Morale Research

The Criminal Justice Department at the University of Southern Mississippi conducted a study of field training programs from April 2003 through May, 2004. Researchers used a confidential survey during seminars to collect data from 466 field training officers and program coordinators from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas agencies.

Field Training Officer (FTO) Findings

Respondents stated in response to the statement “**The compensation I receive as an FTO is fair.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 20%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 64%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement “**Our program has annual goals and objectives.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 21%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 57%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement “**Administrators in our agency sometimes refuse to terminate a trainee with poor DORs.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 56%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 22%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement “**FTO selection procedures consist of more than submitting a memo for consideration.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 33%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 52%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement “**There are some cynical, Bitter FTOs in our program.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 49%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 33%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement “**I have never received training in how to resolve conflicts among employees.**”

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 45.1%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 36.6%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I don’t follow any guidelines or standard procedures when dealing with conflicts.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 27.2%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 53.3%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I most often attempt to resolve conflicts by seeking cooperation or compromise from those involved.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 55.6%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 26.3%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I am often guilty of role-modeling a cynical or negative attitude about my agency.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 15.3%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 64.4%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I hope our evaluation form or procedures are revised.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 46.9%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 25.2%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I believe there is a wide difference in how supervisors interpret and complete evaluation forms.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 63.3%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 18.2%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I don’t believe discipline is fair or consistent in my agency.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 63.0%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 20.7%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I think I should have more training on how to discipline effectively.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 60.3%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 21.8%.

Respondents stated in response to the statement **“I feel our discipline procedures are unfair or poorly designed.”**

Synopsis: Either generally or strongly agree: 47.3%. Either generally or strongly disagree: 30.4%.