

Impact Edition 2: Building the Practice Team: Skill Development

Why Training Doesn't Work!

"We invest heavily in training our staff, but the truth is I sometimes wonder if it's worth it. Nothing much changes around here regardless of the number of courses we send our people on". These are the words of a veterinary Practice Manager. Do they sound familiar?

Training is costly, it is time consuming and it takes valuable staff away from their duties, putting those covering for them under pressure. What is more, training often *doesn't* work!

On what basis is this somewhat surprising statement made? Please read on.

1. A great number of veterinary staff go cold at the mention of the 't' word and become anxious when they are told that they need to go on a course; this is because training is often used by managers as a corrective measure and therefore is viewed as punitive. Furthermore, a fearful trainee is not in the frame of mind to absorb new ideas and make changes, forcing one to ask, 'where is the value in this investment?'
2. The majority of training courses are written without the *individual delegates needs* being taken into account – a sort of 'one size fits all' approach. All of us possess a mix of skills and abilities, and every practice is different in terms of its culture and the way it does things. And yet, we spend considerable sums of money sending people on generic courses where often only a small element of the material presented is of relevance and value to those attending.
3. Training is all too often an ad-hoc activity. It happens when someone in management, usually at around appraisal time, thinks it's a good idea! For many this means that training is an annual event.
4. The decision to invest in training often comes from above; rarely are staff included in the discussion as to what needs to take place to address their differing needs and skill gaps. Therefore delegates can become defensive about the need for training and consequently are closed in their thinking even before the event takes place. So why bother?
5. And finally, the person or persons who funds the practice are the owners and they often do not understand the value and need for ongoing training. Therefore, it often only takes place at the most basic level with little or no follow-up.

People do not require training! Do not offend colleagues by using the 't' word!

What you and your colleagues do require is recognition of a job well done and *ongoing skill development!*

The Skills Gap

The veterinary environment has been going through a period of change for several years now, but never before has the rate and pace of change been as great as that being experienced now. Changes in pet and client demographics, increasing amounts of new legislation and the entrance of new competitors to the veterinary market are just some of the factors impinging on practice life. Nowadays staff have to approach their work with a flexibility not required much in the past; they need to be ready to adapt to meet changing client needs and expectations. Furthermore, the challenges of today's work environment are greater than ever and must be embraced in order to ward off increased competition.

It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change'
Charles Darwin

To thrive in this environment, the gap between those skills your staff possess today and those required to meet the demands of your probable situation tomorrow, need to be continually identified and development plans put in place to fill the gap.

Job descriptions are fluid. They have to be so to accommodate the fact that practice roles change over time, along with the development of and the changing needs of the practice. Job descriptions should be reviewed regularly and amended where necessary by those on the 'coal face', i.e., those actually performing the role. An up-to-date job description is therefore the best place to start when identifying the gap between those skills possessed and those required to fulfil a developing role.

When do you do this? Certainly at appraisal time – but if you only conduct appraisals once per year, then a quarterly review should be instigated. Twelve months is too long!

Developing Skills: Producing a Plan

So, the manager and the employee have studied the job description together, and they have amended it in light of achievement of the practice objectives. They have discussed the skills required to fulfil the emerging role **following*** praise and acknowledgement of the employee's skills and achievements to date.

***Remember, we are all human and therefore more receptive and open to discussing our weaknesses when our strengths have been recognised! If you are a manager and are experiencing some difficulty in getting staff to acknowledge that they need help in developing their skills in certain areas then you may need to look at your own management style and practice culture. Defensive staff may be exhibiting a symptom of their work environment, not necessarily of their resistance to change.**

Together you have drawn up an action plan for the ongoing skill development of the person concerned having asked them to identify areas where they feel they need some additional help. What next?

Developing Skills: The How

1. Training One Another

A vast range of options is available for skill development but one of the most valuable in a veterinary practice is that of the in-house, on-the-job method. The benefits of this include the following:

1. Staff are not taken away from the practice and the need to employ outside training organisations, at additional expense, is eliminated.
2. It is directly relevant and can be less threatening than outside courses, especially for newer, younger employees.
3. Importantly, it can be very motivational for other members of staff to be given the responsibility of training in aspects of their roles. This is in essence, peer recognition of their particular strengths.
4. Quite simply, on-the-job learning is highly effective!

<p>Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand.</p>
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In-practice mentoring can and should be used extensively. The key to making it really successful is to identify the strengths of all your staff and to include everyone in the mentoring process, regardless of experience or time in the job. If, for example, a particular member of your reception team handles difficult clients exceptionally calmly and well, then it makes sense to recognise their strength in this area and ask them to mentor less confident members of the team when complaints and difficult situations arise. Everyone is good at something!

This process is normally applied within teams of people performing a similar role and is often most appropriate when done so. However do not ignore the opportunity to spread good practice and utilise skills across cross-functional teams. For example, a shining star from the reception team may be used to demonstrate their people skills to nurses and vets too. Likewise, an assistant vet who happens to be a good communicator could be selected to brief staff on new product developments as they arise.

