

The Challenges of Managing the Human Resource: An Art, Not a Science

By Valerie Wham

When you were in veterinary school you were accustomed to learning from textbooks and lectures. There are formulas and structured ways to learn to practice medicine. Most of it is a “science”. Unfortunately, no textbook can teach you the “formula” or science for managing people. It would be like creating a manual for being a parent or a spouse. It’s an art, and it’s more about understanding people, what motivates them, and how to establish a relationship with them than it is about one right answer or a formula.

First, the concept of "managing" people is ultimately flawed. You need to consider the concept of "leading" people instead of “managing” them. Many people will refuse to "be managed," so you need to create a culture of support and clear expectations, and then train people to manage themselves while you lead them, give them direction, set expectations, support them in their efforts, and give them feedback on their performance. There are many perceived and real challenges in “leading” the human resource, some of which are simply a difference of opinion in respect to how people are “supposed” to approach their jobs, or a perception of what is “supposed” to be the most important thing in their lives. Much of this stems from simply a misunderstanding or lack of communication of needs and expectations. Understanding these needs and expectations will help you to “lead” your team in the most effective way possible.

Here are some commonly perceived and real challenges:

The Generation Gap:

Most practice owners feel there is a huge generation gap between themselves and their employees. They feel that things have changed since they were employees, and they have trouble understanding the younger employees’ approach to their jobs. It may not be as complicated as that, once you know what it is that those "Gen-Xers" want. Are any of these unreasonable?

- Flexibility
- A balance between personal and professional life
- Freedom and independence
- More frequent informal feedback, coaching and recognition
- Use of technology – they grew up with it and can get bored/frustrated without it
- Autonomy and less hierarchy in their organization
- Self-training programs (this can be tricky for those not ready/not capable)
- Honesty and trust between other employees and with employers
- Direction and expectations set by employers/managers

The Unemployment Rate:

Everyone thinks their market is the biggest challenge in this area, that they are the only ones dealing with this issue. Don't fall into the "poor me" trap. All businesses in all markets in all cities are dealing with this issue every day. Use the following techniques to recruit, hire and retain that "ideal" employee:

- Know what you're looking for – create the skills, attitude and behaviors of that ideal employee so that you will know how to recruit for it.
- Always keep your eyes open for great employees. Someone who provides you great customer service yourself is someone you should want to hire in the practice.
- Always carry business cards with you, and encourage great service providers to call if they are ever considering another career.
- Be specific when you write your recruitment ads. Using short, non-specific ads will get you fewer, less qualified applicants in response.
- Screen applicants carefully. If you know what you are looking for, formulate questions that will indicate whether the applicant "fits" the picture.
- Provide a lot of direction during the orientation process – put a structured orientation training program in place and provide frequent, specific feedback.
- Set expectations and communicate very openly with employees.
- Give all employees feedback on progress.

Remember, many people are "fishing" for a career that they will enjoy for a lifetime. When recruiting you need to find out what it is that they are looking for to ensure that it is a good fit for both the practice and the employee.

Low Wages:

Consider this: McDonald's and QuikTrip pay new employees more than many newly hired receptionists in veterinary practices! Is this the kind of employee you want to be in control of your client perceptions? This is an example of the theory that you "get what you pay for", and you cannot expect to find people of maturity and stability who will be willing and able to make \$16,000 a year. If you have no choice but to hire a less skilled employee, your training programs become an even more essential part of their development. Remember, a profitable, well-managed practice can pay employees better. More skilled employees, making higher wages, who are trained well and have expectations set and feedback given to them, are much better for the practice and increase employee retention.

"People Just Aren't Willing to Work Hard Anymore":

Again, as discussed in regard to the generation gap, people have many other areas of life that are important to them: Family, church and civic activities, continued education, physical health, a commitment to "de-stress" their lives, etc. These are all areas where people have to share their time, and many employees are not effective if they are not balanced. Flexibility, understanding, and open communication can go a long way toward working with employees to ensure they have time to commit to all aspects of their lives. Celebrate this – you will have happier, healthier employees who will be better at their jobs!

The Loyalty Issue:

Many employers are concerned that employees are not loyal to the businesses they work for anymore. While this may appear to be true, there is often a good reason for it. Remember that the new generation employee has different needs. If those needs are not met the employee often has the freedom to “move on” because of the low unemployment rate. Working to retain employees is as much the responsibility of the employer as loyalty is the responsibility of the employee. Consider the following:

- What does an employee owe the business they work for? What does that business owe the employee? Loyalty is a "two-way" street and relationships go both directions.
- Why don't people stay in their jobs? Why are they unhappy? Ask yourselves what would make you unhappy with your job. Is it similar for the employees in the practice?

The following are some of the more common reasons people state for being unhappy with their jobs or for leaving their jobs:

- Pay can certainly be one of the reasons, but is not the only reason.
- Lifestyle issues – family and other personal life is suffering; lack of flexibility in the schedule.
- The job is not seen as a career – maybe not enough challenge or potential for advancement.
- No formalized training to the skills that are expected of them.
- No expectations set and communicated in the first place – no understanding of how their jobs fit in to a bigger purpose or outcome.
- Lack of effective communication between owner/management and employees regarding performance (evaluations).
- No appreciation shown to them for a "job well done".
- No accountability or consequences when people don't do their jobs.
- Poor attitude of the doctors.
- Low quality, unskilled staff members.
- They know the potential of themselves or the practice, but often are not given the avenues to give input or receive the training to improve their skills.

Remember, leading people is more an art than a science; it's gray, not black and white. It's about understanding, listening, supporting, building relationships, mentoring, teaching, empowering, consistency, creating a mission, and providing feedback and communication EVERY SINGLE DAY. It's about listening between the lines and understanding the individual needs and strengths of each employee so they can be utilized to their fullest potential.