

# Practical leadership for building a culture of commitment

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## Abstract

Committed employees tend to put in the extra effort needed to perform at a high level, and they also stay longer with organizations that value and support them. Leaders can build and influence the organizational conditions that foster commitment. This session is focused on practical methods and leadership behaviors that veterinarians can use to build organizational commitment within their own practices, and to share with clients who face similar leadership challenges. Participants will learn practical applications such as setting clear expectations, communicating results, providing performance feedback, and creating opportunities for participation in decision-making.

**Key words:** organizational commitment, leadership, human resource management, business management

## Résumé

Des employés dévoués vont faire un effort supplémentaire pour offrir une performance de haut niveau et ils vont aussi rester plus longtemps dans une organisation qui les valorise et les supporte. Les dirigeants peuvent bâtir et influencer les conditions de l'organisation qui favorisent l'engagement. Cette session met l'accent sur des méthodes pratiques et des comportements d'encadrement que les vétérinaires peuvent utiliser pour favoriser l'engagement organisationnelle dans leurs propres pratiques et pour partager avec les clients qui font face aux mêmes défis de direction. Les participants vont apprendre des applications pratiques comme la définition d'attentes claires, la communication des résultats, la rétroaction sur la performance et la création d'opportunités de participation à la prise de décision.

## Introduction

When a skilled, experienced employee walks out the door to pursue employment somewhere else, perhaps with a competitor, it has a devastating effect on the business. That employee takes with her the capability to please customers through the effective delivery of service and the associated revenue streams. She also takes her knowledge of the local industry and of all the prospective new clients who might have been in the pipeline. She leaves behind, like infectious

agents, whatever problems or office dysfunctions pushed her toward the door in the first place, and she also leaves behind a group of professionals and support staff who must pick up the pieces of broken relationships. Those who remain must work extra hours to serve the customers of the one who left, and begin the arduous process of finding a replacement. Meanwhile, other employees are left wondering, "What went wrong and should I also consider a new career path?". Clearly, the cost of unwanted employee turnover in a veterinary practice is high, both in quantifiable terms and those that cannot be directly measured.

In contrast, committed employees drive business results. They are the ones who see their organization as a force for good in the world and their work as a means to live out their ideals and values. The committed ones will take the extra steps to see that the customer understands and benefits from new management knowledge, they put in the extra hours during the busy times, and take that extra few minutes to help out a teammate. It's their passion that customers appreciate and prospects are drawn to. Committed employees are the lifeblood and building blocks of organizations that thrive and build a legacy of success. Commitment is not an accident. The attitudes and acts of leadership create conditions that either foster employee organizational commitment or slowly smother the light of passion.

## Organizational Commitment

Management scientists have studied a psychological construct known as organizational commitment since the 1970s. Organizational commitment describes "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization."<sup>4</sup> Early researchers looked at commitment as a one-dimensional construct, but over time a more sophisticated concept emerged as researchers came to understand that employees experience organizational commitment for a variety of reasons. Current views of organizational commitment define it with 3 more specific types of commitment: affective, normative, and continuance. Affective commitment refers to an emotional attachment and feeling of involvement with the organization, normative commitment implies a feeling of obligation to the organization, and continuance commitment indicates that it's simply too much of a hassle or too costly to leave and go work elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, affective commitment is the most desirable from an organizational leadership perspective.

Having employees with organizational commitment is nice, of course, but not very relevant, in itself, from a business performance perspective. Like any business, a veterinary practice needs skilled employees who can deliver effective customer service because serving customers drives revenue to the business. Just having skilled employees is not enough, each individual must have the internal motivation needed to put forth the discretionary effort required to deliver good or excellent service. Finally, since few professionals can succeed in isolation, these employees must also communicate and coordinate with a team of other professionals and support staff to deliver consistently strong business results.

Employee organizational commitment is positively associated with outcomes such as higher employee performance and lower turnover.<sup>1</sup> Committed employees deliver a stronger effort and business results that uncommitted employees simply will not bother to achieve. So the question becomes, what management and leadership practices lead to organizational commitment? Decades of research point toward a group of employee experiences that organizational leaders can directly influence: clear communications about expectations and performance, consistent policies and fair treatment, and participation in decision making.

### **Clear Expectations and Feedback**

Ambiguity destroys employee commitment. People who want to contribute in a strong way find themselves uncertain about how to proceed and become frustrated at their own ineffectiveness. Team members, seeking better cooperation, hesitate to ask because they lack knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of others. High performers witness weak performers contributing the minimum, and yet enjoying the same rewards for their inadequate work.

Leaders have the opportunity to banish ambiguity and create a work environment with clear expectations and performance feedback. This starts with functional tools such as job descriptions and organization charts that clarify everyone's roles and responsibilities, especially the responsibilities of owners and senior leaders. It continues with onboarding, a program of planned orientation and training to help new employees get started and experience a shorter period of disorientation and low performance.

