

## Improving work climate to strengthen performance

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*“The essential task of management is creating opportunities, releasing potential, removing obstacles, encouraging growth, and providing guidance.”*

—DOUGLAS MCGREGOR  
LEADERSHIP AND MOTIVATION

**W**hen people work in a supportive environment, they strive to produce results. Such an environment is called a positive work climate. What exactly is work climate, and how is it important for improving performance?

Work climate is the “weather of the workplace.” Just as weather conditions can affect your daily activities, work climate influences your behavior at work. A good work climate can improve an individual’s work habits, while a poor climate can erode good work habits. Most importantly, a positive work climate leads to and sustains staff motivation and high performance (Litwin and Stringer 1968, Stringer 2002).

This chapter discusses what contributes to and results from a positive work climate. It focuses on what managers at all levels can do to create and sustain a positive work climate for work groups by helping you:

- understand what makes a positive work climate and how it affects performance;
- improve work climate by motivating staff and providing challenge, clarity, and support;
- strengthen communication by listening, understanding, and responding constructively;
- sustain your group’s commitment through your own commitment and supportive techniques;
- set the tone for the organization at the senior level.

## Recognizing a positive work climate

*“A positive work climate is conducive to creative, productive work; it is a cooperative, civil workplace that is relatively free from bad mouthing, backstabbing, or petty bickering.”*

—PAUL WONG

“THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF ‘CLIMATE MANAGEMENT’”

Every office and health facility has a work climate. Some climates are positive and productive, while others tend to demotivate staff. Although the type of climate may be easy to recognize in some workplaces, it may be more subtle in others. To understand the climate of your workplace, begin by asking yourself what it feels like to work with your colleagues, including your manager and your staff.

### Work climate

Work climate is the prevailing workplace atmosphere as experienced by employees. It is what it feels like to work in a group.

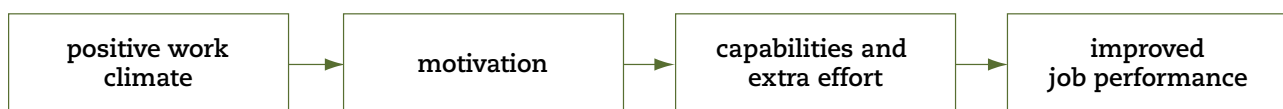
Think back over all your experiences as a member of a team, whether at work, in school, or in sports. Is there a team in which you shared a sense of excitement in working together? Reflecting on your experiences can help you recognize a positive work climate (see the box on the next page).

### REWARDS OF A POSITIVE WORK CLIMATE

A positive climate stimulates motivation and performance

To improve a work climate, it helps to understand how climate affects people and how it develops. A positive work climate stimulates staff motivation because it provides conditions under which people can pursue their own goals while striving toward organizational objectives (Bennis and Schein 1966). Everyone has motivators—impulses, needs, and energy reserves—that can drive him or her to work more effectively. When staff feel motivated, they want to put their capabilities to work. They may even make efforts that exceed job expectations. Quite simply, they try harder with all their potential, and doing so improves their performance on the job, as Figure 7 shows.

FIGURE 7 Rewards of a positive work climate



### Recognizing a positive work climate

Think of a time when you were a member of a great team. How did you feel? Were you:

- energized?
- empowered?
- excited?
- looking forward to the next day at work?
- impatient to get started?
- motivated?

All these experiences indicate a positive work climate.

Now think about how all of you interacted. What did your supervisor, teacher, or coach do to encourage your team's efforts? What did you do to contribute to the team effort? What was your team able to accomplish? Once you identify elements of this team's climate, you can begin to grasp the kind of positive work climate you can create.

**Research demonstrates the effects of positive work climate**

The relationship between work climate and performance is not just intuitive; it has been demonstrated in fields as diverse as health, education, and business. Canadian staff nurses found that a positive work climate increased their sense of empowerment and job commitment, which, in turn, improved their care of patients. A positive work climate was also responsible for students' and teachers' success in British schools. And in a study of corporations, climate accounted for nearly a third of strong financial results—profits, efficiency, and revenue growth (Laschinger et al. 2001, Hay Group 2000, Goleman 2000). When you pay attention to the work climate, you too can improve your staff's performance.

### FACTORS THAT CREATE A WORK CLIMATE

The climate of a work group develops through the influence of an organization's:

- history—its founding, successes, setbacks, and reputation;
- culture—shared work values, beliefs, assumptions, and traditions;
- management strategy and structure—growth and job opportunities, definition of roles and responsibilities, policies regarding promotion and rewards;

- external environment—the broader context of politics, regulation, workforce skills, and social barriers;
- managers' practices and competencies in leading a team.

It is important to know how you can influence work climate and distinguish between factors that are within your control and those that are not. On one hand, you can change a climate that undermines staff commitment and performance by managing and leading your team better. On the other hand, factors such as organizational history, culture, and management strategy and structure may be beyond your influence unless you hold a powerful position in your organization. Figure 8 summarizes the causes of work climate and its effects on performance. It highlights the importance of leading and managing practices and competencies in influencing work climate.

Supportive supervision fosters a positive climate

**Leading and managing practices and competencies.** The leading practices—scanning, focusing, aligning and mobilizing, and inspiring—all contribute to the creation of a positive work climate. Aligning and inspiring are especially useful in facilitating teamwork by building strong work relationships among group members. When you forge connections between each member's special skills and interests and their work, they willingly commit their time and efforts. You also inspire staff by demonstrating honesty, creativity, and personal commitment in your work. At the same time, you show trust and confidence in what they can do and acknowledge their contributions.

FIGURE 8 Causes and effects of work climate



Of all organizational factors, managers' practices and competencies have the greatest influence on their groups' work climate, and through climate, managers can sustain staff motivation and performance.

Practicing good management also helps you to build and sustain your group's enthusiasm for its work. Supportive supervisory practices empower your staff to learn through addressing challenges. Good management systems also make it easier for staff to do their work, stay informed, and monitor their progress in addressing challenges. All these practices create a positive work climate.

Leadership competencies enable you to clarify your purpose and priorities, communicate effectively, handle conflict, and motivate committed teams. When you develop or refine your leadership abilities, you can apply the leading and managing practices more effectively.

