

Surviving workplace dynamics: Whingers, whiners and gossips

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Introduction

During the presentation at the conference I will focus on the “Human Factor” of Workplace Culture and Dynamics. For future reference I offer the following case study as an example of what is so necessary to manage and support the workplace culture by structure and systems.

A facet of workplace dynamics that has fascinated us for years is the role “power” and dynamics play in interpersonal interactions. The root cause of a lot of workplace problems is the over use of power, whether from those in traditional positions of power or from those who possess power because of knowledge, experience or popularity.

Some of the questions we explore in this session will be:

- In what ways do you have power?
- Who has the most power in your workplace?
- How do they exercise this power?
- How do those with less power deal with the power imbalance?
- What can you do to ensure that you do not abuse your power?
- What can you do to ensure those with the most power do not abuse their power?

This paper is a real case study of how a veterinary practice (for the presentation called “New Zealand Veterinary Hospital”) that introduced employee participation techniques to move the practice forward and support staff to survive and drive the Workplace Dynamics and the impact these measures had on the employees and the culture of the practice. It is an example of how employers can empower their staff and how employees react or respond to such techniques.

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital introduced a Human Resources Management System utilising employee participation and techniques to facilitate its implementation and support the workplace culture and dynamics.

The aim

The relevance of this issue to New Zealand Veterinary Hospital was to measure the levels of staff empowerment, morale, advantages on the practice culture as a result of introducing employee participation techniques and strategies.

The aim of this case study is to discuss the various issues that faced New Zealand Veterinary Hospital in introducing a Human Resources Management System utilising employee participation techniques and the impact on the practice culture.

This case study will assist in the design and implementation of the Human Resources Management System into other veterinary practices with an understanding of how to involve and empower staff which impacts productivity and practice culture.

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital management objectives

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital management had set objectives in introducing an employee participation program.

The focus on developing the practice was to introduce **change** effectively and efficiently. The true key to successful change is employee involvement, understanding and commitment.

A desire to achieve Best Practice excellence by integrating individuals to accomplish the practice goals and objectives was paramount.

The change program was developed for the following reasons:

- Increase in competition.
- Decrease in profitability.
- Stagnant employee performance and low morale.
- Business plan focus to expand practice.

Based on these reasons the following objectives were set by New Zealand Veterinary Hospital Management:

- To increase productivity.
- To increase responsibilities to clients via competitive positioning.
- To increase employee morale and potential via involvement and participation.
- To increase profitability by 10%.
- To comply with relevant legislation.
- To introduce new ideas, concepts and technology with ease.
- To develop a practice culture that aligns with the practice and individuals' goals.

Analysing these objectives New Zealand Veterinary Hospital had a clear vision to align staff to practice objectives and the Human Resources Management system.

In essence the objectives set by New Zealand Veterinary Hospital were clearly defined with an understanding of employee participation and empowerment to gain competitive positioning, productivity, profitability and implementation of ideas in alignment with the importance of practice culture.

Employee participation at New Zealand Veterinary Hospital

With the desire to introduce a Human Resources Management system to enhance a positive practice culture, the New Zealand Veterinary Hospital management realised an organisational development program would be able to highlight specific strategies to facilitate employee participation and empowerment.

Such methods were seen by management as ways to decrease resistance to change by staff and to encourage respect and understanding as a mechanism to improved communications and negotiations in workplace reform issues as deemed law by industrial relations legislative.

Participatory methods undertaken were:

Individual and interpersonal development

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital began with a focus on the **individuals**. This involved reviewing level of congruence and morale within the practice and analysing communication and behaviour patterns and level of

stress within New Zealand Veterinary Hospital.

- **Goal setting** for the practice and the staff was undertaken to ensure the practice and its individuals had a congruent match of achievement, motivation, and direction in alignment with the practice goals and vision. Incongruence in the understanding of the practice direction and goals existed, and this was corrected accordingly.
- **Career planning** was taken into account for the benefit of the individuals. Many staff at New Zealand Veterinary Hospital felt stale in their current positions and thus a Career and Remuneration system was developed and initiated to embrace and encompass qualifications, in house training methodologies and external seminars and conferences.
- **Stress management** techniques were put into place to manage stress, given the nature of the work in a vet practice. These included personal seminars aimed at issues such as conflict resolution, relaxation, and time management.

As an employee involvement technique the veterinary nursing and reception staff organised the seminars to attend and were proactively involved in developing the goals and objectives for the practice via the New Zealand Veterinary Hospital working committees as detailed in the next section of the case study.

Group/team development

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital management focused heavily on the “*team*”. This involved reviewing the dynamics of the working team in order to introduce the Human Resources Management system and maximise productivity.

In order to meet the challenge of such change, New Zealand Veterinary Hospital planned the system via working committees for specified areas of the practice, concurrently running team building events and practice activities to further consolidate the individual and interpersonal development and involve the employees at operational level.

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital working committees

The working parties focused on HOW to implement the Human Resources Management systems and processes and HOW all parties could benefit, whilst increasing workplace performance as required by management.

This involved a focus on communication, training and upward problem solving. This was designed to tap into employee knowledge and opinion to encourage cooperative relations at work and to legitimise **change**.

Area work groups

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital management, as part of the employee participation focus, gave staff considerable autonomy in work organisation methods.

