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Counsel for the Veterinary Profession

UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND HOW TO GET IT©

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One of the greatest challenges involved in operating a successful veterinary practice is keeping your staff motivated about their jobs. Maintaining employee enthusiasm about patient care, client customer service and working with their co-workers takes more than a paycheck. Keeping staff motivated requires owners themselves to be motivated leaders and the hospital to provide training, rewards, performance evaluations and career development opportunities to its employees.

Selecting and hiring employees that are compatible with the practice culture and owner philosophy, while beyond the scope of this article, are key to creating a motivated health care team. Motivation cannot be taught, it can only be fostered. Hiring individuals who have no “raison d’être” and no desire to make your practice successful is the mistake that trumps all others. It is akin to baking a cake without the essential ingredients. Without eggs, you get papier mâché, not cake.

To have a practice of motivated employees, it takes more than hiring the right ingredient. In fact, the main reason why employees are unmotivated is not because they don’t have the “right” attitude, but rather, because employers have failed to create a motivational work environment. To create such an environment, practice owners must realize that their employees are their most important business asset. You know you have created a motivated health care team when the practice runs itself when you are not there.

In order to create a motivational work environment, one must first understand the basics of motivational “theory.” To inspire employees to work towards the owner’s goals, which usually centers around providing quality medical care and creating a profitable practice, one must influence their behavior. Put simply, motivated employees have the “will to act” in a manner that is consistent with the hospital’s goals. Per Abraham Maslow, a founder of “motivational theory,” there is a hierarchy of needs, starting with the most basic physiological needs and progressing to the more sophisticated needs of self-actualization. These include:

- Physiological needs: survival needs like shelter, food and water.
- Safety needs: security; environment free of fear.
- Social needs: interaction with other people; having friends.
- Esteem needs: being well regarded by other people and appreciated.
- Self-actualization needs: realizing one’s potential; winning; achieving.

Given this hierarchy of “needs”, employers cannot inspire their employees effectively if they don’t know the primary needs of their employees. For example, rewarding an employee with a plaque “for a job well done” when she has insufficient income to feed her family will be an ineffective motivator. To motivate employees, employers must determine what motivates them. This information can be obtained by directly asking employees “what motivates you” or indirectly, by asking them about their short and long term personal, professional and financial goals.

In the employment context, basic needs include:

- Salary and Benefits: basic income, fringe benefits, time off.
- Working Conditions: work schedule, condition of facilities, availability of equipment.
- Company Policy: rules and regulations in the workplace.
- Status: rank, authority and relationship to co-workers.
- Job Security: degree of confidence the employee has in the organization.
- Supervision and Autonomy: the extent of control an employee has over content and execution of a job.
- Office Life: interpersonal relationships at work.
- Personal Life: how much is this restricted by work?

Once these basic employment needs are met, the more sophisticated needs and motivators include:

- Achievement: the need to succeed and a very powerful motivator.
- Recognition: the acknowledgement of achievements by senior staff.
- Job Interests: a job that provides satisfaction and meets intellectual needs; having responsibilities that match with one’s interests and skills.
- Responsibility: the chance to exercise authority and showcase leadership skills.
- Advancement: promotion and knowing one has the ability to move up the “corporate” ladder.

Once employers understand the basic “mechanics” of what motivates employees, they can create a work environment that meets the basic employment needs and uses incentives to reward desirable work behavior. Implementation of a reward program requires that: 1) employers communicate the organization’s goals and expectations to their employees; 2) employees understand their respective roles and responsibilities in achieving the organization’s goals; and 3) each employee understands how the reward is earned.

For employers to communicate the organization’s goals and expectations to their employee, they must develop a short and long term plan for the business and create a mission statement for the hospital. The short and long term plan should: 1) establish financial goals; 2) consider growth of the practice and how the facility and staff will expand accordingly; 3) develop a marketing strategy; 4) determine the type of veterinary care and products to be offered; and 5) develop and periodically review a strategic plan. A mission statement describes the business “you” are in.

