

Case Study: Assessing Causes of Declining Morale in a Mission-Based Organization

Client:

- Headquarters of a major global nonprofit organization (approx. 35 employees).
- Industry: Nonprofit
- Engagement Length: 3 months
- Location: HQ - McLean, VA

The Challenge:

Despite the brand's worldwide recognition and a strong mission, the organization was seeing signs of declining morale among its administrative staff. Rumors of discontent were surfacing, but leadership was unsure of the cause. The nonprofit was known for its values-based culture, so internal dissatisfaction was deeply concerning.

My Role:

Brought in to assess the root causes of morale decline, I led a focused engagement aimed at understanding the disconnect between employee passion and organizational climate.

What I Did:

- Conducted structured interviews with team leaders and senior staff.
- Created a safe environment for candid feedback, especially around sensitive topics like money.
- Identified a key theme: employees loved the mission, but many were quietly struggling financially.
- Uncovered a psychological barrier—staff felt that voicing compensation concerns might undermine their commitment to the cause.
- Highlighted the pressure of the local cost of living and how private sector peers were earning significantly more for comparable work.

The Results:

- Revealed the unspoken belief: *"Either you care about the mission or you care about money"*—a mindset that fueled silence and disengagement.
- Reframed internal messaging to validate that financial well-being supports mission effectiveness.
- Conducted a market-based compensation audit aligned with the local cost of living.
- Recommended adjustments to benefits and retention strategy.
- Trained managers to discuss compensation with clarity and empathy.
- Leadership initiated a phased compensation review, leading to improved morale and open communication.

In mission-driven organizations, employees may fear that voicing concerns, especially those related to compensation, will be perceived as disloyalty to the cause. This fear is often a result of low psychological safety, where individuals no longer feel safe to speak candidly about their needs.