

Creating a FUN Work Environment

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This lecture was inspired by the fact I have had multiple practice owners ready to move on from the industry and give up everything for the very little fact that they no longer liked coming to work anymore. In fact, it was so bad at times, that they weren't sleeping, depression was setting in, and they just wanted to find a cave to crawl in to. As we talked through the situations, we found they each had sets of staff that were contributing to the issues and the demise of their careers.

We are not going to spend an hour working on 101 ways to make staff happy or have fun at work. Instead, it is much more focused on how do we create a cohesive team that works well together, helps each other, and at the end of the day realizes that each one of us have the sole job of assuring our clients and their pets are taken care of well. Once we create the structure and accountability for the team, the fun will follow. For others, it will be apparent it is time for them to move on. We cannot have a few individual holding the rest of the doctors and staff hostage and creating a dismal work environment. So where do we start?

One of my only quotes goes a little something like this; "We as managers and owners are often too focused on generating revenue as opposed to focusing on those that allow us to generate the revenue". To have a well oiled cohesive team takes time, training, and appreciation. We will evaluate how to make our team understand we have to do more with less in today's economy. That doesn't mean everyone has to work harder (some of them will). It means we have to find ways to be more efficient. We will gain a better understanding of what our role as the leadership team is in directing our staff for success. Helping guide and mold the staff into seeing new and more effective ways to working in our clinics. Take a moment and learn about a promise I made to my staff several years ago. Because of this promise and new attitude toward the staff, my turnover is low, my efficiency is high, and I am profitable.

The concerns, questions, and complaints I most often hear at Continuing Education conferences are I can't keep good staff or train them. It of course never seems to be the fault of the owners, managers, or practices. The youth of today just aren't like they were in my day said one practice owner recently in Kansas City at CVC. So where should the fault lie? I am not as concerned as who to blame as opposed to the mind set the practices must take in order to gain some ground on this issue. I hate to burst any practice owners/managers bubble but for every time I hear "I can't find any good employees" I hear "I wish the practice I worked for was managed better".

Several years ago I too along with our practice owners at Meadow Hills Veterinary Center in Kennewick, WA felt the strain of staff turnover. Each year we set a theme for our management team during our annual strategic planning session. In 2004 the theme was set as the "Year of the Staff". Sure we always wanted to treat the staff well, but were we? It was time to take a mental inventory and evaluate areas for improvement and build on them.

It was at that moment I defined "My Promise" A promise which states "No team member will leave the practice feeling unchallenged, concede to a lack of direction, or have professional growth hindered". A bold statement yet so simple. I realize there are companies out in the world able pay higher hourly wages, afford well rounded benefit packages, and perhaps even work schedules with ideal hours. But can they compete with "My Promise"?

It was a turning point for the company. At the same time a challenge to our management group not allow this promise to go unfulfilled. The idea of an empty promise leads us to the next factor of ultimate responsibility. The responsibility to say each employee's success or failure is dependent on the systems and communication channels the management team puts in place. Failure by any team member is a direct reflection of the management and

leadership style itself. For us to realize our new obligation and find success, the promise had to be interwoven with management undertaking the act of ultimate responsibility.

Let's take a look at an example of ultimate responsibility: A new employee is confused with creating a vaccination schedules for a puppy on their second wellness visit. Our normal reaction tends to be: "We have told her 5 times how to determine the vaccination schedule, I think she is just not bright enough for the job." Ultimate responsibility would have us examining our training methods for the new employee. Asking ourselves, did we spend enough time practicing and role playing? Do we have prepared materials for them to use as references as the new staff learns and becomes confident? Perhaps the training methods are not where the problem is but in our hiring techniques. Maybe we hired somebody trying to fill an immediate void that never belonged in the clinic to begin with. This is where the change has to occur with the management team in taking the responsibility to say we failed the team member, they didn't fail us. The management team must be humble, learn from their mistakes and move on.

The idea of ultimate responsibility must funnel down to your senior staff. It is often time the senior staff witnessing job performances of the younger staff. We recently surveyed all of the staff that was trained in the last 18 months. One question posed was "What was the hardest part of fitting in at the clinic"? One of the popular responses was they felt the staff was quick to offer blame for any mistakes made. Finger pointing simply put. Since completing the survey results we have worked with our staff to create a culture in which now they realize the mistakes made by others are mistakes they need to help offer further training and guidance to. Instead of pointing a finger and gossiping to others, they are taking the challenge on their shoulders to find a solution. Not an easy transition style of thinking.

