

Leadership for the farm business

Robert A. Milligan, PhD

Senior Consultant, Dairy Strategies, LLC

Professor Emeritus, Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY,

rmilligan@trsmith.com

Abstract

Veterinary practices and all organizations are experiencing challenges in attracting and retaining employees. At the same time research increasingly reveals that most employee management practices are wrong. Most simply stated, we have tried to manage employees when, in fact, people - employees - are fully capable of managing themselves.

A revised definition of business success is required to truly recognize the role of people in organizations. The fundamentals of business remain crucial; however, to optimize success, all businesses must also be healthy. A healthy organization has high productivity, low turnover, high morale and job satisfaction, minimal confusion, and minimal politics (often referred to as “drama”).

Research on human behavior and brain function sheds great light on employee motivation and a healthy business. Employees are productive, engaged, and passionate when their psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fulfilled. Autonomy is our human need to have choices. Relatedness is our need to care about and be cared about. Competence is our need to feel effective at meeting everyday challenges and opportunities.

Five skills to increase autonomy, relatedness and competence are active listening, vision, clarity, quality feedback, and continuing growth. Providing these increases the motivation, productivity, and retention of staff.

Key words: employees, management, business

Résumé

Les pratiques vétérinaires et toutes les organisations éprouvent des difficultés à attirer et à retenir le personnel. En même temps, la recherche démontre de plus en plus que la plupart des pratiques de gestion des employés ne sont pas correctes. En termes simples, nous avons tenté de gérer les employés alors qu'en fait les employés sont tout à fait capables de se gérer eux-mêmes.

Il faut réviser la définition du succès d'affaires afin de pleinement reconnaître le rôle des gens dans une organisation. Les principes de base d'une entreprise sont toujours cruciaux. Néanmoins, toutes les entreprises doivent être saines pour optimiser le succès. Une organisation saine a une meilleure productivité, moins de roulement, un moral élevé et une bonne satisfaction au travail, moins de confusion et un minimum de politique (souvent appelé les ‘dramas’).

La recherche sur le comportement humain et le fonctionnement du cerveau a fait la lumière sur la motivation des employés et sur la santé d'une entreprise. Les employés sont productifs, engagés et passionnés quand on répond à leurs besoins physiologiques d'autonomie, de rattachement et de compétence. L'autonomie est notre besoin humain d'avoir des choix. Le rattachement est notre besoin de se soucier des autres et qu'on s'intéresse à soi. La compétence est notre besoin de sentir qu'on puisse faire face efficacement aux défis et aux opportunités de tous les jours.

Cinq aptitudes permettent d'améliorer l'autonomie, le rattachement et la compétence : l'écoute active, la vision, la clarté, la rétroaction de qualité et la croissance continue. En incitant ces aptitudes, la motivation, la productivité et le maintien du personnel s'améliorent.

Introduction

News stories about employee wages and job opportunities abound. You hear from your clients about hiring difficulties and employee problems. Your practice has many of the same issues.

Modern research in organizational development, psychology, and neuropsychology tells us that our traditional thinking about motivating employees is mostly wrong. The simplest way to illustrate this point is to think about how often we talk about managing employees. Animals, facilities, and equipment should be managed, but people – employees – are fully capable of managing themselves. Research today is clear that to hire and retain motivated, productive, engaged employees, they must be led, coached, encouraged, supported, and redirected – not managed. The important difference between managing and leading, coaching, etc. is shown in Table 1.⁴

In this paper we begin by redefining business success, review the prevailing organizational development thinking on employee motivation, and discuss 5 keys for a farm, veterinary practice, or other business to hire and retain motivated employees.

Redefining Business Success

Before addressing business success, let's think about success for an individual. Success certainly requires us to be smart, meaning skilled in our career and making excellent decisions. To succeed, however, we must also be healthy. An athlete cannot excel if he or she is injured. An owner of a

Table 1. Comparison of management and leadership.

