It’s a key factor that in the management of any business, to ensure growth and success, staff need to keep pace with that business’ development. Veterinary practice is a prime example. You risk losing valuable, well-trained and motivated members of your team if they are unable to find challenges to increase their skills and forward their career. At the other end of the spectrum, you find that you are wasting time, energy and resources dragging members of the team along with your vision, if they really feel under-confident or are afraid to learn new things or embrace change. The engagement of your team is vital in any business development plan and needs to be thought out as an integral part.

Therefore, before you devise and implement a team development plan, you need to have a clear idea as to how you wish to take your business forward. You then need to share this information with them, ideally in a very specific format—

“Within twelve months, we want to boost the profitability of the practice by improving cash flow, decreasing debts and reducing stock wastage by 10%.”

“Within six months, we want to increase the number of nurse consultations by 20% and increase compliance of worming and flea treatments by 10%.”

“Within three months, we want to improve continuity of care by implementing systems that ensure a patient will always be booked back to see the same vet for re-examination of the same condition.”

Communicate these goals to your staff, ensuring they have a clear understanding of targets and most importantly, why they are important. In larger practices with multiple branches, having a regular strategy meeting that involves representatives from each department is useful; vets, nurses, receptionists and the customer care team should all have a voice. Having input at an early stage in formulating development plans from everyone ensures time is not wasted. Ideas can be bounced between different departments, and this often stimulates even more ideas and input. People feel involved and their opinions valued.

Once you have a clear vision of where you would like to go, you need to ensure that everyone is clear on how you are all going to get there. My favourite way of explaining this is that “everybody gets on the same bus, we arrive safely at our destination without crashing, and we are all still singing the same song when we get there!” Ensure that you work at the right pace and that you do not lose anyone along the way.

Before you can look to develop your team members, it is vital that you know where they currently sit. You will need to have solid recruitment, induction and performance review processes already in place to help you with this information. This will ensure that you will already have a good idea of training needs and then personal development plans can flow out of these. If you use the practice development plan alongside these individual development plans, your team will be able to relate to these together and this helps to engage them in the process.

It is important within the development of any team that regular feedback is given on progress towards the required goals. How this information is given will depend on the methods best suited to the construction and size of the team, but it must be inclusive. Do not be afraid to share quantitative information i.e. facts and figures and explain their significance. Vague negative feedback, hearsay and rumour will undermine the compliance and engagement of the team. Praise and encouragement is far more motivating, and if there are problems, then solutions should be sought together as a team. As the driver of the bus, having a clear vision for the development of the practice, and having the enthusiasm and involvement of your whole team, will ensure that when you get to your destination you will have retained staff who might have been tempted to move on elsewhere, and swept along and developed those who may have been holding themselves and the team back.

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Case Study – Newly qualified RVN

Let’s use the example of a newly qualified RVN. Normally this is a point in their career which is one of the most important for future development. I always ensure that I, or one of my senior nurses, has an informal chat with the RVN after they have qualified, and the initial excitement of finally wearing that hard-earned bottle green uniform has settled down a little. This is not the end of their training as a qualified nurse, of course. But it is the start of a career that now needs to be developed as they grow into their role. They can often feel daunted and under-confident as the level of supervision that they have grown used to during their training will start to decrease (think about the first time you drove a car alone after passing your test!). So it is important to start to devise a development plan at this point.

One of the clear advantages of training veterinary nurses within your own practice is that at this point, you will already have a solid base on which to build your development plan. You will know the areas in which they are confident through their NPL (Nursing Progress Log) and at the same time, they will have a clear understanding of your own practice culture and your vision for the future.

Taking one of the objectives outlined above, a key area in which the nurse can play an important role in is the development of nurse clinics. You should already have a clear idea of the possible clinics and which parts of the client base you will target for these. These will have been worked out at your team strategy meetings where you’ve had input from the vet team, the nurse team and customer care team on how you can all work together. You might have decided on a weight clinic for example, or a post-operative care protocol, a nutrition advice service or clinics to manage dressing changes. Agreements are in place that the veterinary surgeons are supportive of the nursing teams’ role in this and that clients will be referred to them, which is vital for the clinics to grow. Having all of the basics in place in advance will mean that your development plan for this nurse will be more effective.

Based on this information, a formal development plan can now be agreed mutually. Further training needs are assessed and written in, along with what support and resources are required from the practice. The nurse is encouraged to develop their own ideas within this plan as this will ensure they are engaged with the process. An action plan with clear timings and deadlines is also agreed with commitment from yourself to ensure that it is monitored regularly, and the pace of development meets the needs of both the nurse and the practice.

When we come to review the action plan, it is important that information is available to measure its level of success. At the beginning this may just be a tick box to show that specific tasks have been completed. But as time goes on, it will be necessary look at facts and figures for supportive evidence e.g. compliance statistics and sales figures, so ensure that these are available from the beginning to give a baseline against which progress can be measured. Giving the nurse access to this information will help them to gauge how successful their development plan has been so far, and where the areas are that need more focus.

Developing the nurse’s strengths and interests within the framework of the bigger development plan for the practice, and providing consistent monitoring and opportunity for discussion, will help to ensure success. It will also help to develop the nurse’s role within the practice, hopefully moving them toward more senior positions or taking on specific responsibilities that will help retain them within the practice team. It’s important to remember to engage your existing senior nursing team in the development of junior staff. The former can sometimes feel threatened and insecure by the emphasis on development of newly qualified staff, so involve them in the process, share information and pay adequate attention to their own development plans. And remind them that they are all on the bus together!

“The nurse is encouraged to develop their own ideas within this plan as this will ensure they are engaged with the process.”
Case Study

Petplan Practice Manager of the Year, Cery Lawson-Tancred from Golden Valley Veterinary Hospital, shares her approach to staff development

Staff development is a very interesting element of practice life and one that can have huge consequence on the business if we get it wrong. However, in my experience there are two ‘problems’ with individual staff development in any business. Firstly not all staff want to be ‘developed’ and secondly keeping a core of competent well-motivated people who remain in place over a long period is essential to the success of the business.

Golden Valley Vets believe that staff development is the mirror of practice development and the two have a totally symbiotic relationship. Rather like Health and Safety, any sort of practice or staff development, is an ethos that has to be lived and breathed if it is to be successful.

In the current educational climate the individual has been made responsible for their own training costs and the responsibility for maintaining CPD is an individual one rather than one for the practice. So the focus at Golden Valley Vets is more on providing the correct environment to enable all this knowledge to be put into practice in an individually rewarding way. Besides the actual physical equipment needed to do the job this really involves building and monitoring teams and providing the practice with a culture where we are always looking to improve the way we do things. It requires a process of actively encouraging staff participation in researching and developing new ideas. At Golden Valley Vets this is achieved by frequent staff meetings and multidisciplinary teams established to look at different possible developments and reporting back to the full group.

On a day to day basis within the teams there will be many different skills and talents, but all should have a commonality of purpose focused on doing the very best they can for the client, either by themselves or with the help of others. Even covering a twenty-four hour shift pattern, with the correct person in place to head the team, any issues can be very quickly identified and rectified if a mutually supportive culture has been developed, and individuals know that they will not be scapegoated if they speak up. With a team of vets, nurses and receptionists this also makes life a lot easier for the Practice Manager who then only needs to manage three people and ensure the teams are working together!

At Golden Valley Vets the plan is to learn together, go forward together and prosper together through the combination of business and staff development.

“Every member of the team has a right to be heard and an obligation to contribute, at whatever level...”