What about the effect of organizational culture? How will it affect the climate you try to create for your work group?

### Organizational culture is different from climate

While climate is the way it feels to work in a group, culture is the pattern of shared values and assumptions that organizational members share. Assumptions that have worked well in the past are taught to new members as “the way we do things here.”

A manager may develop a climate that differs from the prevailing cultural norms. She may encourage participation and a sense of collective responsibility in her work group while the organization is characterized by strict definition of roles, authoritarian decision-making, and an attitude of “that’s not my job.” In such cases, the manager can expect pressure from the rest of the organization to conform and will have to handle the tension between culture and climate. When she eventually produces results that please senior managers, she may feel less pressure.

## Improving work climate and staff motivation

*“What the boss of a work group does is the most important determinant of climate. The boss’s behavior drives climate, which arouses motivation. And aroused motivation is a major driver of bottom-line performance.”*

—ROBERT STRINGER  
LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

As a manager who leads a work group, you influence the climate of your work group more than any other factor. This finding is based on a survey of 2,500 organizational units in 24 organizations. It found that the unit manager (not pay, benefits, or the organizational leader) is the most critical player in building a strong workplace (Buckingham and Coffman 1999).

Your behavior and leading and managing practices can create a positive work climate and strong results within your group, even if your organization's climate isn't optimal. How successful you are will depend on how well you:

- know your staff, their motivations, work styles, and interests;
- know what motivates you, what you value, and what rouses your emotions;
- focus on providing challenge, clarity, and support to your group.

### KNOW YOUR STAFF

Be the “human connector” who makes things happen

The most important things you can do to develop a positive work climate are to know your staff and establish a good work relationship with them. Managers are the “human connectors” who make things happen (Kouzes and Posner 1999). If you have a good work relationship with the individuals in your group, it will be much easier for you to align their efforts with yours and mobilize their energies to face a challenge. If you are a caring and supportive supervisor, your staff will also be more likely to stay with the organization, instead of looking for work elsewhere.

You can ask your team members, individually or together, to talk about their hopes and dreams for their communities and country (see Table 5).

**TABLE 5 Learning about your staff**

Learn about the ideas, past experiences, goals, and behavior of your staff to understand what makes each person want to do his or her best.

Staff characteristics	Examples (interests, experience, temperament)
Dreams	For the community or the country
Motivation	Power: visibility and prestige Affiliation: having good relations Achievement: pride in a job well done and greater responsibility Job security
Life situation	Past jobs Transportation to and from work
Work style	Abstract thinker or practical See the big picture or very detail-oriented Eager to act or reflective Aware of others or concerned only about self
Preferred team roles	Initiator Follower or supporter Observer Opposer

Sources: McClelland 1985; Kantor 1999

Gathering this information will help generate ideas about how your work group might be able to effect some changes to improve health. Talking with your staff and observing them as they interact will give you a good idea of what motivates your colleagues in their work.

The handbook toolkit offers an exercise, “Creating a Climate of Hope and Possibility,” you can use to help a group that needs encouragement and self-confidence to embrace a positive vision of the future.

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Three big motivators: power, affiliation, and achievement

In the workplace, internal sources of motivation energize staff as they work. People often feel motivated for high performance by one of three primary motivators (or a mix of them): power, affiliation, or achievement (McClelland 1985). For example, people motivated by power want positions of visible responsibility. People motivated by affiliation want to work in a group where the interpersonal relations are pleasant and supportive. People motivated by achievement want to see results and to know that their efforts contributed to those results. You can create a climate that addresses such motivators and allows productivity, results, and sustained performance to flourish.

Do job-related factors such as money, safety, or training opportunities also motivate performance? You may hear complaints about these job-related factors. While (as much as possible) you need to ensure that pay and other external factors are acceptable to staff, increasing them above an acceptable level does not increase staff’s motivation for performance. For example, when people receive pay they consider adequate, additional money does not improve their job performance (Buckingham and Coffman 1999, p. 29).

### KNOW YOURSELF

As you become more aware of your staff’s internal dynamics, reflect on your own behavior and how staff may perceive you. How you behave and respond to stress, or experience strong emotions in the workplace, affects your team and coworkers. Sometimes people fool themselves into thinking that they are in control of their strong emotions and that no one notices. Feelings, especially strong ones, have a way of filtering into conversations, however. They show through your tone, choice of words, and behavior. Staff perceive these cues and adjust their behavior to you accordingly.

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Reflecting on personal motivators and emotions

The more you model supportive, enthusiastic behavior, the better you help others manage themselves. You can explore what energizes you and discover whether you are motivated more by power, achievement, or affiliation. How much do you also seek to serve your community? Your actions will reflect what motivates you, and your motivation and actions will affect how your staff see you. Also become more aware of things that drain your motivation or make you angry, disappointed, frustrated, or afraid. When you reflect on these, you can usually find ways to do something constructive that will lessen these feelings and help you feel more in control again.

**Watch your health and level of distress.** If you feel continually overwhelmed by all the things you need to pay attention to, be mindful of your own physical and psychological well-being. “How can I worry about my own health if I have the responsibility for the health of eight million people?” said one senior health official from South Africa. While it may seem selfish to be concerned about your own health, if you no longer have the physical energy to lead and have not built the leadership capacity of those around you, you may significantly compromise all your efforts.

As a leader, you have a responsibility for individual and organizational health. While everyone’s different demands may produce distress, you can begin to cope with it by making individual and organizational changes to manage perceptions of stress. Manage the work environment and manage your lifestyle (Quick et al. 1997).

### PROVIDE CHALLENGE, CLARITY, AND SUPPORT

Besides knowing your staff and yourself, you can positively influence work climate by changing the way you assign and manage the workload. Look for ways to:

- *challenge* your staff to help them grow;
- *ensure clarity* about work roles and responsibilities;
- *support* staff by providing resources, making connections, and understanding their needs.

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Make work assignments that stretch staff

**Challenge staff.** You can challenge staff by offering assignments that stretch them beyond their current level of competence and confidence. Such assignments offer the possibility of doing something in a new way or starting something new. They are opportunities for staff to show leadership potential. When staff members are not challenged, they do not grow or learn from mistakes, and they become bored. As one staff member commented, his supervisor knew the right way to challenge his team:

He knows how to ask people to do things well, even things we don’t know we can do, and gives us support to do it. He throws people into something they think they cannot do, but he never throws people into something they would fail at. He gives us the confidence to try.