Management	Leadership
Planning	Establishing direction
Budgeting	Aligning people
Organizing	Motivating people
Staffing	Inspiring
Measuring	Mobilizing people to achieve astonishing results
Problem solving	Propelling us into the future
Doing what we know how to do exceptionally well	
Constantly producing reusable, dependable results	

From: Kotter JP. *Accelerate: building strategic agility for a faster-moving world sense of urgency*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2014.

farm or a veterinarian is greatly limited if hindered by poor health. An employee is challenged to succeed or even retain a job if he or she has health issues requiring more than the allowed sick days.

“Smart” and “healthy” have somewhat different meanings for veterinary practices or other business or organizations; however, they are both required for a veterinary practice or other business to succeed today and tomorrow. Lencioni recognizes that the fundamentals of business – decision-making, operations (production), strategy, marketing, finance, etc., are critical.⁵ He refers to these as “smart.” Unfortunately, most businesses, focus almost exclusively on being smart.

In order to optimize success, Lencioni articulates that all businesses, veterinary practices included, must also be healthy.⁵ A healthy organization is one with high productivity, low turnover among great employees, high morale and job satisfaction, minimal confusion, and minimal politics (often referred to as “drama”). Lencioni’s experience is that almost all business leaders/owners recognize the importance of having a healthy business; however, most continue to focus almost exclusively on creating a smart business.

Succeeding as a veterinary practice or a farm in the healthy part of the success definition requires an understanding of human behavior and motivation.

Employee Motivation

Lencioni states: “The single greatest advantage any company can achieve is organizational health. Yet it is ignored by most leaders even though it is simple, free, and available to anyone who wants it.”⁵ Certainly a meaningful vision and a winning strategy are necessary for a successful organization – the veterinary practice. The “healthy” component of success is, however, primarily created in the business culture. What then does research say employees require for the veterinary practice/organization to have a healthy culture?

A healthy veterinary practice, farm, or other business has a workforce with superior productivity and extraordinary job satisfaction with a passion for the business and a desire to thrive and excel. How can that be achieved? Research on

human behavior (psychology) and brain function (neuropsychology) sheds great light on the answer to this question. The answer is surprisingly simple, but challenging to implement. As with many animal research results, the answer forces us to abandon generally accepted ways of thinking.

We now know that the answer to this question is that people are productive, engaged, and passionate when their psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fulfilled. Below, each is described with suggestions to implement with employees.

Fowler describes autonomy as: “Our human need to perceive we have choices. It is our need to feel that what we are doing is of our own volition. It is our perception that we are the source of our own actions.”³ To understand how a lack of autonomy feels, put yourself in the following situation: Your spouse has sent you to the grocery store with a list of several items needed immediately. On the way to the store, you realize you left your cell phone home. Now you are looking at the grocery shelf where the first item is located. There are too many sizes, varieties, brands, etc. You do not know which to get! How do you feel? The usual feelings are frustration, anxiety, tension, etc. You are no longer in control of your task! Your need for autonomy – feeling in control – is no longer being met.

Autonomy is increased when workforce members believe they are in control of their actions, i.e. when they can manage themselves. Autonomy can be increased by a) encouraging ideas and involving employees in decisions, b) giving choices where appropriate, and c) explaining WHY when choices are not available – such as with quality assurance tools including standard operating procedures (SOP). These actions increase understanding and a feeling of control.

Fowler describes relatedness as: “Our need to care about and be cared about. It is our need to feel connected to others without concerns about ulterior motives. It is our need to feel that we are contributing to something greater than ourselves.”³ To understand how a lack of relatedness feels, recall a time when you felt a complete disconnect from a group. For whatever reason you were on the outside looking in. How did you feel? The most common answer is “lonely” or left out leading to sadness, lethargy, and even depression.

Relatedness is about being a part of the group and being a part of something meaningful.

Most business owners and veterinarians have relatedness. The relatedness challenge for owners often is in multiple owner situations, including during business transfer. When there is disagreement over the vision and core values or a lack of collaboration among partners, relatedness can suffer dramatically.

