

How we keep the alien longer?

It is 6 months since we hired the new assistant and she seems to be coping well. She is well integrated in the team and her performance is really good. Everybody in the team likes her and clients are starting to ask for appointments with her. Then the big question comes, how do we keep her much longer?

This is a very common question for practices everywhere. It is difficult to find the right assistant but it is even more difficult to keep them. Retention is an important matter. We need to aim to have a team that builds a bond with the clients, which will be good for the practice.

One of the most common complaints by the owners is the constant change of faces at the veterinary practice. This turnover is not good for any company and even less so for a veterinary clinic with such an essential requirement for good client management.

In this article we are going to try to find ways to keep employees happy, which will benefit the clinic and its clients. It is a tedious road that implies investing time and money but it is a road that also leads to benefits too.

Let's begin by talking about benefits. In this way it will be easier to try new things if we know the benefits that they bring to us.

The first benefit of keeping the same working team is obviously a more efficient running of the day to day activities. Like in a sports team, it takes time for a new member to know the working routine and adapt to it. Keeping the same group will improve the process as they will know what to expect from each other and predict their needs.

It is also clear that a group of people working together for a while will have a personal connection that will encourage them help each other. In other words they begin to function as a team. They tend to become more co-operative and inclined to swap shifts or stay that extra fifteen minutes to help with consults in a busy afternoon, for example. It is important to keep a good environment at work because a group that has been working together for a while can become the perfect environment for personal problems to become an issue and affect the group dynamic. This is what we all know as "practice politics". It is not good enough to throw a Christmas party once a year for everybody to wind down, it is necessary to regularly organise events, no matter how small, to help maintain a healthy working relation and 'bond' between the team.

To improve relations it is important not only to have regular meetings about managerial issues, but also about personal issues. Every member of staff needs to be involved (including partners) for this to be a success. Organising team building exercises is not just getting everybody out bowling once a month but an exercise of exchange of concerns and trust building. Petty things like leaving the consult room in a mess can poison the relation between vets sharing the same room, so it is important for these matters to be addressed early on.

The presence of the senior members of the team will give credibility to the exercise, especially if they are open to feedback as well. We have to remember, not just at work but in life in general, that when you point your finger at somebody, three fingers point back at you.

There are several exercises that can be done at work, but if you need help there are companies which specialise in human resources management that will detail the exercise that suits your clinic best.

It is also important to keep the same faces in the practice, as they will build a bond with the clients. Those clients will be as likely as any other to complain about the service, but they will also be more willing than anybody to stay with the practice, as human nature dictates we are scared of change. In how many practices have we heard the clients saying that the most senior partner can do no wrong? The only reason for that is the fact that they have been meeting the same person for over 20 years, not because he can make no mistakes! In fact he has made mistakes but for every mistake he has been successful many times so the overall picture is a good one.

As we see, to keep a consistent working team will help us to improve our processes, services and client care, but it is necessary to invest to preserve it that way.

Now comes the important matter of how to retain the personnel. Companies are realising the importance of coaching to retain their employees. Coaching is a method of directing, instructing and training a person or a group of people, with the aim to achieve some goal or develop specific skills. There are many ways to coach, types of coaching and methods of coaching, but all are based on the fact that the person being coached has the ability to sort out the situations they are facing.

I like to use, as a starting point, a very simple method. First we need to assign a coach to each person of the team. This person is recommended not to be part of the management to prevent the “coachee” feeling threatened or judged during the sessions.

A simple way to apply the coaching to a team is a method named GROW. This method has 4 very simple steps:

- G: Goal. This is what we want to achieve (In the case of a vet it could be learning a new surgical technique, in the case of a nurse this could be to set up a weight control clinic)
- R: Reality: This is where we are. (This is how surgically skillful we are at the moment, for example)
- O: Obstacles and Options. The obstacles prevent the person achieving the goals. To overcome those obstacles, we have Options. These options are the way to deal with the problems we encounter on the way to the goal (following our nurse example: is there an available room for the weight clinics? How can I find a gap in the schedule to use room 1?)
- Way Forward: The options need to be converted into a series of steps that will take the team member to their goal (In the vets case that might include taking a course, practising the surgery with a senior member, doing surgery alone etc).

In this method, the coach does not give solutions, but makes questions to lead the “coachee” towards the final goal. It will be a more fulfilling journey if you have set the route yourself than if you follow what somebody else says.

As we have seen, to retain the members of our team we need to work as a team, but also individually, finding the weakness in a team will make it stronger, the same way that finding the path to a goal will invigorate an individual.