**Clarify roles and responsibilities.** When each group member understands the roles and responsibilities of everyone in the group, then all members see how their roles contribute to the desired results of their group and ultimately of the organization. They know who their internal and external clients are and what their clients need from them.

To clarify responsibilities with your staff, talk about your expectations as well as clients' expectations and make sure to point out the consequences of not meeting these expectations. Inquire to see whether staff understand them and follow up with written documentation, so they can easily access this information. This kind of clarity exists when staff can say what this person said about her supervisor.

I know where I stand with him. He clearly expresses his intentions and personally upholds high standards of performance. We're all treated fairly. I know that I'll be letting my manager and my team down if I fail to complete this challenge.

Support comes  
in many forms

**Support staff.** Supporting your group means advocating for its work and its needs. Make the services your group performs and what it accomplishes visible to the wider organization. Once you've established a good reputation for the group, you can follow up by securing or providing the resources it needs to do its job. These include not only time, materials, and money, but also political and emotional support. Offer political support by making connections, paving the way, and getting necessary approvals to proceed. Help your staff to deal with organizational politics. Also consider whether particular individuals in your group could benefit from a mentor and look for

### Use leading and managing practices to improve work climate

**Leading practices.** As you design strategies for improving your work group's climate:

- scan to get to know your staff better;
- focus by clarifying expectations and identifying challenges;
- align and mobilize the entire team around shared goals and aspirations;
- mobilize individuals by addressing their needs for power, affiliation, or achievement;
- inspire team members by recognizing their accomplishments and modeling the kind of behavior you seek in others.

**Managing practices.** You will also improve work climate when you and your staff:

- plan regular meetings to exchange information on progress and share learning;
- organize management systems, especially systems that promote work efficiency and information flow;
- implement activities that move your group toward your shared goals;
- monitor progress and use mistakes as sources for learning.

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Understand  
others' work  
styles and  
needs

trusted colleagues in other parts of the organization who could guide their professional development.

It is important to be aware of different work styles and needs that people have for your support. Some may want a sympathetic ear, others want to explain themselves, and some just need help in setting limits or structuring their work. Men and women may have different needs when it comes to support. In the following staff descriptions of supervisors, the supervisors have different ways of supporting their staff. The staff who are quoted also appear to be differently motivated. The first staff member appreciates support for achieving results, while the second appreciates opportunities to affiliate:

He holds people responsible. When they take on initiatives, they have [the] means, time, and money to help them get things done.

One of the things that she changed is the attention to personal relationships with people at all levels in the department, using first names and inviting people into her office. She always tries to involve people by making personal connections.

**Balance challenge, clarity, and support.** To help your work group respond productively to changing circumstances, you may need to adjust the balance of challenge, clarity, and support. Staff who face challenges but lack support or clarity can experience stress and frustration. They may feel set up to fail. Without challenge or support, however, staff who are clear about expectations may find little intellectual and professional stimulation at work. When you find the right balance for your group's climate, you are on the way to helping your staff improve their performance.

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## Strengthening communication

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*“Have you ever thought you failed to communicate what you intended? Putting yourself on the receiver’s end is one way of putting things right.”*

—LYDIA MUNGHERERA

NATIONAL FORUM OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS, UGANDA

To build the strong work relationships and balance of challenge, clarity, and support you need for a good work climate, it is critical to communicate in ways that encourage understanding and learning. Communicating effectively is a key leadership competency for developing a motivating work climate. When you communicate well, you help to create a work climate that encourages the flow of ideas and conversations where people learn from one another. In a learning conversation, people can ask questions in a sincerely curious, non-

critical way. They seek to understand before being understood. They also feel free to discuss their own ideas and share their assumptions. Learning conversations help people reflect and be creative as they address their challenges.

To have meaningful communication, you absorb and reflect on what others are saying and then respond constructively in a way that others will find helpful. Small changes in the way you communicate can make a big difference in your work climate. In Nicaragua, municipal teams from the Ministry of Health built skills in interpersonal communication, coaching, and negotiation as a way to address poor morale. As a result, working relationships between supervisors and staff, coordination among departments, and work climate all improved.

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Good communication improves morale

### HEAR WHAT OTHERS HAVE TO SAY

As simple as it sounds, many people fail to thoughtfully hear and reflect on other people's comments. In a busy day, it can be hard to focus on something that does not seem immediately related to the task you are involved in. But people who are open to learning from each other know when to listen carefully and ask questions, and when to propose ideas. They deal with differing opinions and negative feelings before they cause conflict.

**Listen carefully.** A good place to start is with listening skills. Not listening when another person speaks indicates disinterest and lack of courtesy. When a coworker seeks your advice and you promise to give him time, it is important to listen fully to what he has to say and respond appropriately to his concerns. That means ignoring outside interruptions, such as phone calls. It means not reading unrelated materials or bringing up unrelated topics. If you cannot be fully present, propose a more convenient time and place for the conversation.

If people in your group have poor listening habits, you can address these through role plays of poor and good listening. You can also remind staff that it is particularly important to pay good attention to their clients, coworkers, and stakeholders. This simple skill can be powerful, as a colleague in Uganda noted:

Effective listening encourages interpersonal relationships. Good listening improves morale. When leaders listen effectively (with full attention), they receive respect. This helps satisfy others' needs for self-esteem. As a result, the morale of the group improves.

**Balance advocacy and inquiry.** For lively discussions about work issues, encourage verbal give-and-take. Sometimes we promote our own view, hoping others will accept it and change their minds. This is called *advocacy*. At other times we are curious and try to understand the other's thinking and reasoning. This is called *inquiry*.

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Be attentive to others

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Encourage verbal give-and-take

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Pay attention  
to how you  
communicate

To create a space where everyone learns from everyone else, first try reflecting on your pattern of communication. Do you tend to tell people what to do or think, or do you ask questions to learn where others are coming from? In your interactions with others, how do you balance these forms of communication? If you use only advocacy, you will not learn how others think and will limit your outlook. If you use only inquiry, you do not make your own voice heard and may have difficulty reaching consensus.

