

# Cultivating Employee Motivation



Charlotte A. Lacroix, DVM, JD  
 Veterinary Business Advisors, Inc, Whitehouse Station, New Jersey



*Once employers understand what motivates employees, they can create a work environment that meets their basic employment needs and uses incentives to reward desirable work behavior.*

One of the greatest challenges involved in operating a successful veterinary practice is keeping staff motivated. It takes more than a paycheck, and instead requires motivated leaders and a hospital that provides training, rewards, and career development opportunities to its employees.

Selecting and hiring employees compatible with the practice culture and owner philosophy, while beyond the scope of this article, is key to creating a motivated health care team. But having

motivated employees in your practice takes more than hiring the right people. In fact, the main reason employees are unmotivated is not because they don't have the "right" attitude, but because employers have failed to create a motivational work environment.

#### UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONAL THEORY

In order to create this environment, one must first understand the basics of motivational theory. Per Abraham Maslow, a founder of "motivational

TABLE.

#### Types of Employee Incentives

NONFINANCIAL INCENTIVES	FINANCIAL INCENTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition and appreciation for work well done, expressed directly by employers, either privately or publicly</li> <li>• Professional training and career development opportunities</li> <li>• Decision-making authority and independence</li> <li>• Privileges in the form of extra vacation time, flexible working schedules, and dress code</li> <li>• Being treated as a member of the team and having the opportunity to participate in policy decisions</li> <li>• Exciting and meaningful work and the sense of making a difference</li> <li>• Pleasant and fun working environment with nice people and minimal stress</li> <li>• A fair boss who criticizes constructively and treats employees equitably</li> <li>• Company perks, such as a cell phone, car, or computer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Salary increases—initially powerful motivator, but impact is short term</li> <li>• Commissions and bonuses—effective motivator but difficult to implement for support staff positions that don't generate revenue</li> <li>• Performance-related pay—motivational, but there is a delay between performance and reward</li> <li>• Shares/stock—motivational for long-term loyalty and those who want "ownership" responsibilities; weak short-term motivator</li> <li>• Family health benefits—low motivational value, because it is expected</li> </ul>

theory," there is a hierarchy of needs, starting with the most basic physiological needs and progressing to more sophisticated needs. These include:

- Physiological—survival needs like shelter, food, and water
- Safety—environment free of fear
- Social—interaction with other people and having friends
- Esteem—being well regarded by other people and appreciated
- Self-actualization—realizing one's potential.

Employers cannot inspire employees effectively if they don't know their primary needs. For example, rewarding an employee with a plaque "for a job well done" when she has insufficient income to provide for her family will be an ineffective motivator.

Information about employees' needs can be obtained directly by asking them, "what motivates you," or indirectly by asking them about their short- and long-term personal, professional, and financial goals (see **Table, Types of Employee Incentives**, page 10).

#### BUILDING AN INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Once employers understand what motivates employees, they can create a work environment that meets their basic employment needs and uses incentives to reward desirable work behavior. Implementation of a reward program requires that:

1. Employers communicate the organization's goals and expectations to their employees
2. Employees understand their respective roles and responsibilities in achieving the organization's goals
3. Each employee understands how the reward is earned.

For employers to communicate the **organization's goals and expectations** to their employees, they must develop short- and long-term plans for the business and create a mission statement for the hospital. The short- and long-term plans should:

1. Establish financial goals
2. Consider growth of the practice and how the facility and staff will expand accordingly
3. Develop a marketing strategy
4. Determine the type of veterinary care and products to be offered
5. Develop and periodically review a strategic plan.

In establishing a **mission statement**, owners must consider the unique and specific attributes of their veterinary practice. An example of a mission statement would be: *To provide comprehensive, high quality veterinary care, with emphasis on exceptional customer service and patient care, while providing owners and employees with desirable, fulfilling, and financially rewarding employment.*

Next, employees should be provided with specific **job descriptions and pay scales** for each position. Evaluations should be conducted by the employer at least once annually and two to three times during the first year of employment. During the evaluation, employees should be told what they do well and areas that need improvement, as well as the time frame in which the improvements are expected. New challenges and responsibilities also should be identified, and employers should be prepared to provide additional training to assist employees in their professional growth.

All of this must be in place before implementing a **reward program**, which should be measurable and attainable. Contrary to what most employers think, financial rewards are not always the best motivators. Bob Nelson, author of numerous books on employee motivation, including *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, has consistently found that long-term employees stay with employers because they are recognized for a job well done and are appreciated as significant contributors to the success of the business. Other nonfinancial motivators are listed in the **Table**, along with financial motivators.

#### IN SUMMARY

To have a motivated health care team, employers must know what kind of business they want and who they want to be to their clients. Once the successful practice is envisioned through a mission statement, employers must hire employees with attitudes that are consistent with that vision and then communicate expectations to employees through the use of specific job descriptions and provide regular feedback. By instituting reward programs that are measurable, attainable, and tailored to the employees' needs, employers can maximize employee enthusiasm and secure long-term loyalty.

—Charlotte A. Lacroix,  
NAVC Immediate Past President

*Special thanks to James Wilson, DVM, JD, of Priority Veterinary Management Consultants (pvmc.net) and Shawn G. McVey, MA, MSW, of McVey Management Solutions (smcvey@mcveymanagementsolutions.us) for their gracious contributions to this article.*



Read Dr. Lacroix's complete article on this topic—

**Understanding Employee Motivation and How To**

**Get It**—at [http://veterinarybusinessadvisors.com/up/file/understandingemployeemotivation\(clacroix\).pdf](http://veterinarybusinessadvisors.com/up/file/understandingemployeemotivation(clacroix).pdf).