

Impact Edition 1: The Art of Motivation

When 1 + 1 *doesn't* make 2.....

The practice is humming; a hive of activity with nurses and vets buzzing around like worker bees, receptionists hard at work dealing with clients and their pets and everything going tickety-boo. Well, this is how it is when the practice is busy: the team giving their all and working very hard indeed.

But what about the quieter times? In between peak consulting times, what happens then? Does everyone breathe a sigh of relief, grab a cup of coffee and have a chat or a moan? We all deserve a break after all! Or does the buzz die down a bit but the energy levels remain high? Do you and the rest of the staff use the quiet time to catch up and prepare for the next onslaught of clients?

Time and motion studies reveal that a huge proportion of the working day is wasted, regardless of the type of business you are in. This is often attributed to poor working practices, unnecessary bureaucracy and low levels of motivation, and whilst the former two are easy problems to fix, the holy grail of productivity – and the one which many veterinary practice owners wrestle with – is that of keeping the staff happy and motivated, working hard *at all times* to do the best possible job they can. One plus one does not necessarily make two: depending on motivation levels, two people can **either** do the work of three or more.....**or** considerably less.

The wonder of You!

Some years ago the managing Partner in a large veterinary practice said to me, 'I **pay** the staff, therefore they should be motivated!' (expletives deleted). He sat there looking like a bulldog chewing a wasp, moaning about the practice and the staff, and the irony was that he'd called on me to help him sort out the motivation issues in his practice! It was tempting to hold a mirror up in front of his face - talk about not seeing the wood for the trees!

'And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brothers eye but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?' St Luke, Chapter 6

Before you spend valuable time considering the merits of a bonus scheme or some other performance related pay structure designed to increase motivation (more of this later), do something obvious and simple: take a long hard look at yourself.

Sometimes it is all too easy for us to be aware of the deficiencies in the attitudes and approach of others, whilst being blissfully unaware of the detrimental effect that we have upon those around us. Whatever your role in a team of people, this is the case – but the effect you have as a manager or team leader is greater than you think. Be clear about this: whilst we cannot change other people, we can influence their behaviour, through modifying our own behaviour towards them.

Expect the earth...

Numerous experiments have taken place to study the effect of expectation on performance, and results consistently correlate. Whether a child or an adult, if those around you expect great things of you then the likelihood of that outcome is dramatically increased.

Analysis in the workplace has also shown this to be the case – those teams working for managers with high expectations of achievement, achieve more than those with managers who expect less. Expect your practice team to achieve more and they almost certainly will.

'Treat a person as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a person as he could be, and he will become what he should be' Jimmy Johnson, American Football Coach

Be positive

Believe in the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy; if you think positive and act positive, positive outcomes will have a habit of coming your way. Furthermore, simply by being positive and enthusiastic ourselves we have a profoundly beneficial effect on the attitude of those around. Tackle your own work with enthusiasm. Appreciate the efforts of other team members. Look for the good things that are happening in your practice every day and take the time to comment on them.

(NASA put men on the moon way back in the 1960's). Your practice is bursting at the seam with intelligent, talented, experienced people. Think about what can be achieved. Then do it!

'Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em 'Certainly, I can!' Then get busy and find out how to do it' Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919)

Look for the good

Like 'the bulldog' mentioned earlier, not only do we sometimes fail to see the negative influence we are having on a situation, we all too often focus on 'not-so-good' aspects of the behaviour and work of others. We all get to hear about the angry client whom the receptionist forgotbut what about all the times, every single day, when the same receptionist got things right?

A comment voiced all too often by veterinary practice staff is that they feel largely unappreciated and undervalued in the work they do. Yet so often the managers of those same practices will openly say to outsiders, 'we have a great team of committed staff here!' If you are a Practice Manager, managing Partner, Head Nurse or Team Leader reading this, make sure that the high opinion you have of the rest of the team is being communicated to them. Further, be aware that the criticisms always outweigh the gratitude - at least ten 'thank you's' are required to compensate for the tiniest negative comment, which wounds deeply and whose effects last forever! A little bit of praise and recognition goes a very long way in making staff feel valued and boosting morale.

'The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated': William James (1842-1910, philosopher and psychologist)

Addressing Problems

Of course we cannot ignore mistakes completely, though it may surprise you how often we can! – focus on the positives and you build confidence in others; build confidence and the mistakes have a habit of disappearing.

If we reward others with praise when things go well they are more likely to admit to mistakes and failings when the reverse is true. Admitting to failings is the first vital step in addressing them therefore this situation *must* be encouraged. The antithesis of this is a culture where people cover up mistakes, blame others and the practice stands still; and a stationary practice in today's market is actually going backwards.

Rather than wring your hands (or the neck of the person who made the blunder!) think about what can be gleaned from the situation and how this can lead to improvement. The best approach by far is to encourage staff to view failure as a positive learning experience; where this happens they will be encouraged to do a better job next time.