By observing your group over time you can determine how advocacy and inquiry are used, and whether there is a good balance or whether one is too dominant. If some people frequently advocate, do others stop listening to them? Do they feel ignored or overwhelmed with information? If some always inquire, do others see them as indecisive? Achieving balance between advocacy and inquiry in your group will improve the quality of the discussions and provide opportunities for staff to learn from each other.

**Identify assumptions.** When you promote the exchange of ideas, conflicting opinions will inevitably emerge. These are good, since better solutions often come from wrestling with differences. Identifying each person's assumptions will help in sorting out disagreements.

From the massive amount of information that comes your way, you filter what is useful to you by making assumptions and interpretations, and then you draw conclusions. Your coworkers do the same, except the subset of data they pay attention to, and the assumptions and interpretations they use as a filter, can lead to very different conclusions. It is no surprise then that people can disagree strongly with others in the workplace.

When you ask each other questions, you can uncover people's assumptions and the reasons behind their initial conclusions. The Ladder of Inference is a useful model for understanding the assumptions that led to your conclusions.

The following scenario illustrates how people can apply the Ladder of Inference.

Roberto Suarez assigns Marina Costas to a task force for developing a clinic strategy to reach male clients. You disagree with Roberto's decision because you think Marina lacks good ideas, never having heard her speak in meetings. Your assumption is that staff with ideas share them in staff meetings. Roberto stubbornly defends his assignment. So far you have just advocated your point of view.

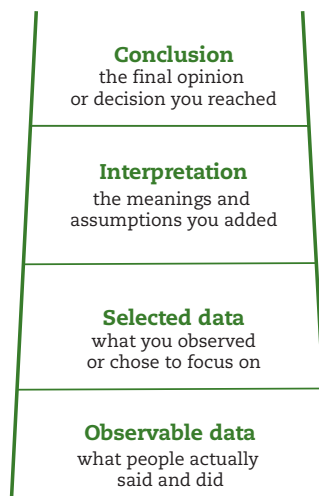
Then you shift your approach by inquiring into Roberto's reasoning. You ask him what he has observed about Marina that supports his decision. Roberto says that when he walks to the bus with Marina, she often suggests ways to help the clinic attract other kinds of clients. As Roberto expands the data you have about Marina, you change your interpretation and conclude the assignment makes sense. Over the next few months, Marina comes up with a number of creative approaches to reach male clients.

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Different  
assumptions  
yield different  
conclusions

### Climbing the Ladder of Inference

People base their conclusions on their interpretations of selected data and on what they observe other people saying and doing. When you and another person disagree, you can go back to the reasoning behind your conclusions. You can each disclose the data (the words or actions) you observed and your interpretations of them. Then slowly you can move up the Ladder of Inference, explaining to the other person, “This is what I am thinking and this is how I reached these conclusions.” Together, you can find flaws in your selected data, interpretations, or conclusions, which will enrich your communication.



Source: Adapted from Argyris 1982 in *THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE* FIELDBOOK by Peter M. Senge, Charlotte Roberts, et al., copyright © 1994 by Peter M. Senge, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, Bryan J. Smith, and Art Kleiner. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

If you and your group are able to question your assumptions and learn together, you are more likely to discover new ways to address your challenges.

**Seek to understand diverse viewpoints.** To introduce interesting viewpoints into your team, seek to hire capable people from diverse groups, especially those who represent your client population or skilled workers of the opposite gender. When you do this, you may need to help everyone on your team understand each other’s way of communicating.

The same words and gestures can mean different things to different groups. They may also approach challenges differently. For example, one person may want to go straight to the point and make decisions quickly, and become annoyed with someone who wants to hear everyone’s opinion first. This style of decision-making may irritate others. To keep diverse styles, temperaments,

cultural norms, and gender dynamics from derailing conversations, patiently check assumptions about the meaning of words before reaching conclusions.

**End conflict before it spreads.** When you sense yourself entering into conflict with another person, step back and ask yourself “What brought me to this situation? What is happening?” Then put yourself in the other person’s shoes and ask, “What would you do in his situation?” If at all possible, check your conclusions with the other person, revealing your reasoning (how you went up the Ladder of Inference). You can have more meaningful conversations when you clarify your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and when you try to see things from the other person’s perspective.

### RESPOND CONSTRUCTIVELY

Once you clearly hear and understand what staff are saying, you are in a better position to respond in ways that help them. How they receive your feedback depends partly on how you deliver it. Simple changes in your style of communicating can clarify expectations, lift morale, and give people ways to deal with situations they complain about.

**Give specific feedback.** Providing helpful feedback is a great motivator of performance. You can reinforce a person’s constructive action by letting the person know what you specifically appreciated about their action. For instance, you might comment, “I liked the way you organized the meeting agenda and kept time. We accomplished all we needed to and even finished early.”

On the other hand, poorly delivered, critical feedback can make people feel resentful or helpless. In giving staff constructive feedback, you should avoid saying “You always . . .” Rather, identify the specific action that bothers you

Think about how you give feedback

TABLE 6 Shift from reactive to proactive language

Reactive language	Proactive language
There’s nothing I can do	Let’s look at what we can do
That’s just the way I am	How can I be more effective?
She makes me so mad	I can control how I feel
They won’t allow that	Maybe we can negotiate
I have to do that	I choose to do what is appropriate
I must	I prefer
Should I?	I will
No one will help me	Will you?

Source: Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*, p. 78, text adapted (Fireside edition, 2004).

and indicate how it affects you and the group's work. Then you can request a different action from the person.

**Balance the negative with the positive.** When you find yourself giving critical comments about poor performance, you can balance these with positive comments. In meetings and informal conversations, pay attention to how often you share the things you like about your staff's work and how often you focus on what you want them to improve. A study of successful teams found that their conversations included, on average, five positive comments for every negative comment (Gottman 1994).

This balance is especially important if your group suffers from low morale and you tend to criticize. Consider decreasing your critical comments and increasing positive feedback to your staff. In discussions about performance, if you start off with genuinely positive comments, your staff are less likely to grow defensive and more likely to accept your suggestions. Also encourage staff members to give positive feedback to each other when their work deserves praise. However, positive feedback for mediocre work is dishonest and can encourage persistently mediocre work or even arouse cynicism.

