

Implementing Appraisals

In businesses large and small, the word "appraisal" fills managers and employees alike with a feeling of dread and foreboding. So why bother? All will become clear in this edition's top tips column by Caroline Johnson.

Most people wish to develop personally in some way. Most veterinary practices, as with any business, also need to develop and this involves change. To achieve change you need to involve and develop your staff: so the [performance] review process is a valuable part of the employer/employee relationship and should be a mutually beneficial exercise.

So, how might you make the process work in your practice?

1 Link reviews to personal development: Make time to understand how your employees wish to develop, separately from the review process. Towards the end of every review, once employee and employer have identified what must be done to move the practice forward, ask what support needs to be provided, and link personal development to the progress of the individual, the team and the practice.

2 Whilst reading the introduction, you may well have thought, "What's in a name?" Does it really matter whether we use the word "appraisal" or the term "performance review"? To answer the question, ask your staff which phrase they are most comfortable with. You may even choose the phrase "development review" as long as every member of staff clearly understands point one!

3 When introducing any new system or process it is important to be clear and unambiguous in your objectives and to communicate these to every member of staff. If the initial drive behind implementation of a review process is, for example, to improve standards, which will benefit everyone within the business, particularly clients, you must ensure there is general understanding of this point. Common, agreed objectives should provide motivation for full participation and a desire by practice staff to make the process a successful one.

4 Focus on what has been achieved, the positives. Managers often fall into the trap of focusing on the negatives so be aware that all through the year and especially at review time, managers should be focusing mainly on the things that have gone well. People who feel appreciated for the good things they do are then much more likely to recognise and address their own shortcomings. If you do this well the employee will often volunteer the things they would change with the benefit of hindsight and make the process easier for both of you.

5 Keep it simple! Many performance review systems are lengthy, complex administrative exercises where having all the right boxes ticked becomes the object of the exercise. These systems achieve little but do cause aggravation, waste time and contribute to low morale. If you are introducing reviews for the first time, consider an informal, relaxed setting and a simple structure asking questions such as, "what do you like most about your role and working in this practice, and where can we improve?"

6 Finally, a word on timing. Once a year is too long for reviews to have meaning; once a quarter is usually about right. Agree the dates well in advance and then stick to them; performance reviews are important to the success of the practice, so afford them that level of importance. ■



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Caroline has worked in the veterinary sector for many years. She has wide experience in sales, people management and training, mentoring, marketing and veterinary practice development. She titles her work 'People and Practice Development', which is also a trademark of Prescription Marketing Ltd, a company that she runs with her husband.