

Empowering Kennel Associates at Veterinary Practices: Win-Win Strategies for Management and Employees¹

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Introduction

“No training, no raises, no communications with management” (Grosdidier 2005). These are some of the problems expressed by kennel associates working in veterinary practices. Not feeling appreciated is one of the most often cited reasons for job dissatisfaction. Staff members often believe that while they are working hard and helping the business prosper, their practice managers or kennel managers do not take notice of their efforts (Rothstein 2004). Heightening this situation is the demand for staff to be more productive, work longer hours, and take on extra responsibilities (Rothstein 2004). One study found that aside from salary, job applicants are as interested in the work environment as they are in fringe benefits. The inference is clear: The more enriching your practice’s work environment, the more likely you are to maintain a staff of satisfied, productive team members (Robert Hall Finance and Accounting 2007). It is a fact that without a motivated, caring kennel staff, no veterinary practice can realize its greatest potential.

Research has shown that workplaces where employees feel valued benefit by way of higher productivity and job fulfillment (Soares 1998b). Retaining quality staff members makes team member recognition extremely important to both staff and management (Rothstein 2004). A happy, fulfilled staff makes a big difference in the success of veterinary practices (Rothstein 2004).



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This article outlines what it takes to create a positive work environment through effective communication, encouragement, rewards, training, and goal setting.

Communication

Studies have shown that staff members rise (or sink) to the expectation level of their managers and fellow team members (Soares 1998b). Therefore, it is important as a practice or kennel manager or practice owner (manager/owner) to show confidence in your team. Managers/owners express confidence in their teams by showing respect through clear and open communication. When communicating with team members, remember that body language also

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sends a strong message, and an unintentional eye roll or sigh can be viewed as a sign of disrespect (Soares 1998b). How a manager/owner communicates with team members significantly affects a practice's bottom line. This reasoning is supported by research (NCVEI 2004a). According to a report by Watson Wyatt Worldwide, an international consulting firm, organizations that regularly communicate with their employees have lower turnover rates. Effective communication with employees makes good business sense, boosts morale, and enhances team spirit (Meisinger 2006).

Many managers/owners only believe in one-way communication from management to team members rather than two-way communication between management and team members (NCVEI 2004a). There are several effective methods of two-way communication, such as regular team meetings with question-and-answer sessions, open door policies (one-on-one communication), performance reviews, and feedback forms or surveys (NCVEI 2004a). For example, Shannon Cribb (2007), practice manager of Coastal Veterinary Hospital, found that monthly staff meetings helped to improve staff morale.

When executing an on-going communication program in a veterinary practice, there are several tools and resources to consider. The first of these is conducting job orientations with all new team members. Job orientations introduce new employees to their job activities and provide accurate information (NCVEI 2004b). During a job orientation there should be an overview of what a practice does; what its goals are; employee duties; and company rules, policies, compensation, and benefits, followed by a tour of the facility (NCVEI 2004b).

The second tool or resource to consider when executing an ongoing communication program in your practice is establishing an open door policy. This requires a commitment from all team members in managerial positions to listen to the concerns and suggestions of subordinate team members and to respond appropriately. There are several ways of doing this. For example, suggestion boxes allow both employees and managers time to think about a subject before making a statement (NCVEI 2004a), and one-on-one conversations encourage individual discussions between employees and managers (Meisinger 2006).

The third communication tool or resource to consider is performance reviews. These provide the opportunity to communicate one-on-one with team members on individual job performances, teamwork performances, and contributions to the goals of the practice (NCVEI 2004a).

Team members need to know whether they are meeting expectations and making valuable contributions to the practice (Veterinary Economics 2005a). Frequent reviews are important to effective communication. Managers/owners should think of themselves as coaches and mentors, and should help their team members grow professionally (Soares 1998a).