With employees, relatedness is increased when they feel included, when there is a bond with other members of the workforce, and when their work is meaningful to them. Relatedness can be increased by a) improving interpersonal relationships – trust – by listening, being fair, expressing encouragement, providing quality feedback, and treating your employees as equal human beings, b) ensuring everyone understands and is committed to the vision, and c) explaining WHY when explaining decisions and making assignments.

Fowler describes competence as: “Our need to feel effective at meeting everyday challenges and opportunities. It is demonstrating skill over time. It is feeling a sense of growth and flourishing.”³ To understand how a lack of competence feels, think of something that you are definitely not good at. For me, it is anything mechanical. Now think about how you feel when you have to do whatever it is that you are not good at. Typical answers are stupid, tense, incompetent, frustrated.

To understand that competence is more than skill, think about why the opposing team calls timeout before a field goal kicker attempts a game winning field goal? We often describe the goal to get the field goal kicker to “choke.” What does that mean? Obviously the kicker does not have diminished skill in the 2- to 3-minute delay. The goal is for doubt to enter his mind – to lose confidence – decrease his competence.

Competence, then, is skill plus confidence. As with the field goal kicker, skill precedes confidence. To ensure that employees have competence, not just skill, requires coaching well after they have learned the skill. Competence can be increased by a) training that includes high levels of encouragement and feedback, b) providing opportunities to learn and grow, and c) developing a culture of improvement where redirection and negative feedback are given immediately and received with minimal defensiveness and with a desire to continuously improve.

The remaining sections introduce 5 leadership and supervisory practices to enhance autonomy, relatedness, and competence creating increases in motivation, productivity, and retention.

Active Listening

What comes to mind when you hear the word “communication?” For most, the answer is speaking. In reality, when communicating, we typically spent more time listening than speaking.

My second question is: “Are you as focused when listening as when speaking?” For most of us the answer is “no.” We

tend to be less focused because we perceive listening to be a passive activity. Each of us needs to remember that excellent communication requires that we be active listeners. We need to be at least as focused while listening as while speaking.

Active listening allows us to be a better listener and communicator. Rather than just hearing the words, in active listening we are trying to completely understand what is included in and behind those words. In active listening we focus on both the message being sent and the underlying emotions. This means listening intently to the words, noticing the tone in the voice to detect emotions, and observing carefully the body language again for hints of emotions.

Most of the time when we are listening, we are also planning our response. Active listening typically takes 100 percent of our mental capacity, thereby leaving little or no time for considering a response while the other person is speaking.

After the speaker finishes, we then need time to prepare a thoughtful response. This can produce an awkward moment as the other person is typically expecting an immediate response. You may need to explain that now you require time to develop a thoughtful response. I have found few people who are unwilling to give you that time. Most are flattered that you were listening so intently – so actively!

Here are ideas to help you be a better listener and improve your interpersonal communication:

- Be an active listener. Don't let your mind wander or your attention wane while listening to others.
- To the extent possible, refrain from diverting your attention from listening by thinking about how to respond. You may miss key points.
- Develop a habit of pausing for a second or 2 before responding. This pause shows you are listening, reduces the chance you will interrupt before the person speaking has finished, and enables you to focus on listening as you now have time to prepare your response.
- Make certain you have not missed what the speaker is trying to communicate. Often a statement like “tell me more” will provide the opportunity for the speaker to expand on what he or she is saying and feeling.

Vision Contributes to Relatedness

Think about the owners you know of veterinary practices and farms. They are driven to succeed and are passionate about their business. Think of one or more national or local veterinary practice or companies that have employees who are extremely committed and passionate about the company, farm, or organization. The latter is surely a short list. Given that all or nearly all owners are passionate about their business, why do only a small handful of companies – Apple and Southwest Airlines, for example – have a workforce that is passionate about the success of the business?

Experience and research increasingly show that businesses, including veterinary practices and farms, with pas-

passionate employees do much more than communicate what the company does. Businesses with passionate employees articulate and constantly communicate WHY the practice, farm, or organization exists. Recent research deepens the understanding of why vision is so important.