Regardless of age, experience and role, everyone has something to teach and something to learn – Partners, Assistant Vets, managers, nurses and receptionists. By involving everyone in the mentoring process you not only fulfil the need to address skill gaps, but you also build a stronger, tighter team and assist in the development of a practice culture where ongoing personal and practice development is seen as the norm – not an exceptional event designed to meet crisis situations. Personal development is, and should always be, a motivator!

2. Book Learning

In addition to hands-on learning, there is considerable value in the use of written material to support the role being mastered. Policy manuals, standard operating procedures (SOP's) and written protocols ensure a consistent approach when performing a range of tasks from answering the telephone or admitting an animal, to dealing with a recently bereaved client. Consistency in dealing with such matters ensures the task is completed efficiently and professionally regardless of the role of the person performing the task. But there is a downside.....

Practice manuals of all sorts have a tendency to collect dust! This happens because they are often out-of-date, too wordy, irrelevant and all-too-often inaccurate and misleading. Why have them in that case? Well, you should have them because they are of tremendous value, if updated and reviewed regularly and used every day as working documents!

An up-to-date practice manual (and there is value in having a version for each department) is a useful training tool for brushing up and developing knowledge within the practice team, **providing** that it is broken up piecemeal and studied in parallel to the mentoring and the activities taking place.

Learning must be tested. The testing can be done in a fun manner as part of a team game at practice meetings. This stimulates learning and ensures that no-one feels exposed or vulnerable if they get an answer wrong.

3. External CPD Providers

Of course there are times when there is clear benefit in using an external provider to help meet the skills gaps identified by individuals in your practice. For vets wishing to specialise for example, a plethora of courses are available to meet their needs and provide them with the qualifications required to pursue their interests in a particular field.

In addition to accessing skills and knowledge not available within your practice team, there are times when outside courses can also be useful in developing and motivating groups of people within the practice. For example, it may be of value to send the reception team along with some nurses to attend a course on client care. That way, the receptionists and nurses who are all part of the bigger practice team, can develop an appreciation of one another's roles and learn how to best work together in achieving the stated aim of better client care. Where the course includes people from other practices, this can facilitate the adoption of new ideas and working methods.

So, how do you choose the most suitable course and the one offering best value? To achieve value for money it is essential that the course meets the needs of your group – therefore, the cost is secondary to the content! It is important to remember that a considerable element of the expense incurred in an 'away day' is in simply not having staff at the practice – apart from the wages bill, there is an 'opportunity cost' in the work which does not get done when staff are missing. So, a decision made to recruit an outside company and take staff away from the practice, represents a considerable investment – fact. However your investment will be re-paid several times over if you choose the right provider with the right course content. This can be achieved by following the steps below and ensuring that a full discussion with the trainer takes place prior to the final course content being agreed:

Trainer Brief:

1. Define your objectives and list the skills gaps identified with those who will be attending the course.
2. Ask the training provider to provide you with an outline of the course content, along with a description of the format to be used (workshop, presentation and/or role plays)
3. Agree a list of measures for evaluating the success of the course in achieving your objectives.

At all stages in the process of selecting a training provider involve the staff that will be included on the course. Tell them who you are speaking to and what the outcomes are, and where possible include a group representative in the meetings. That way everyone feels involved and will be more likely to 'buy in' to the training when it is finally delivered.

Finally, after the course, it is imperative that an evaluation is done. In addition to the measures agreed beforehand, ask the following:

Training Evaluation:

- Were expectations met?
- Are staff more confident in their role as a result of the training?
- Do they feel that their skills and learning have developed as a result?
- Most importantly, what actions have they listed which will ensure they do a better job tomorrow than they were able to do yesterday?

The latter point is the most important. All too often people go off on courses returning to do their jobs exactly as they have done them before. If nothing changes, then there is little point to the exercise and money has been wasted.

What can also be done to maximise the benefit and value of external CPD, is to ask those attending to write a summary of the key points learned and to disseminate this information to other members of staff. This can be done via a written summary or a short presentation at a practice meeting and ensures that lessons learned and ideas generated are shared throughout the rest of the practice.

Follow Up

Motivational training courses and inspirational role models can fire others with hitherto unknown levels of enthusiasm, but sadly and all too often, the fires are quickly dampened when the individual is thrown back into dealing with the demands of a busy veterinary practice. Such is life!

To maximise the impact of any training or skill development initiatives, follow-up is imperative. New ideas and better ways of doing things need to be formulated into protocols and action plans. Learning must be tested. Repetition of new skills is the way to actually learn them. Only when this is done is the real value of our efforts and investment realised; only then do we do things differently and better.

Does Training Work?

This article started with the statement that training doesn't work..... well, perhaps that is a little rash!

Training is the way forward in developing your team and building their confidence in dealing with the new and varied challenges presented by an ever-changing veterinary market. It is most successful if regarded as a process of on-going skill development, tailored to address the skill gap of individuals and of the team as a whole. Undoubtedly, it is of greatest value when everyone is involved in the process – in the identification of areas for improvement, of using strengths to help one another and in the decision-making process regarding which methods would best improve skills and spread good practice.

A final word: If you think training is expensive, then try ignorance!



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