

Max Messmer, Editor

# How Small Slightings Can Cause Big Damage to Morale

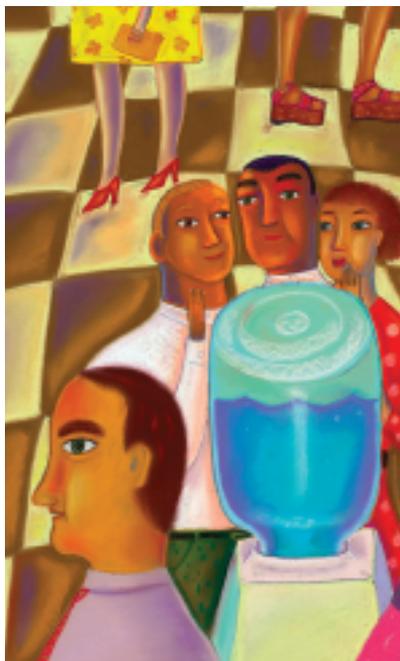
Sometimes the little things can matter as much as the big issues when it comes to keeping employees motivated and satisfied. Most managers intuitively know this and do their best to regularly show their appreciation to staff members and perhaps offer tangible rewards for a

job well done. Despite their best intentions, however, managers sometimes inadvertently lower morale in small, subtle ways.

Unintentional slights can come in the form of a supervisor's continued inability to pronounce an employee's name correctly, someone being overlooked for a lunch meeting with the boss and other colleagues, or a manager's tendency to cut off certain employees when they're speaking while allowing other team members to talk at length.

No matter what form small snubs take, they have the same negative effect: Over time, they undermine the employee's self-confidence. Those staff members who are continually overlooked are likely to become disengaged and cease making contributions—robbing their companies of valuable insights and expertise. Many employees who feel

underappreciated eventually leave. In today's competitive labor market, where firms are struggling to recruit and retain skilled financial professionals, that can affect the produc-



tivity of the entire team.

By becoming more aware of how your actions as a manager affect employee job satisfaction, you can improve the work environment for everyone. Here are a few ideas.

## Examine your interactions with employees

Build awareness throughout your firm about the need for managers to serve as role models and seek participation from all employees. Ask supervisors to think about whether they always turn to the same two or three staff members for feedback, for example, or whether there are certain individuals with whom they routinely have casual discussions while others receive only a reserved greeting in the hallway.

Most managers don't intentionally exclude others, but sometimes they forget that small, seemingly insignificant actions can be magnified in the eyes of employees, who may justifiably feel that certain people are in the inner circle while they aren't.

If it seems that some team members are consistently overlooked or that their contributions are minimized, explore why this is the case.

Some employees avoid the spotlight and must occasionally be drawn out. You may be waiting for them to speak up, and they may be waiting for an invitation to give input.

### **View employees' concerns as your own**

Employees can feel as though their roles have diminished when their supervisors don't appear to care about or address their concerns. Conversely, they know they are appreciated and valued when managers take the time to explain situations to them or offer reassurance. Even if a matter seems inconsequential to you as a manager, if it's troubling your team or an individual in your group, it's important to address the issue.

For example, suppose your company has announced its intention to reorganize the finance department. You have been assured that your team and direct reports won't be affected in any significant way. Although you have communicated this

information to your team, staff members may continue to have concerns. Rather than being dismissive about the issue, address it promptly, and provide as much additional detail as possible. Make sure to talk to everyone at once or send a group e-mail rather than giving information only to certain individuals. This ensures that everyone on the team receives the same information at the same time.

### **Thank everyone involved in a project's success**

Unfortunately, well-intentioned efforts to offer team members praise for a job well done often backfire when managers fail to acknowledge others who also made integral contributions. People whose efforts are overlooked may begin to feel that both they and their contributions are invisible, especially if it happens more than once.

Take the time to check that you're assigning credit to the right people if you intend to single out specific team members. Otherwise, a well-

meaning gesture can easily turn into an unintentional slight.

It's hard to be objective about your own management style, so you should seek input from others on your effectiveness as a leader. Many companies provide a forum for 360° feedback. If there isn't a formal process for this type of assessment, ask a peer or trusted assistant to be candid with you. As a manager, you are a standard bearer, and employees take their lead from your example. ■

*Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are Motivating Employees For Dummies® and Managing Your Career For Dummies® (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.). The second edition of Messmer's Human Resources Kit for Dummies® will arrive in bookstores this month.*