All businesses know WHAT they do - products and services. Most are pretty good at HOW they do it - strategy and tactics. Only a few can truly inspire their employees by clearly articulating WHY they do what they do! When leaders talk about or explain WHAT the business does, employees process what is said in the part of the brain called the neocortex.⁷ The neocortex is responsible for rational and analytical thinking and language. The WHAT and the HOW are understood here; however, the neocortex does not drive behavior.

When owners talk about and explain WHY they do things, their employees process what is said in the limbic part of the brain. This part of the brain is responsible for feelings - trust, passion, loyalty, engagement, commitment. The WHY resonates in this part of the brain. Only when WHY is clearly articulated will employees experience the emotions that lead to commitment to the vision and passion for the success of the business.

It seems pretty compelling that business owners and leaders should articulate WHY the business exists. Why then is it so rare? Again we need to understand how the brain functions. The limbic brain has no capacity for language. Language comes from the neocortex. One result is that we human beings have trouble describing feelings. Try explaining to someone why you love her or him.

Articulating vision - the business› WHY - is difficult because the neocortex has difficulty verbalizing emotions that are in the limbic brain. This is why successful communication of the vision - the WHY - often uses stories, symbols, and images. A quote from Sinek articulates the challenge for the owner/leader: "If the leader of the organization can't clearly articulate WHY the organization exists in terms beyond its products and services (veterinary services for example), then how does he expect employees to know WHY to come to work?"⁷

For the vision, the WHY, to create the passion we seek in our employees, the WHY must have meaning to the employees. This contributes to relatedness. I believe veterinary practices and farm families have always been driven by a vision, a WHY, that has meaning to them. The difference today, with increased size and greater complexity, is that the WHY, the vision, must be articulated and continuously communicated. It also must be meaningful to an increasingly diverse and changing workforce. The Gen X and Millennial generations are much less willing to work at a job that does not have meaning. Vision and relatedness are more important to them compared to previous generations.

Clarity or "Chalking the Field"

What emotion do you think I observe the most when I visit with employees and their supervisors? The answer is

FRUSTRATION. Many employees are very frustrated with their jobs and their supervisors! Many supervisors are frustrated - even exasperated - because their employees are frustrated and less productive than desired.

So, the 64-thousand dollar question is: why is everyone so frustrated? The primary answer is: lack of clarity or as I call it "chalking the field." To avoid this frustration, employees must be able to answer 2 questions:

1. What is expected of me?
2. How am I doing?

To better understand the importance of these two questions, let me share an example. Yesterday, my Minnesota Twins scored 5 runs. My question to you is: Did they win or lose? The answer, of course, is "I don't know" because you did not tell me how many runs their opponent - Tampa Bay - scored.

Now think about when an employee knows his or her performance level but does not know what performance is expected. He or she is in the same predicament you are with my baseball game. He or she only knows half of what is needed to be able to answer the 2 questions: What is expected of me and how am I doing?

I will tell you how many runs Tampa Bay scored on the condition that you now clearly explain to you employees what is expected of them. Tampa Bay scored 7 runs.

Complete clarity or "chalking the field" actually includes more than just telling employees what is expected of them. The following list lays out, in probably too great detail, what I describe as complete clarity:

1. Every detail clearly explained.
2. Explain why the expectation is important and/or needed.
3. Provide opportunities to ask questions and, where appropriate, provide input (engagement).
4. Make a detailed description available to employees (employee manual, job description, policy manual, written SOPs, etc.) so an employee can access and review it without "showing his or her ignorance."

Clarity - "chalking the field" contributes to all 3 of our motivational needs. Autonomy is greater because the clarity replaces uncertainty with control. Success is within the employee's control. Explaining WHY contributes to relatedness, and the enhanced knowledge and understanding enhances competence.

How do you as a leader and a supervisor ensure that your employees can answer the 2 questions - what is expected of me and am I winning? You know that successful veterinary practices and services require excellent systems. Similarly, excellent employee performance and job satisfaction requires a system. We call this a performance management system!