**Use proactive language.** The language you use can be a self-fulfilling prophecy that helps to determine your and others' actions. To lead, it is important to use "proactive" language that enables you and others to face challenges

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Be genuine with positive comments and constructive with criticism

### Exercises to improve communication

The following exercises, found in the handbook toolkit, offer an opportunity to learn more about and practice communication skills.

**Listening.** To practice listening skills, you can refer to "The Art of Listening."

**Balancing advocacy and inquiry.** When there is no or little balance in your group's modes of communication, consider using the exercise "Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry: Changing the Pattern of Conversation."

**Identifying assumptions.** You will find a detailed process for using the Ladder of Inference in the exercise "Exploring Each Other's Thinking: The Ladder of Inference."

**Ending conflict.** If you are already involved in a conflict, you can use "Reflecting on Communication: The ORID Method" to carefully review what happened, separate your feelings and thoughts from what you observed, and make a fair decision or reach agreement with the person. ORID stands for: be Objective, Reflective, Interpretative, and Decisional.

**Giving feedback.** "Giving Useful Feedback" offers a way to practice constructive feedback.

**Convert complaints into requests.** You and your group can practice requesting help by using "Making Effective Requests and Reducing Complaints."

and create the future. Reactive language does not offer space for creating new possibilities. Think about the language you use when you encounter obstacles. How can you shift from words that close off options to language for overcoming obstacles? See Table 6 for examples.

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Be specific  
when making  
a request

**Convert complaints into requests.** You can shift the language that staff use as well, by encouraging them to convert the complaints they make when they feel discouraged into requests. Ask them to identify the person(s) they think can help remedy the situation. Then support them in asking that person to take a specific action and to act by a specific time. Remind them that if they get a negative answer to the request, they can always ask, “Then what *can* you do that would help?”

Your staff will sense your interest and support for their work when you listen, understand assumptions, and balance your responses with inquiry and positive, proactive comments. As you give staff specific feedback and suggestions for acting on their complaints, they will hear clear expectations and begin to feel empowered to seek assistance in facing their obstacles. All these communication strategies will help you achieve and maintain a positive work climate.

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## Sustaining your group’s commitment

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*“True leaders are merchants of hope, speaking to the collective imagination of their followers, co-opting them to join them in a great adventure. Leaders inspire people to move beyond personal, egoistic motives—to transcend themselves, as it were—and as a result they get the best out of their people.”*

—MANFRED KETS DE VRIES  
“ORGANIZATIONS ON THE COUCH”

Your ability to sustain a positive work climate also depends on your ability to inspire commitment in your team. Creating an initial vision with your team will go a long way toward engaging the team’s commitment to addressing challenges. You can reinforce this commitment through conversation and actions that encourage individual staff to connect their own goals to this group effort. Over the long term, you can maintain your team’s motivation if you keep an eye on your own behavior and apply techniques to sustain your staff’s performance. You can:

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Creating  
conditions  
that sustain  
performance

- rekindle your commitment if it begins to fade;
- remain worthy of people’s trust;
- balance commitment and compliance;

- acknowledge others' contributions;
- encourage your staff's performance through supportive techniques;
- foster learning that will encourage creative group solutions.

When you do these things continually, they become part of the prevailing work conditions that staff experience as a positive work climate. All contribute to an atmosphere in which your group's members feel inspired, clear about what they are doing, and supported in facing every challenge.

### REKINDLE YOUR COMMITMENT

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A support network that reinforces hopes and dreams

Leading any group requires hard work at a personal level, the courage to take significant risks, and the constant need to manage expectations of stakeholders and those who rely on you for direction. From time to time, when you find your commitment fading, you can take important steps to rekindle it. Remind yourself of your dreams for your community. Ask whether you are achieving personal growth and what you can do now to better satisfy your source of motivation. One way to do this is to form a support network of peers.

Developing a good support network involves selecting a group of people whom you know and trust to have your best interests at heart. It can help you learn how others handle similar work challenges, how others respond to your work style, and what changes you need to make in yourself and your work style to influence your group's commitment to good performance. These people can be honest, remind you of your direction, and tell you when you fall into old habits. This kind of support can go a long way toward rekindling your commitment.

### REMAIN WORTHY OF PEOPLE'S TRUST

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Mutual trust through integrity

Trust underlies everything that successful managers do with their work groups. Trust is essential for information exchange, problem solving, success of teams, enjoyment, and productivity. Being trustworthy means that others willingly rely on you because of your integrity, ability, and character. Team performance depends on mutual trust between you and the individuals in your team.

But trust takes time to build and maintain. If you didn't already know this intuitively, think of someone you trust. What have they done to earn your trust? There are things you can do to build trust and maintain it during times that test your resolve (see the box on the next page).

To reflect on your trustworthiness or to identify features that gain your colleagues' trust, refer to the exercise "Inspire through Building Trust at Work" in the handbook toolkit.

### Building and maintaining trust

A study of managers (Bragar 1991) who were able to influence their colleagues effectively showed that they used the following practices to build and maintain trust.

Practices that build trust:

- agree on a code of conduct for your team
- keep your promises
- be clear about your intentions
- avoid gossip
- consider alternative viewpoints
- draw on the expertise and abilities of others
- be open to others' influence in making your decisions
- be fair in your treatment of others
- support staff in meeting standards and expectations
- look for causes of problems in work processes, not individuals
- increase your competence
- trust others and accept the vulnerability that comes from relying on them
- humbly and wisely admit mistakes, doubt, and uncertainty

Practices that maintain trust:

- consistent messages
- consistent standards and expectations
- strong group performance
- information for understanding organizational incidents
- availability to staff
- open discussion of large, disturbing issues

### BALANCE COMMITMENT AND COMPLIANCE

As your commitment and communications inspire your staff to move ahead, you may still need to set some standards so their performance yields the desired results. First, it is important to understand the difference between commitment and compliance.