The fourth communication tool or resource to consider is providing rewards and/or recognition as an unambiguous way to boost staff morale and to encourage exceptional work behavior. Periodic, creative recognition programs inspire teamwork and employee accomplishment (NCVEI 2004a). About three-fourths of managers/owners wrongly assume that they are providing meaningful feedback or employee recognition (Lynch 2006). Find something admirable in each and every employee and do not forget the small courtesies. Saying thank you or writing notes of appreciation is important (Soares 1998b).

The fifth communication tool or resource to consider is exit interviews, which may identify the strengths and weaknesses of a practice.

Encouragement

Encourage the team. Sometimes all it takes is one person with a positive attitude and an unwavering sense of humor to drive team success. When team members trust each other, they communicate better (Soares 1998b). The culture and climate in an animal hospital is largely affected by the manager/owner. A happy work environment has a positive effect on staff morale, productivity, and team spirit, and an unhappy work environment has a negative effect (NCVEI 2004a). Managers/owners should always encourage enthusiasm in the staff (Soares 1998b). Research shows that optimism can be learned, so make it a goal of management to develop a positive approach. Using a positive approach will enable managers/owners to focus on the assets, resources, and strengths of their employees rather than on employees' weaknesses and shortcomings (Soares 1998a).

Rewarding Team Members

Rewarding team members is a key element in improving team member satisfaction, client service, and practice profitability, and involves knowing what motivates employees. Unfortunately, employers frequently do not know what employees want (NCVEI 2005). Kenneth Blanchard (2005) surveyed 10,000 employees to find out what they liked and disliked about their jobs. He also surveyed managers and supervisors to determine what they thought made

employees satisfied with their jobs. The most notable finding from this study was that the top items on the employees' list were the bottom items on the employers' list (NCVEI 2005). Based on Blanchard's study, the top motivators for employees were public recognition, learning opportunities at work and through education courses, positive work environment, acceptance as team members, and flexible work schedules (NCVEI 2005).

Studies show that staff morale, devotion to better care, and turnover rates improve when team members believe they are recognized for their actions (Kornfeld 2005). It is important to note that the frequency of rewards is more important than the size of rewards. Small rewards given regularly help keep employees motivated. A few examples of team member rewards include public praise, gift certificates and/or trophies for tasks well done, employer-paid pizza parties for late evenings or stressful shifts, and gifts for team members' pets. Appreciation rewards will help bond your team members to your practice (NCVEI 2005). Practice manager Shannon Cribb (2007) suggests hosting group activities such as a day at the ballpark, BBQ/potluck dinners, and holiday office parties to boost staff morale. Playing competitive games is another type of reward. For example, a practice in Virginia conducted a contest for rewarding improvements, whereby each implemented improvement earning points toward an employer-paid dinner at a restaurant on company time for everyone (Krauss 2006). Another example is a practice in Kansas that launched a Catch Me at My Best program, where the manager placed postcards in the lobby and the exam rooms so that clients and associates could use the postcards to note outstanding employee service, which were read aloud at staff meetings (Allen 2005).

Booher (2006) noted that Pascal said that kind words do not cost much, yet they accomplish much. Praise is important in any business and should be sincere. A scenario in which an employee should be rewarded with praise would be in a situation where a client has come to pick up his pet from boarding and it is discovered that the pet has defecated on itself in the cage. The proper behavior would be for the employee to offer to have the pet bathed and groomed on the spot.

Third-person praise or eavesdropped praise is important to any business because it helps build employee morale. Delivering "eavesdropped" praise requires the praise to be discussed with other team members within earshot of the team member being praised. A scenario in which eavesdropping praise could occur would be at scheduled team meetings where employees could be praised for doing

a spectacular job of keeping the kennel spotless and odor-free. Publically complimenting employees increases the significance of the compliment because it is shared (Booher 2006).

When including praise in your reward and recognition program always be very specific about the behavior or outcome being recognizing. Four steps should be followed when recognizing team members: (1) make the praise specific, (2) acknowledge the effort that was made, (3) state the impact on the business, and (4) underline how it affected management (Leyes 2006).