When a major error occurs - and they will from time to time – make sure that you focus on the processes and procedures, not the person. At least nine times out of ten it is the procedures at fault. If you concentrate on looking at how the mistake can be prevented next time, three things happen:

1. An environment is created where individuals feel confident enough to admit to errors, and mistakes are viewed as a critical element in continuous improvement.
2. The practice team learns to view mistakes constructively. By changing procedures as a result of this learning process, mistakes can be eliminated or at least reduced in number.
3. Clients will see their complaints being dealt with positively, not defensively, and a complaint handled well can bond a client for life.

'I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that don't work' Thomas Edison (1847-1931)

Share Success

Use every opportunity you have to share success. Pin up congratulatory client letters on noticeboards and seek testimonials from your clients. If someone does a good job of the new waiting room display then make sure everyone gets to hear about it and take a look. When a nurse passes her final exams, send a congratulatory card around for everyone to sign. Make sure that others in the practice *not only* hear about the complaining client that Maggie on reception had to deal with, *but also* how well she handled the situation.

Every day there should be an opportunity to say 'well done'. Simply look for it and do it. In doing so you are spreading the success factor, and making those around you feel even more positive about *their* practice.

Your Personal Checklist for motivating Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Have high expectations of those around you; they <i>will</i> achieve more.✓ Be both enthusiastic and optimistic in your approach to engender a more positive attitude in those around you.✓ Look for reasons to say 'thank you'✓ Show appreciation for the plethora of things that went right today✓ Don't focus on mistakes; if you do, they are more likely to be repeated.✓ Only deal with the problems that really matter, and do so constructively: focus on the processes and procedures, <u>not</u> the people.✓ Success fuels success – shout from the treetops every time something goes well!

Communication

Apart from your own behaviour and attitude, the most influential factor affecting the motivation of others is that of communication. Whilst good communication is not entirely synonymous with being highly motivated, poor communication invariably leads to de-motivation. Which situation prevails in *your* practice?

There are various ways in which practice members can and do communicate on a day-to-day basis. Examples of those most commonly used include the following:

- Verbal face-to-face or at meetings
- Written, such as in the visit book
- Practice e-mail
- Telephone, say between branches or contacting vets on their mobiles

Edition 4 of Impact will deal with practice communication in depth but within the context of this article be aware that good communication is critical to long term motivation of your practice team. Identify your communication 'hot spots' now in preparation for dealing with them later.

Bonus Schemes: Value for Money?

Where business owners identify difficulties in the areas of staff motivation and morale the quick fix is often seized upon to sort the problem out as quickly and as painlessly as possible. This quick fix frequently takes the form of a bonus scheme or some sort of performance-related profit-share initiative. My experience is:

They do not work. Indeed, bonus schemes often cause de-motivation.

.....unless everything that has already been covered in this article so far is in place.

That being the case, ask yourself this: *do we really need to introduce a bonus scheme?* After all, staff working in a positive environment, unafraid to learn from mistakes and feeling appreciated for all their hard work and effort, will be highly motivated anyway.

Rewarding staff for commitment and hard work is highly commendable however, and a little thought and imagination can go a long, long way. Firstly, try and find out what really switches your staff on and then as an alternative to the yearly bonus – a year is too long a period to have an effect on motivation anyway – consider the following:

- A staff party at Xmas
- A birthday cake on birthdays for all to share
- Sponsoring a practice night out at the bowling alley or ice rink

- Giving additional, *valued* CPD or vouchers towards this, when the practice reaches a financial goal such as the best month or quarter ever. It's not the monetary value which counts but the element of surprise and appreciation.
- Allow individuals to leave work early on special occasions or when they have acted above and beyond the call of duty.
- Offer to pay for a meal for a staff member and their partner as a special thank you, in recognition of outstanding effort. Ensure that both parties keep this in strictest confidence –the element of secrecy adds to the feeling that this is an exceptional situation and prevents disquiet amongst others who may feel equally deserving of recognition in this way.

And so on. The list is endless. Just listen, observe and use your imagination.....

Training and Development

Everyone in the practice, including Partners, should have a personal development programme in place and all involved with the practice should benefit from the investment made in this.

- If the skills and knowledge of individuals in the team is continually improved practice performance will be enhanced.
- Improved practice performance leads to better standards of client and patient care – consequently this leads to happier clients.
- Increasing numbers of happier clients, combined with staff who feel they are being developed to reach their full potential leads to higher levels of self-motivation.....this enhances practice performance, and so it goes on

(note to PR company: the above could be presented graphically as a virtuous circle where each element re-enforces the next)

Training and development is a big subject and an important one when it comes to motivation and practice development. The next edition of Impact deals with this and the author will start by (controversially) stating *why training doesn't actually work.....!*



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