To continuously innovate, improve, and achieve sustainable results in health services, you need people who are committed to achieving those results. In many organizations it is also important to have compliance. To ensure the

**TABLE 7 Distinguishing commitment from compliance**

Commitment comes from inside a person. You do something because you care about the results. Compliance, on the other hand, is motivated by something outside you: the need to meet external requirements. You do it because you *must*.

Source of motivation	Outcome
<b>Commitment (internally driven)</b> You want to do something extraordinary You believe in it	Good results that you are proud of and care about
<b>Compliance (externally driven)</b> You have to do something	Obedience to orders and working according to a plan
<b>Formal compliance</b> You do just what is required and no more	Results that are expected
<b>Noncompliance</b> You don't do what is required	No results
<b>Malicious noncompliance</b> You purposely do the wrong thing, although you may not object openly	Negative or sabotaged results

Commitment unleashes energy to overcome obstacles

quality of health care, organizational or national standards or guidelines must be adhered to. You may choose to set a few performance standards for your group that relate to the results to which they have committed themselves. And sometimes people need to comply with new ways, before they can understand the changes well enough to be committed. Table 7 summarizes this difference.

It is important to balance mobilizing people for commitment and setting standards for compliance so your staff not only own their challenges, but are also aware of the standards they are expected to follow. Formal compliance produces many results. Commitment, however, is a key to encouraging staff to face obstacles, overcome resistance, and realize sustainable results. It unleashes the extra effort often needed to develop and implement creative, effective approaches.

To explore the differences between commitment and compliance with a group, you can refer to “Gaining Commitment, Not Just Compliance” in the handbook toolkit.

**ACKNOWLEDGE OTHERS’ CONTRIBUTIONS**

Praise and recognition bolster team spirit

As you balance commitment and compliance, make sure that you develop processes for acknowledging individuals’ accomplishments. Recognizing others for positive contributions is a powerful motivator because it shows that someone is making a difference and her contributions are noticed. You can acknowledge another’s efforts by thanking her directly, writing a personal note, and emphasizing her contribution in a formal work review. When you *publicly* congratulate individuals and teams, however, you foster a climate where all staff can say “Look what we can accomplish.”

### Seven essentials of encouraging the heart

#### To start—

- Set clear standards. Clearly link specific goals and principles with rewards and recognition (for example, with an annual merit increase or bonus, or with opportunities for attendance at conferences).
- Expect the best. Express confidence in your staff's good intentions and competence (for example, "You can do this. I know it.").
- Pay attention. Look for positive examples of staff as they meet the standards. (For example, walk around, read, and notice good work practices and accomplishments.)

#### When you find a good example—

- Personalize recognition. Become familiar with the individual's preferences before you reward her good work. (For example, recognize the person with a carefully worded award that speaks to the interests of the individual.)
- Tell the story. Describe the individual's efforts in a memorable and inspiring way. (For example, "I noticed that she observed the pharmacy serving long lines of clients and then figured out a way to speed service for medication refills.")
- Celebrate together. Hold a party to show support for the whole group.
- Set the example. Personally follow through on this process to show you mean these standards.

Source: Adapted from Kouzes and Posner 1999

A caveat about acknowledgment: Think carefully before singling out one person or one group. Word your recognition in such a way that everyone can feel proud about the accomplishment.

To encourage staff members to strive together for results and recognition, you can follow the "seven essentials of encouraging the heart." The essentials presented in the box above will make clear to everyone what kind of performance you are looking for.

You can also strengthen the group's team spirit by asking people to recognize each other's contributions. At any time, you can call a meeting and ask people to write a sentence on a piece of paper for every member of their team, beginning with the phrase "I acknowledge you for . . ." These acknowledgments can include what the other member has contributed to the team, to clients, or to the community. Have each person read his acknowledgement to the other members of the team. Through this process, your group members will grow more appreciative of each other's efforts and commit to producing desired results for each other.

**Acknowledge  
people's  
contributions  
to boost  
cooperation**

## ENCOURAGE PERFORMANCE THROUGH SUPPORTIVE TECHNIQUES

Besides public acknowledgments, you can adopt techniques to support your staff's performance. Some techniques can help you coach good performance, while others can help you manage performance issues if they arise.

**Apply coaching techniques.** Coaching is a conversation in which the manager is committed to the development and success of the person he is guiding. An effective coach cares about the person being coached. He builds a relationship of trust and listens well.

When you meet with a staff member as a coach, take time to observe and relate to the other person. Sense how things are going for the person and set a supportive tone. Then you can ask about her issues and point of view. Listen to her response, give her specific feedback, and repeat the process until you both agree on a course of action that she will take. This process is known as OALFA, for Observe, Ask, Listen, give Feedback, and Agree.

The questions you ask can help the person think through her commitments, results achieved, and obstacles that still need addressing. Through a guided inquiry, the staff member may see new possibilities and come up with new actions to strengthen her performance.

To learn more about coaching staff, refer to the exercises “Coaching to Support Others” and “Improving Coaching Skills: The OALFA Checklist,” in the handbook toolkit.

**Manage performance issues.** Sometimes a staff member repeatedly falls short of meeting the standards you communicated. Keeping a record of occa-

Coaching to encourage new behaviors

### Guided inquiry for coaching a staff member

A good coach asks questions and works with staff to find solutions. In this way, staff become more thoughtful about their performance and more skilled at solving problems independently. Some of the questions a coach can ask are:

- What are you committed to achieving?
- What have you achieved so far?
- What obstacles are you facing?
- Why do you think you are stuck?
- If it could turn out exactly as you dreamed, how would it turn out?
- What actions could you take to overcome your obstacles?
- What support do you need from others?
- How can I support you?

sions of poor performance can help you see patterns in performance, so that you have some objective information in considering possible causes of the inadequate performance. Your main source for this information is the staff member, but you may also want to look at what systems are in place to help staff work well. Find out if staff understand your performance expectations and if they have received feedback on their performance. Do current policies, procedures, and resource flows support and reward good performance? Do staff have the skills and training needed to perform well?

Please refer to “Diagnosing Performance Problems” and “Giving Useful Feedback” in the handbook toolkit to pinpoint issues affecting staff’s performance.