I suggest you start with the following 2 components of a good performance management system:

1. A frequent, perhaps monthly, meeting with each employee where you do 3 things: a) review their

performance over the last month by comparing actual performance to the expectations you and the employee jointly set last month, b) jointly with the employee establish performance expectations for the next month, and c) discuss any issues, ideas, concerns, challenges, problems that either of you has.

2. Provide ongoing feedback and encouragement to the employee.

Performance Feedback

Traditionally we have talked about 2 types of feedback – positive and negative. This is logical as there are 2 outcomes of every behavior (including performance) – meet or exceed expectations and fail to meet expectations, typically referred to as “good performance” and “unacceptable performance.” The appropriate outcome of “good performance” is positive feedback. It does not follow, however, that the appropriate outcome of “unacceptable performance” is always negative feedback that we usually think of as a reprimand. Three not 2 types of feedback are necessary. We begin, though with positive feedback.

Let me begin by asking you to recall how many times you have provided positive feedback in the last 24 hours. When I ask this question in workshops, few respond to the “5 or more” choice. Research by the Gallop Foundation finds that less than 1 employee in 3 received positive feedback from their supervisor in the last week.⁸

I have no doubt that each of us understands the value of positive feedback – compliments, kudos! Why then do we provide so little positive feedback? I believe there are 2 legitimate and solvable reasons:

1. Most veterinarians and farmers were trained to be outstanding technical animal - problem solvers. Since animals have little or no response to positive feedback, your training focused on identifying and solving problems. It is only natural to take a similar approach to workforce productivity.
2. Most adults do not show their true emotional response when provided positive feedback. The apparent neutral or even negative immediate response discourages us from providing additional positive feedback.

We address the second issue first. I indicated above that few participants in my seminars indicate they have provided positive feedback “5 or more” times in the last 24 hours. When asked, most of those few respond that they provided the feedback to children – coaching, teaching Sunday school, etc. Why? I believe it is because children have not yet “learned” to be ashamed of or reticent about responding with their true emotional response.

Research and my experience from coaching is that adults respond just as positively as children to positive

feedback; they just do not show it. Many times managers in discussing their efforts to increase positive feedback have reported that they were not certain that their employees appreciated the positive feedback **until they heard from the employees’ spouses.**

What then is quality positive feedback? Quality positive feedback has 2 attributes:

1. The positive feedback – compliment – refers to something specific that met and exceeded expectations or at least showed improvement.
2. The positive feedback – compliment – motivates the employee to continue to improve his or her performance.

Positive feedback is the appropriate response to good performance or behavior. Unacceptable performance, on the other hand, requires 2 alternative responses because it has 2 causes. The key to improving unacceptable performance is quality feedback and appropriately choosing between the 2 – not 1 – feedback responses and, then, providing quality feedback.

When we experience unacceptable performance or behavior-- whether from our friends, family, co-worker, or employees – a little voice subconsciously or consciously asks “what punishment is appropriate?” To understand that this question is understandable but the wrong, we need to look at human behavior. Answer honestly these 2 questions:

1. When someone else – friend, family member, co-worker, employee – makes a mistake, who or what do we tend to blame?
2. When we ourselves make a mistake, who or what do we tend to blame?

The likely answer to the first question is the other person, and the likely answer to the second question is the situation not ourselves. The latter is often referred to as making excuses. These answers are so at the core of human nature that in the organizational behavior literature this tendency is referred to as The Fundamental Theorem of Attribution.²

Now we can see that when there is unacceptable behavior:

1. The supervisor will likely attribute the performance as under the control of the employee and provide a reprimand or punishment.
2. The employee will likely believe/perceive/argue that the unacceptable performance is out of his or her control and a reprimand will be perceived as unfair.

