

By Bill Stronge

"There is joy in work. There is no happiness except in the realization that we have accomplished something."
—Henry Ford

"Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."
—Abraham Lincoln

Would you be surprised to know that some of your employees dread getting up for work in the morning? Most of your team members probably like to do a good job at work, and having a sense of accomplishment is one of the keys to being happy. But as a leader, you will sometimes have to deal with unhappy employees. They could be unhappy for many reasons (money, career, personal), and it's up to you to find ways to uncover the problem and motivate them to turn things around.

Below is my list of the things you can do to help an unhappy employee become a happy one. Over the years, you've no doubt seen variations on these strategies and have probably learned (usually the hard way) why some work better than others.

1 One-on-ones

How much time do you spend with your employees? Do they get the opportunity to discuss nonwork-related issues with you or is that time spent only on reviewing project status and budget problems? If you are really keen to understand your team members, scheduling regular one-on-ones is a great approach. Spending some quality time with them and giving them a chance to talk out their thoughts allows you to see issues before they get too big—and in many instances allows you to cut off potential problems before they manifest themselves. Providing employees with a safe outlet to express themselves also lets them share their concerns, which otherwise might eventually worsen their situation.

2 Coaching

Employees sometimes lose their way at work. Maybe they aren't sure what is expected of them or what the goal of the organization is. Your role is to help them get a better understanding of these things. Take the time to ensure that they know what they should be doing on their project, or maybe when their next deadline is. Providing positive feedback when things go well and constructive criticism when tasks go wrong is all part of the process. No matter what the issue, taking an active role in their growth is important.

3 Paying attention

When asking questions, try to put yourself in your team members' shoes. There could be something going on in the office you are not aware of. Or maybe something is happening in their personal life that is spilling over into their job. Either way, you need to really listen to understand what the issues are. Employees will see right through you if you're asking them about a situation but you're more interested in answering your Blackberry than in listening to what they're saying.

4 New projects

Resolving some issues is as simple as giving employees a more challenging project. A work environment devoid of challenges (and their associated successes upon completion) can easily lead to boredom, which can turn a happy employee into an unhappy one. I remember a friend working on the same project for nearly 12 months. The project was rather complex but in an area that didn't really interest him. His boss noticed this and was able to gradually transition him onto a project that was more aligned with his skill set. His productivity skyrocketed at that point because he was able to get excited about what he was doing.

5 Training

Sending one or more employees to a class to work on a new skill or learn a new technique—or even just allowing them to attend a seminar—is a great way to jump-start people. Having something new to learn and bring back to share with others can motivate not just individual members but the entire team.

6 Money (not)

Who wouldn't like to see another few thousand dollars a month in their paycheck? While we all wish this would happen, it's not very realistic. Also, very rarely does money solve the problem of an unhappy employee. In some instances, money problems might be a contributing factor in their unhappiness, but overall, that won't be a root cause.

7 Time off

We've all been there. Working 20 hours a days, five, six, or seven days a week for who knows how many weeks in an effort to get a big project launched can be grueling. Having a few days to recharge after such an effort can help even the most diehard workaholic. Employees all like to have a few days off now and then that aren't part of their standard compensation. Just make sure it doesn't turn into an expectation for them or anybody else on the team or it could turn into a bigger problem for you.

8 Telecommuting

There is nothing worse than commuting back and forth to work each day. With the length of the typical daily commute now more than 30 minutes, employees are increasingly frustrated with the long lines of traffic and the cost of fuel. Allowing employees to work at home one or two days a week can help with this problem. And you get the added benefit of keeping another car off the road!

9 Mentors

Having somebody to talk to and relate to can provide many benefits for employees. Finding a mentor isn't the easiest task, since you have to figure out the right match. But if you can find somebody employees trust and respect, someone who will inspire and challenge them, the potential for their growth and happiness can be endless.

10 Moving on

In some cases, there is nothing that you, as a manager, can do to alleviate an employee's unhappiness. The work environment may not be to the employee's liking, he or she may not be getting along with co-workers, or maybe there are issues at home that have rolled over into the employee's work. No matter what you try, things are not getting better. In these situations, the best thing you can do is to help the employee find a different situation—either elsewhere within your organization or in extreme cases, outside it.

Keep it positive

Being a true leader means getting the most out of your team no matter what the situation. One of the best ways to do this is by keeping in touch with your team while providing constant feedback. Positive feedback when things go well is as important—if not more important—than negative feedback when issues arise. Most of us know when we make a mistake. We usually just need somebody to pick us up, dust us off, and point us back in the right direction.

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