Early on in our consulting practice, at the end of an employee survey, managers representing different parts of the organization would be presented with the results, a process which often took a couple of hours and involved looking at massive amounts of data, question by question, group by group. At the end they would frequently ask an important question about their own area: “I saw the presentation, but can you tell me how my group did?” As easy as the task of answering this may sound, it is not: how do you “boil down” the results of 110 questions into one quick summary? They had seen the results on the screen, even summarized by major topics like “compensation and benefits”, “communications”, etc., but they often had no real sense of the overall picture. At the time, the tactic which was used was to say something like this:

Well, your employees love their jobs but don’t feel so good about the company; they think many more decisions should be made at the local level and that they are being micro-managed by corporate. As you saw, your group was lower than the company average on a few questions, but also higher on others.

To which they would reply, quiet appropriately:

Yes, I noticed that, but how did we do?

They were asking about morale; they wanted the big picture, the sense as to whether people in their group were feeling good or bad about things in general. That was a long time ago; nowadays, as we shall see, sophisticated software is used to “slice and dice” the data to create everything from overall morale-index scores to subindices such as “engagement”. Go to a good external consultant now, or use skilled in-house resources, and those questions are easily answered.
Most people have a sense of what morale is; we have heard the word in many contexts, for example in the military, and often where we work. The dictionary is quite clear on the subject, so let's start there:

**Morale:**

1. a state of individual psychological well-being based upon a sense of confidence and usefulness and purpose.
2. the spirit of a group that makes the members want the group to succeed [syn: esprit de corps].

Other sources add things such as:

“willingness to perform assigned tasks”

The phrase “psychological well-being” appears in this definition, something which is very familiar to readers in Europe (but much less so in the United States, where “well-being” is generally used to refer to physical states rather than psychological). We also see that morale refers to an individual as well as a group, it is about confidence and a sense of purpose at the individual level (we would argue at the group level too) as well as the “spirit” of a group. Psychological states are referenced, motivation is covered too, morale is said to create a “willingness to perform assigned tasks”. In other words, this little word carries a lot of weight.

Note that morale is defined in a way that goes far beyond just “feeling good”. The latter may be a by-product of high morale but does “feeling good” by itself make people “want the group to succeed”? Not necessarily. It could make you want to take the day off and go to the beach. In other words, morale is a psychological state which makes a person want to contribute, be a part of things, make things work better, more successfully.

The measurement of morale has been around a long time, starting in earnest in the postwar United States, around 1947. That means plenty of time has passed for the meaning of this word to be transformed, for it to be used in many different settings, for new ideas and words to emerge which challenge its usefulness or create more focus on a particular aspect. So perhaps it’s not surprising that people get confused when looking at all the words which have come to be used in this field.