In establishing a mission statement, owners must consider the unique and specific attributes of their veterinary practice. For example, are you simply providing technical services and procedures for the medical care of animals? Or are you providing care that transcends traditional animal care and offers services that foster the human-animal bond? An example of a mission statement would be:

"To provide comprehensive, high quality veterinary care with emphasis on exceptional customer service and patient care, while providing owners and employees with desirable, fulfilling and financially rewarding employment."

The only way employees can understand their respective roles and responsibilities in achieving the organization's goals is if they are provided with specific job descriptions and evaluated periodically to ensure they are properly performing their duties. Job descriptions are important because they help reduce mis-matched expectations about the employment position. Specifically, job descriptions: 1) allow prospective employees to learn about the job and what will be expected of them after they are hired; 2) identify, organize, and clarify responsibilities of existing employees; 3) define employer's expectations for each position and the compensation employees can achieve when they meet those expectations; and 4) prepare for and provide meaningful performance reviews. The following is an example of a job description for a receptionist. The employee's duties shall include, but not be limited to the following:

- *answer phone calls
- *make appointments
- *coordinate patient information to and from the doctors
- *prepare and maintain patient records; greet and assist arriving clients
- *process invoices for departing clients
- *enter data into the computer; insure the cleanliness and organization of the reception area examination rooms; etc
- *oversee daily receipts and bank deposits
- *oversee account receivables

Once you have job descriptions and set pay scales for each position, it is important to regularly evaluate employees as they need to know whether they are meeting your expectations and what behavior they need to change so as to increase their pay and the practice's success. Evaluations should be performed at least once annually and two to three times during the first year of employment. During the evaluation, employees should be told what they do well and areas which need improvement as well as the time frame in which the improvements are expected. New challenges and responsibilities also should be identified and employers should be prepared to provide additional training to assist employees in their professional growth.

Job descriptions with corresponding pay scales and performance appraisals must be in place before implementing a reward program. Rewards and incentives are ineffective motivators if employees do not understand how they are earned or if there is no reliable and consistent way to measure an employee's performance. Reward programs should be: 1) simple to implement;

2) effective motivators (which means you must know what motivates your staff); 3) realistic, measurable and attainable; and 4) fall within the practice's budget.

Rewards are usually financial or non-financial and contrary to what most employers think, financial rewards often are not the best motivators. Bob Nelson, author of numerous books on employee motivation, including *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, has consistently found that long term employees stay with employers because they are recognized for a job well done and are appreciated as significant contributors to the success of the business. In fact, employees usually rank money at the bottom of their list of what motivates them to do a good job. The motivators that often supersede money include:

- Recognition and appreciation for work well done, expressed directly by employers, either privately or publicly.
- Professional training and career development opportunities.
- Decision making authority and independence.
- Privileges in the form of extra-vacation time, flexible working schedule and dress code.
- Being treated as a member of the team and being informed of important business issues and having the opportunity to participate in policy decisions.
- Exciting and meaningful work and the sense of making a difference.
- Pleasant and fun working environment with nice people and minimal stress.
- A fair boss who criticizes constructively and treats employees equitably.
- Company perks such as a cell phone, car or computer.

Financial rewards come in various forms and each motivates differently. For example,

- Salary increases: initially powerful motivator, but impact is short term.
- Commissions and bonuses: effective motivator and creates job satisfaction but difficult to implement for support staff positions that don't generate revenue.
- Performance-related pay: motivational but there is a delay between performance and reward.
- Shares/Stock: motivational for long term loyalty and those who want "ownership" responsibilities. Weak short term motivator
- Family Health Benefits: low motivational value as it is expected.

CONCLUSION AND THANKS

To have a motivated health care team, employers must know what kind of business they want and who they want to be to their clients. Once the successful practice is envisioned through a mission statement, employers must hire employees with attitudes that are consistent with that vision and communicate to their employees their expectations through the use of specific job descriptions and providing regular feedback. By instituting reward programs that are measurable, attainable and tailored to the employees' needs, employers can maximize employee enthusiasm and secure long term loyalty.

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