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In discussing poor performance, separate feelings from observations

It is important for you to give the person a warning and a chance to improve. Meet with a staff member who has performed poorly or been involved in an incident such as theft or disrespectful or dishonest interactions with others. To protect yourself from being overwhelmed by strong emotions, you can prepare for the conversation using the ORID method (be Objective, Reflective, Interpretative, and Decisional). With ORID, you can carefully review what happened, separating your feelings and thoughts from what you observed, and then reach a decision with the person that re-engages him in the task at hand. During the meeting you can also apply techniques already mentioned in this chapter: the OALFA process, specific feedback, and positive comments on things that the person has done well.

For more information on ORID, please see the exercise “Reflecting on Communication: The ORID Method” in the handbook toolkit.

## ENCOURAGE SHARED LEARNING

Learning new things on the job can inspire staff members’ enthusiasm, creativity, and commitment. Here, we refer to learning as *expanding the ability to produce intended results*.

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Create opportunities for learning that promote growth

One way for you to encourage continuous learning is to create opportunities for staff to share their knowledge and best practices. Collecting and sharing information contributes to achieving a positive work climate and helps produce the desired results. Not only does the group gain information about its progress toward results, it also learns what has worked and what has not. It can then apply these lessons to its ongoing work.

**Be humble and manage expectations.** To learn from one another over the long term involves a group commitment to learning. Becoming conscious of what you do not know requires humility on everyone’s part. Then you can all seek out new skills and information, and change your attitudes, so that everyone becomes more competent. This continuous motion from unawareness to awareness is what drives learning.

### Show that you don't know it all

- When people look at you for an answer, turn the question back to them.
- Listen to others first when you have an urge to pronounce your opinion.
- Wait until someone else says what you want to say (and then if no one does, you can say it).
- Ask people: What would you do if you were me? What should we do?
- Acknowledge the authors of successful ideas and suggestions.
- Learn to say “I don't know.”
- Ask for help from your staff and peers.
- Inform your staff about the complexities of the work (make connections visible).
- Explore the consequences of decisions.
- Involve your staff in “what if” thinking.
- Admit mistakes promptly and apologize if necessary.

**Improve team learning.** In groups that learn well together, people generally assume different team roles. Some common roles in teams are that of initiator, follower, opposer, or observer. When faced with a difficulty, someone initiates an idea or action to address the situation. Another follows or accepts the idea so it gains momentum. A third person opposes or questions the idea, which encourages the group to refine the idea by exploring its drawbacks. Finally, someone observes and gives feedback on the group's progress.

Groups can become stuck on less-than-optimal solutions when one or more persons dominate the discussion while others tend to follow, or when someone constantly disagrees. In such a climate, much of the team's creative talent remains untapped. To function well, a group needs to find a balance for all four roles.

To help your group apply these roles, you can use the exercise “Understanding Roles in Teamwork” in the handbook toolkit.

By continually modeling commitment, maintaining trust, acknowledging accomplishments, developing support processes, and learning with your staff, you create a climate that maintains group dedication to results. Before you begin your effort to build a more positive work climate, you may want to assess the climate of your group. This assessment will give you a basis for determining the effects of the changes you introduce.

#### Balance team members' roles

### Applying the Work Climate Assessment

The Work Climate Assessment, developed by MSH's Management and Leadership Program, is designed to measure work climate in work groups at all organizational levels. Assessing work climate provides insight into group members' perceptions of what it feels like to work in their team. You can discuss the results with your group and use insights gained from this discussion to direct your change effort. You can also use the assessment as a monitoring tool by applying it as a baseline survey and then repeating it later to assess progress.

The tool is designed to be completed by all members of a work group. It consists of 10 items. Eight items, validated through an evaluation, measure elements of work group climate. The last 2 items assess work group perceptions of quality and productivity. Each group member rates the 10 items on a scale of 1 to 5. The items are:

#### Climate items

1. We feel our work is important.
2. We strive to achieve successful outcomes.
3. We have a plan that guides our activities.
4. We pay attention to how well we are working together.
5. We understand each other's capabilities.
6. We seek to understand the needs of our clients.
7. We understand the relevance of the job of each member in our group.
8. We take pride in our work.

#### Perceptions of productivity and quality

9. Our work group is known for its quality work.
10. Our work group is productive.

An independent facilitator guides the process of collecting and analyzing the data to maintain the confidentiality of group members' responses. In discussing the overall results, your group may articulate how it wants to work together in the future. Or individual members may voice their opinions to the facilitator. As the group's manager, your role is to support your staff in making a commitment to a new work climate and to provide the clarity needed.

For the complete assessment tool and instructions on how to use it, please refer to the handbook CD-ROM.

## Setting the tone at the senior level

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*“Daily one gets carried away by the power that one has to change the quality of our people’s lives, simply by creating space for initiatives and innovations. What inspires me is the level of commitment and resolve my team has, and their enthusiasm to add value to what we are doing in South Africa.”*

—DR. SIPHIWO STAMPER  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Choose allies carefully to initiate change

If you are a senior manager, you have a critical role to play in setting the tone for the organization by articulating and living the values that you want the organization to embody. You can make far-reaching changes simply by starting to operate in a different way. For example, if you want transparency and honesty, you must be transparent and honest. If you want a focus on clients and results, show it in all your conversations about work. Setting the tone at the senior level requires discipline and humility, each and every day.

To set a new tone, you need allies. Make sure you have the support of important peers and superiors, for example, the board or the minister, and secure their full commitment before you go ahead. Be sure to engage your peers in the senior management team in this change initiative.

### ENGAGE YOUR MANAGEMENT TEAM

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Reconnect your staff to field realities

It is important to anchor the work climate you want to create in a shared vision for your organization or ministry. (See chapter 2 and the handbook toolkit for visioning exercises.) Before creating such a vision, however, you may need to prepare your management team. At times, senior managers lose track of the program’s purpose because they are far removed from the program’s ultimate beneficiaries. They sometimes become immersed in the complexities of the political or economic environment; unclear, shifting donor priorities; or their reputation and opportunities for securing more attractive positions. If so, reconnect your team with service providers or people politically committed to improving health services.

As part of a strategic planning exercise, senior managers from various agencies and divisions involved in Zimbabwe’s National Family Planning Program fanned out over the city of Mutari and into the countryside to visit clinics and youth centers, and follow community-based distribution agents and their supervisors over difficult terrain. They returned with a vivid picture of the challenges that they faced and took these field realities into account in their subsequent strategic planning.