Training

Blanchard (2005) found that learning opportunities both at work and through continuing education courses were a major job satisfaction motivator. While an effective training program takes time to design and execute, the benefits far outweigh the costs. Staff training should occur in multiple areas, including medical and client services (NCVEI 2005). Unfortunately, kennel associates are often overlooked when training opportunities arise. Training kennel associates allows veterinarians to concentrate on diagnosing and treating patients, it keeps team members motivated, and usually results in greater income for the veterinary practice (NCVEI 2004c). Additional resources are available at the end of this document.

Goal Setting

The work environment in an animal hospital is largely influenced by the manager/owner. Therefore it is important to have team members who show respect for each other and work together to achieve common goals (Soares 1998b). Setting goals gives management and team members concrete, objective ways to measure performance (Veterinary Economics 2005b). Discussing responsibilities and work goals with employees will help them to focus on what really needs to be accomplished on a daily basis (Soares 1998b). It is also important to analyze and refine business goals on a regular basis (Levoy 2004).

Managers/owners should set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Realistic, and Timely) goals. This helps to measure progress and results and to set new achievements (Soares 1998b). Goals should be divided into manageable parts (or subgoals). Once the subgoals are set, it is time to prioritize the goals and set a timetable for completing the goals. Checking items off a timetable will help sustain enthusiasm about accomplishing the goals (Levoy 2004).

Superior practices create strong work environments by setting common goals. Here are some examples of goal statements that team members can use to guide their interactions with patients, clients, and each other (Rubino 2005):

- Achieve clinical excellence and offer a quality experience for staff and clients.
- Provide extraordinary, value-added patient care that supports optimal health and well-being.
- Support staff so that they are productive, well compensated, and prosperous, as is fitting for those who offer excellent care.
- Achieve harmonious, empowered relationships based on open and empowering communication that is free of gossip and unhealthy attitudes.
- Encourage staff through rewards.
- Support commitments to excellence and offer cutting-edge veterinary health care.
- Help each team member achieve breakthrough performances and gain a leadership role in some area of the practice.
- Help staff to deliver outstanding service to others.
- Create an ideal work environment that attracts, rewards, and maintains a dream team.
- Support the practice so that it serves as a role model in the community and veterinary profession, inspiring respect, trust, and confidence.

To meet the SMART criteria, goals should be tailored to individual veterinary practices and individual team members within practices. Goals should be displayed prominently in the work area to provide team members a constant reminder of their commitment to excellence, ethics, and service. Managers/owners should commit to improving communication and relationships among team members and create a work environment that supports the highest quality of health care (Rubino 2005).

Conclusions

Successful veterinary practices retain talented team members by creating a positive work environment based on clear communications about performance standards, expected workplace behavior, and the goals of the practice, and by promoting opportunities for professional development (Veterinary Economics, 2005b). To establish this type of work environment in a veterinary practice, managers/owners must be committed to maintaining an ongoing

communication program, providing appropriate rewards and recognition, and setting manageable goals. A successful work environment benefits both management and team members through increased profits, reduced staff turnover, and more job satisfaction.

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Veterinary Economics. 2005a. Avoid these six categories of workplace stress. *Veterinary Economics*. <http://veterinarybusiness.dvm360.com/avoid-these-six-categories-workplace-stress>

Veterinary Economics. 2005b. Are you driving your team nuts? *Veterinary Economics*. <http://veterinarybusiness.dvm360.com/are-you-driving-your-team-nuts>

Additional Resources

The following is a list of links to training resources for empowering kennel associates:

- eLearners. <http://www.elearners.com/courses/animal-care.htm>
- Animal Care Training Program. <http://www.4act.com>
- Veterinary Practice News. <http://www.vetpracticenews.com>
- Veterinary Information Network. <http://www.vin.com>
- AAHA Staff Training and Continuing Education. <http://www.aahanet.org/>

The following is a list of readings related to reward and recognition programs:

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