Training helps new employees become productive and begin making real contributions that benefit customers and team members. All of these factors contribute to a sense of purpose and belonging for new employees. It's not just new employee training that develops organizational commitment, continuing training can also contribute. Employees view training as a form of investment by the business in them. Continuing training helps employees develop advanced knowledge and skills so that they can add even more value for the organization.

Job descriptions, organizational clarity, and training all set the stage and equip an employee for performance,

and performance feedback provides direction and leadership toward ongoing success. Performance feedback is the act of providing information to employees about their own performance, positive reinforcement is used to encourage effective behaviors, and negative reinforcement is used to redirect ineffective behaviors. Most of us have experienced a workplace where little or no feedback was ever provided. Such an environment is de-motivating for employees because they are never sure where they stand and unable to know clearly how to improve. The worst part about an absence of feedback is that the absence itself sends a message: no one cares. You can perform poorly or you can perform at a high level, and the performance feedback you receive will remain the same: nothing.

Some leaders choose to use only 1 type of feedback: negative reinforcement. Employees perform well day after day and no words of encouragement or appreciation are heard, but at some point a mistake is made or performance expectation not met, and the leader swiftly criticizes the performer. Many employees are crushed or worn down over time by such a negative environment, but perversely a few will thrive in it. Negative feedback is better than the absence of feedback because it sends a message that someone at least cares enough to speak up and correct poor or ineffective behaviors.

The most effective leaders use positive feedback to encourage effective behaviors and negative feedback to redirect ineffective behaviors. Average and high performers will get a significant share of the leader's attention and encouragement because they are driving the success of the business. Poor performers will receive attention to redirect ineffective behaviors and establish new patterns that will deliver better results. Employees, experiencing the genuine care and interest of their leader, will tend to experience a growing commitment to succeeding and helping the organization to thrive.

### **Consistent Policies and Fair Treatment**

Veterinary practices, like other small businesses, tend to grow over time from very small, informal operations to larger, more complex teams. Small groups of 2 to 4 team members can easily communicate and often interact repeatedly throughout the workday. As the organization grows from only a few people to a much larger group of perhaps 10 or more employees, group dynamics change dramatically. Instead of a single leader, there may be more than 1 business partner, each with quite different leadership philosophies or objectives. While the small team interacted with each other frequently and on a daily basis, the larger organization may have multiple teams and individuals who rarely interact. All of these organizational growth changes create an environment rife with the potential for poor communication, inconsistent human resource policies, and inequitable treatment of employees.

Growing veterinary practices are well advised to create tools, such as an employee policy manual or handbook, to

clarify and communicate leadership's expectations. A manual can be adapted from a template since many human resource issues are common among small businesses, but it should be carefully customized. No 2 businesses are alike, and the business philosophy and objectives of the partners need to be captured in the manual. It is an excellent practice to use a human resource consultant to assist with policy manual development. An experienced consultant will help partners to think through policies and anticipate future questions and management concerns. Finally, a competent labor attorney should review the manual to ensure compliance with state and federal regulations.

Of course, developing the manual alone will not ensure the fair application of policy. Veterinary practices should designate a partner or manager to have primary responsibility and authority for how human resource practices are applied. That person should strive to apply policies with consistency and appropriate consideration for the just treatment of employees. It is also a good practice to have a process for employees to appeal any decision, and a small committee assigned to hear and resolve any complaints.

### Participation

Researchers have demonstrated that employees who have an opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them will have stronger organizational commitment.<sup>3</sup> The higher commitment levels are likely driven by the employees appreciating that their ideas are respected and greater engagement with the decisions that are made.

Veterinary business leaders can harness this effect by encouraging greater participation from employees at all levels. Employee participation doesn't require managing the business as a democracy where everyone has the same vote, but it does mean recognizing the intelligent contributions that team members can make, especially about business processes that they carry out every day. For example, your office bookkeeper might have excellent ideas about how billing and accounts receivable could be improved.

Business leaders must be intentional about encouraging participation by employees. Steps such as establishing a formal method to suggest ideas for improvement definitely help. Another way is to include employees in specific process improvement teams that are charged with identifying, devel-

oping, and implementing process improvements. Finally, it is critical for leaders to create a culture that is safe for new ideas. An employee who shares an innovative idea only to have it crushed and dismissed by a leader will be very reluctant to share another idea in the future.

### Conclusion

High-performing employees have never been more valuable than they are today. It is critical for veterinary business leaders to develop a workplace culture that fosters employee organizational commitment, because committed employees deliver strong results and are less likely to leave. Clarifying and communicating expectations, applying fair and consistent human resource policies, and encouraging employee participation in decision making are 3 proven methods to increase employee organizational commitment.

### Qualifications

Dr. Richard Stup earned his PhD degree from the Pennsylvania State University in Workforce Education and Development in 2006. He has taught and conducted research in agricultural human resource management, previously at Penn State University and currently at Cornell University. His research has been published in peer-reviewed journals and in the popular press. In addition to his academic pursuits, Dr. Stup spent 10 years in private industry fulfilling supervisor, manager, and senior leader positions that has given him tremendous practical leadership experience. He consults widely with farms and agribusiness firms to develop leadership and enhance organizational performance.

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