This meant the nursing and reception teams were given the responsibility to schedule rosters within legislative and budgetary requirements, allocate and delegate the operational and daily tasks and design operational policy and procedures, to run the various practice areas.

These included:

- Customer service/reception.
- Surgical nursing/theatre.
- Medical nursing/kennels.
- Stock Control/administration.

This task participation method is similar to “*quality circles*” as seen in the corporate arena. Each of the staff met regularly to identify how to streamline areas, make recommendations to New Zealand Veterinary Hospital management and document the procedures and policies agreed on via joint consultation. Such role clarification proved to be an effective method of employee empowerment.

Team building focus

In line with individual and personal development the alignment of the practice team to the practice objectives, vision and culture was deemed vital by New Zealand Veterinary Hospital. Team development begins with an understanding of group dynamics, group norms and how the group outputs productivity.

Cohesion of a team results in loyalty, security, high esteem, and productivity. Problem solving and brainstorming meetings were held over various practice meetings to alleviate misunderstandings and promote team based organisation via feedback, role clarification and redefining practice goals and objectives.

The effect on employee empowerment on New Zealand Veterinary Hospital

To what extent did these measures empower the New Zealand Veterinary Hospital staff?

New Zealand Veterinary Hospital believed that such employee involvement would lift motivation and thus increase productivity and workplace reform, as stated in the objectives.

In order for New Zealand Veterinary Hospital to meet its challenges and objectives it needed to focus on quality service and productivity and were prepared to develop programs to facilitate employee growth both personally and professionally.

In essence New Zealand Veterinary Hospital appeared to adapt a “*Responsible Autonomy*” approach which gives staff responsibility, status, and encouragement plus an increase in autonomous decision making.

To measure these measures, and the impact on employee empowerment the practice undertook a survey to ascertain the results.

Structured interviews were constructed using a questionnaire for the New Zealand Veterinary Hospital staff to indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement with each measure. Each statement was graded 1 to 5 in line with responses of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5).

Each interview took 30 minutes, allowing each employee to express their opinions and a sample of the questions is attached in Appendix 1.

The results were analysed and reported the following results:

- All staff believed the Human Resources Management system offered a greater understanding of practice direction, goals and objectives.
- All staff believed Human Resources Management systems offered them a clearer understanding of their job.
- All staff agreed or strongly agreed that management communicated well and joint consultation was very effective.
- 90% staff agreed or strongly agreed that Human Resources Management system impacted morale and the culture positively.
- 70% strongly agreed and 30% agreed that a more efficient quality service is now being offered.
- 100% agreed that the methods enhanced motivation.

A striking finding is the salient findings of this survey that the individuals are united in their agreement that the joint consultation and participating approach to introducing the Human Resources Management system was effective.

As the New Zealand Veterinary Hospital suspected, employee productivity was not at a maximum prior to commencing this project – a concept many practitioners will appreciate. This case study confirms employee involvement during the process or workplace reform offered clear advantages - implementation and clear communication strategies with employee participation and involvement were key success factors.

Results and advantages for New Zealand Veterinary Hospital

The advantages to New Zealand Veterinary Hospital, as well as many other veterinary practices across Australia, NZ and Asia, by putting such employee involvement strategies in place have been numerous and include:

- Improved education and skills throughout practice via training and Human Resources Management development.
- Clarification roles within each practice area resulting in more effective and efficient work flow and less conflict.
- Efficient systems in place to introduce new ideas and technology into the workplace.
- Procedures to deal with all staff relation issues have seen compliance with Industrial Relations legislation, such as Occupational Health & Safety (NZ - OSH).
- Increase in effective communication resulting in more active employee involvement.
- Practice objectives understood and adhered to resulting in an increase of practice income by 10%.
- Increase in staff commitment to best practice issues resulting in quality service, client satisfaction and client retention.
- Retaining valuable staff.
- Reduction in sick days, hence increase in productivity.
- Greater sense of “*belonging*” to practice by staff and “*ownership of ideas*” resulting in effective time management and decrease in frustration when implementing new concepts.
- Respect by staff of challenges of small business management and ownership.

Appendix 1. Personal interview questionnaire

Employee No.: _____ (coded for confidentiality)

Time in employ at New Zealand Veterinary Hospital: _____

Age: _____ Gender: _____

1. What is your career objective with New Zealand Veterinary Hospital?

2. Management communicated well with me during the introduction of the HRM system:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

3. Management communicated well with all the employees during the introduction of the HRM system:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

4. Management involved me in the development of the HRM by asking me my opinion:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

5. I get a feeling of job security with the HRM system as it highlights career opportunities:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

6. I believe the HRM system will support me to develop professionally and personally:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. I get a feeling of motivation and job satisfaction as a result of the introduction of the HRM system as above:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

8. The HRM system gives me a clear understanding of the business objectives and direction:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

9. The HRM system gives me guidelines and expectations of my work:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

10. I believe the New Zealand Veterinary Hospital morale has been boosted as a result of the HRM system:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

11. Before the introduction of the HRM system morale used to fluctuate:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

12. We are able to offer a more competitive service as a result of the HRM structure:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

13. I believe the quality standards have improved as a result of the HRM system:

strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

14. Other relevant comments