In order to avoid this perception bias, replace the “what punishment is appropriate?” question with “what is the reason for the unacceptable performance?” I often quote a highly respected dairy farm manager: “When I analyze the cause of my employee’s unacceptable performance, 90% of the time I determine that the cause was something I did.” There are 2 key points in this quote:

1. He was clearly asking the question Why? What is the reason for the unacceptable performance?

2. He was saying – research, my experience and other managers agree – that most unacceptable behavior is caused by factors not in the control of the employee.

Redirection feedback is required when it is determined that the unacceptable performance was caused by the situation not by the employee's lack of motivation, focus, etc. I believe that many managers are aware that negative feedback is not appropriate for this situation. Not knowing what else to use, they often do nothing. The result is little or no performance change.

Redirection feedback should be proactive and focus on success. This is an opportunity to redirect the employee toward good performance. We must further pursue the "What is the reason for the unacceptable performance?" to determine the cause of the unacceptable performance. Possibilities include: a) insufficient training and coaching has been provided, b) the expectations were not clear ("chalking the field") and/or attainable, and c) unusual or unexpected circumstances prevented meeting the expectations.

As with any problem, understanding the root cause allows us to develop a plan to correct the problem, in this case unacceptable performance (or behavior). You now have the opportunity to be proactive to enable change in yourself and/or the employee to increase employee and thus veterinary, farm, or business performance.

Some of the time as you carefully determine the cause of the unacceptable performance, you will determine that the employee's motivation, energy, focus, concentration is the cause of the poor performance. In other words, the employee had everything required to meet the expectations – good performance was under his or her control.

In this situation, especially when you have already provided redirection feedback, negative feedback is warranted. Even here, though, neither you nor the employee should view negative feedback as a punishment. Rather it should be given as a choice:

- Make the change necessary for good performance.
- Incur the specified consequence.

Essentially all managers dread dealing with unacceptable performance. You must, however, be proactive in determining the cause. You can then work to institute changes that will lead to employee success. Based on your analysis of the reason for the failure to perform, you can redirect and/or provide a consequence for failure to change.

Individuals and Teams Development

Veterinary practices, agriculture, business, and most everything else is changing at unprecedented rates. These changes have major implications for everything we do. Consequently, our preparation for the future must also change dramatically. Ensuring that all members of the workforce continue to grow and succeed is crucial to the business and to employee competence. In hiring and in developing

employees, the leader must build on strengths. Research is increasingly supporting the value of building on strengths rather than trying to "fix" weaknesses.^{1,6} A workforce with diverse skills, experiences, and educational backgrounds is also advantageous.

In business terms, the development opportunity is to transform the veterinary practice, farm, etc., into a learning organization. Personal growth and development contributes to all 3 of our motivational needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The following are ideas for progressing down the path to a learning organization:

- Development must start with the owners and leaders. Continuing growth by the leader is necessary to keep the veterinary practice, farm, or other organization on the cutting edge and to serve as a role model for the workforce.
- A major step toward a learning organization is for leaders to implement a practice, business or farm policy that every member of the workforce has a training/improvement plan. The plan should include learning goals and actions to a) increase competence in current responsibilities and b) prepare for expected new or expanded responsibilities. Today, progressive performance improvement systems include an annual meeting – sometimes called a "stay" meeting – with discussion of opportunities for the coming year and career advancement opportunities with the business. This meeting is the ideal time to review and revise the professional improvement plan and update the employee's job description.
- Too often we think learning is only in-house training and off-site programs. Those are important, but learning can be expanded every day. There are great opportunities to learn as we proceed in our job and in our life. I have often referred to these as the classroom of life. Three examples are:
 1. Be observant. Continuously focusing on and analyzing what is happening around us enables us to see opportunities for improvement and proactively respond to current or potential problems.
 2. Reflection. We are all so busy we have little time to think and reflect. Learning requires that we take time to think and reflect.
 3. After action reviews. Take the time after an event to individually or as a team go back and analyze what worked and could be improved, and make plans for the task or event to continuously improve.

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¹Scours vaccine study. May 2007. Resear zons Inc., St. Louis, Mo. Interviews were conducted between April 30 and May 14, 2007.

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