The staff you have in your hospital is already capable and ready for further challenges and growth. We as owners and managers just simply turn a blind eye consciously and unconsciously. It is not until the clinic enters a crisis situation such as losing key senior staff member that we are reminded. It is scenarios such as this where the management team is forced to promote or ask more of a team member to compensate for the loss. Not surprisingly, the individuals steps up to the plate. The sad part is they had it in them the entire time. We just didn't realize it and take advantage of the talent sooner. I was recently reminded of this lesson a couple of weeks ago. I was in need of some gift certificates that needed to be created for a promotion which was soon concluding. I kept putting off the project because of time constraints. I finally had a team member offer to create the gift certificates on the computer for me. I reluctantly agreed. The next day I arrived in my office to find the certificates were completed in color with our logo and a creative theme for each month of the year (The certificate which was valid for July had a 4th of July theme on it, October had Halloween on it and so on). I was dumbfounded at the thought and creativity that went into the certificates.

We often hear the clichés maximize the staffs strengths and minimize their weaknesses or don't try to fit a square peg in a round hole. As non-original as the quotes are they do hold truth. Part of the promise is to identify each team members tools and talents and having them working positively and in unison for the clinic.

Betsy just celebrated her sixth year anniversary with Meadow Hills. She started in our boarding department and has since cross-trained in every other department of the hospital. While she does a fantastic job no matter where we have her scheduled, it wasn't until recently where we truly found her ultimate strength. She now oversees all of our hospital assistants. From the hiring and training to evaluations and establishing communication lines with other departments, it is a perfect fit for her. One she excels in. We now focus our attention on making sure she is successful in her new endeavor. The management team is there to offer guidance and support and a little bit of cheerleading when needed. At the same time we relinquished some our control in order for her to continue to grow. Not always an easy feat for practice owners and managers but necessary for success when done in a controlled manner. Betsy and others continue to take on more responsibility and with proper road maps and open doors will continue their professional growth for many years to come.

Ah, now the difficult part of the promise. Identifying these talents and strengths and opening the doors for growth and opportunity before it is too late. We start the process by encouraging and soliciting feedback from each member of the staff. It is not uncommon for me to invite an employee into my office and plainly ask “how are you doing” or “How do you feel about your job”? . When time permits I will take an employee on an errand, community event, or just simply for coffee. One on one time which aids me in determining if the staff is staying challenged and enjoying working for the company. A time to talk about personal and professional goals. During these essential meetings I find staff members are unaware about the possibilities the future may hold.

Take Kari a seven year veteran with us. For six years she worked in Reception and as a part time bookkeeper for us as she began her family. With the kids preparing to enter pre-school she was ready to go back to work full-time and wanted to be further challenged and possible seek work in the field of her bachelor’s degree. I took an hour of my day to take her to lunch. During this time we sat and explored options drawing a map with 3-4 areas she could advance with Meadow Hills. Over the last year she has trained in our treatment area becoming a coordinator for our surgeries and dentistry. I will never forget her satisfied face as she boasted to me she completed the placement of her first IV catheter. She will be attending her first major CE conference at CVC East and we look for her to take on even more responsibility when she returns. A lunch and an hour of time is a small price to pay in order to retain a valued employee.

With the promise goes sincere appreciation and gratitude. Rather than celebrate birthdays we focus on staff anniversaries. A poster is created each month to reflect each employee celebrating an anniversary and noting how long they have been with the company. After 3 years of service the ladies receive a gold star necklace. The gentleman receives a gold star tie tack. At five years a diamond is placed in the center of the star. At ten years the ladies receive diamond earrings. A special way to appreciate our gold star employees and simply say Thank You.

Going back to 2004, I am reminded of a night of celebration and thanks we created for the staff. What was unusual about this evening is our primary focus was to show the staff’s families how important each team member was to our hospital and to the clients and pets they serve. The night started off with a tropical themed dinner complete with real Hawaiian leis for each employee. The program presented by the two practice owners reviewed each position with the clinic and the immense responsibility, dedication, and training demanded by each role. The program continued with a video compiled of clients speaking to the staff on what their compassion, professionalism, and expertise means to them and their pets. The night concluded with a slide show of each employee at work played to the song “Simply the Best” by Tina Turner. A group photo was taken that evening. The picture remains framed in my office. While some of the faces have changed, the defining message remains clear of ultimate responsibility and of a simple promise to work hard each day to fulfill. Nothing is more rewarding than to turn out my office light at night, walking out to my car and thinking “I saw someone grow today.”

A simple promise. It is time for you as a practice owner or manager to think about creating your promise. A journey to create a culture and environment with challenges growth, and opportunity for your staff. A renewed dedication to ultimate responsibility. At times you will have to be innovative and creative. The satisfaction you will endure while establishing long term professional relationships with your staff will benefit your practice immeasurably. In turn, it will set up the fun environment you are looking for and wanting.