**Improve factors that undermine work climate.** Once you have a vision, you can begin reflecting with other senior managers on the organization's culture and ways you could go about changing it to move toward the vision. Perhaps your organization's history and culture may once have inspired people but are currently crippling the organization's momentum because times have changed. Examine the factors related to work climate that undermine performance or productivity throughout the organization. And cultivate a positive work climate in your own senior management team.

### ORGANIZE A SUPPORT NETWORK

A strong support network can move mountains

A good support network is especially important for senior managers. With such a network, you will be able to influence your organization's work climate and much more. When senior managers form networks of peers, they come to realize that in banding together, they can "move mountains." They can publicly question unmentionable practices, such as siphoning off resources,

#### Improving work relationships, group climate, and performance— Example from Senegal

Concerned about the underperformance of its districts, the Ministry of Health of Senegal initiated a Leadership Development Program in two regions for teams from 14 districts. The district teams identified a challenge in maternal and child health or family planning and learned how to improve their leading and managing practices and competencies so that they could face their challenge. In the first of four bimonthly meetings, each team assessed its work group climate. The teams also discussed motivation and relations with internal and external clients. In subsequent meetings, they built their leadership competencies through exercises to improve team communication, emotional intelligence, and commitment. Working on their challenge also provided ample opportunity for them to consciously adjust the ways in which they worked together.

**Better communication among team members.** At the end of the four-month program, participants said they were able to listen better and put themselves "in other people's shoes." They experienced better control over their emotions, especially anger, so that when faced with a conflict, they remained calm. They could successfully mediate to prevent the conflict from growing. Participants shared much more information with their team than in the past. As one participant summed up, "We have become more receptive, tolerant, and open."

**Staff committed to teamwork and results.** Teamwork has become the norm. Rather than seeing each other as superiors or subordinates, staff now see themselves as colleagues working together toward a common goal. Senior members of the team stopped giving orders. People who tended to work

that severely hamper the delivery of health services in the field. Feeling safe about questioning such practices is possible if you can count on support in high places.

In their discussions, senior managers in a West African Ministry of Health began to realize that their behavior had something to do with how their subordinates reacted to them. Some team leaders recognized that they created passivity and dependence among their staff, even as they complained about how passive and dependent their staff were. The leaders also realized that they often triggered their own crises and sometimes blamed these crises on someone else. By reflecting together on their own experiences with motivation, delegation, and communication, they discovered that what motivates them can often motivate others. This was a starting point for significant change.

By engaging your management team and organizing a support network of senior managers, you can create the kind of work climate in which managers at all levels can lead. Do not leave this important task to someone else.

#### Improving work relationships, group climate, and performance— Example from Senegal (cont.)

alone or were seen as “difficult” are now working with others, allowing team members to learn from one another for the first time. Most importantly, all are committed to producing intended results. They used to drop their plans or get discouraged when they encountered obstacles. As one participant says, “Now we count on our own strength” and find almost all solutions rest “on our doorstep.”

**Improved work climate.** Work climate assessment scores before and after the program also indicated that the teams perceived an improved work climate. Among other things, the changes signaled an increase in mutual trust.

**Service results.** A positive work climate and motivated staff have contributed to improved services and produced measurable results. Four of the eight teams that had collected data at the end of the program met or surpassed their performance objectives. Depending on the challenge they had chosen, different districts reported that the majority of births were now assisted (67%, up from 35%) or were assisted by qualified personnel (100%, up from 75%); postpartum visits (two) were completed (more than 50%, up from 37%); or prenatal visits (three) were completed (17%, up from 9%; and 59%, up from 12%).

By addressing service delivery challenges and building leadership competencies simultaneously, district teams in Senegal have created a work climate in which all team members feel encouraged to work through barriers to strengthening services.

In a number of countries, district teams have improved their work climate as they have applied leading and managing practices to strengthen health care services. The day-to-day struggle to achieve a desired result, if approached from a leadership perspective, can change how staff members interact and how they feel about working with their peers.

## Achieving a positive work climate

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*“The best thing we gained is that we perform our work as a team, not as individuals. If something affects one person, it affects the whole team. If we are faced with a constraint, we take a poll of each other’s opinions to try to overcome it.”*

—SUHEIR SABRY SIAM  
ASWAN HEALTH DISTRICT, EGYPT

When staff feel they are engaged in meaningful work and belong to a good team led by an inspiring manager, they experience a positive work climate. They also contribute to creating and maintaining this positive climate. In this atmosphere, everyone strives to learn, do what she needs to do, and avoid disappointing her colleagues. You often see this kind of cooperation in sports events, where the players count on each other to perform well and cover for each other when needed. Behind every great team is a committed coach who encourages this behavior. The coach understands the players’ motivations and capabilities. He organizes their positions, builds their skills, and channels their energy into coordinated actions that produce results.

Similarly, your style of communicating, coaching, and acknowledging individuals can continually mobilize your team to put forth its best, for each other and for clients. Working and learning well together, staff will overcome obstacles to produce remarkable results. These prevailing work conditions will sustain group commitment over the years, as current challenges are addressed and new challenges emerge. As you move up the leadership ladder in your organization, you can create a work climate in each of your work groups that keeps you and your group energized, enthusiastic, and motivated to move mountains.

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Build a climate  
of teamwork  
and support

**Questions to consider on . . .****Improving work climate to strengthen performance****Current work climate and organizational culture**

- How would you characterize the current work climate of your group?
- What aspects of the current work climate are undermining your group's efforts to address key challenges and achieve results?
- What elements from the broader organizational culture are influencing the current work climate of your group? Which ones can you do something about, and which are outside your control?

**The best work climate for your group**

- What sort of work climate would motivate your work group?
- What are the easiest things you can do to improve the group's work climate? The most challenging? Which areas require support from higher levels? Which can you do on your own?

**Leadership competencies to improve the climate**

- How does your behavior influence the work climate? What do you think you need to change in yourself to improve the work climate?
- What sort of communication breakdowns are most common in your team? What can you do about these?
- What is the most important thing you can do to gain your group's commitment to achieving results?