VCI Seminars at Sea – August 21, 2014

Nanette Walker Smith, MEd, RVT, CVT, LVT

n_w_smith_24@outlook.com

3 BENEFITING THE TOTAL WORKPLACE: CREATING A TEAM OF STAKEHOLDERS INSTEAD OF A TEAM OF PAYCHECK RECEIVERS

A leader should also inspire by bringing new possibilities to the team. NOT forcing them on the team, but allowing the team to provide input from respective sections. New procedures, equipment, or software for example can cause great stresses on a section of the team. Suddenly dropping those in play without knowing where that portion of the team is can be disastrous from within, causing collapse of the pyramid either in part or a slow demise. Even our illustrious team leader for this Seminar at Sea, Dr. Tom Catanzaro (2014) states, "I get many of the best 'turnaround' ideas from the staff members; I use my 2000+ practice experiences to translate that into pro-active programs. It's not what you know. It's the questions you ask that help you become a more effective and inspiring leader."

As we 'go up' the pyramid the visual impact of the peak appearing to supersede everything below it is evident. However, as we've already discussed, the rest of the pyramid is just as important. The amount of job tasks and importance of those job tasks do not decrease because the pinnacle is smaller. Job tasks are merely redefined for each level both in accordance with the expertise needed for that level, but also for the number of people available who can do those tasks at each level. The pinnacle still needs to be accountable for all, and yes, to some degree able to perform all tasks, or at least have an understanding of those tasks. By maintaining this knowledge, each level is able to understand at least a bit of a standard when mentorship or input is requested from a level below.

Does this mean that you 'break the ice' by stepping in and doing the task? No. You are treading in that persons' domain. Instead, communicate. Bring that person to you by engaging him/her in a conversation about the task, a new product being used, a new protocol, etc. How is it working for you? If you could improve it, what would you do? This person's input and opinion or concern counts. Listen to it. You never know when you might find the feature or concern that everyone else overlooked, but this person caught it for whatever reason. Each person that takes his/her job to heart has a tendency to notice what seem to be small things to others, but may in fact have huge effects on others. An example might be a small hole in a screen that allows spiders or pests in to the run area and a sudden rise in spider bites or bug bites, and hot spot reactions in kennel run animals. The savvy pinnacle utilizes the communication to find out 'how's it going' but also to find out the likelihood his/her staff might be open to a potential upcoming change before making a final decision and dropping it in the staff's laps. Promotional gimmicks, new equipment, changes in clinic hours, etc. are all things that can directly affect team morale and are often not items the staff has ever even been asked about. They are helpless and are suddenly placed in the autocratic or custodial position (Catanzaro, 2013) of doing what they are told.

A true stakeholder feels like s/he has a piece of the pie and that piece of the pie is important to overall health and wellbeing of the whole pie. Attention to what is occurring within the practice at that person's level, with the other levels, and a different viewpoint of the consumers comes with the stakeholder's territory. It's similar to owning stock in a company. Stockholders (similar in name too ☺) have a vested interest in what 'their' company is doing, usually to make money, but often also in what that company is doing for the community, economy, global good, etc. Motivation is felt from within the stakeholder as s/he is communicated with by managers and those above – 'your opinion, concerns, thoughts, matter to the health and welfare of this company.' Motivation requires optimism to be present (Catanzaro, 2014). Optimism is hardly present when a team member doesn't feel appreciated. Motivation takes time and perseverance to see results as well an understanding that not everything will always result in change, but should be acknowledged and addressed.

Creating this team of stakeholders may take some time. It's a culture to be nurtured and tilled. "Creating a workplace culture that breeds high morale and engagement doesn't happen by accident. It requires leadership – wise, empathetic, discerning, thoughtful, strategic, and caring leadership. And it's a leadership you can't fake. It has to flow from the ethos of who you are as a person (Conley, 2014)." What Conley means is, you can't just want it; you have to talk the talk, walk the walk, and live it. *Catch people doing something right* is the title of his article and it's a two way street! Employees have every right to catch the boss in the same 'right!' This is one of the hardest abilities for some pinnacle people because it can take longer, it may not be the straightest path, but it can be guided by a great leader with clear W's (What, Why, Who, How, and When) with points for the team to give input and their levels to address concerns, timelines, and best methods to make something happen for their section (Catanzaro, 2014). This gives them input – and again creates stakeholders because they've been given a chance to have a decisional chance at the whole practice – and you've listened to it, reasoned it, and answered why if something was not taken into account so there is a response for everything. No stone left unturned. Some might say this is transparency; however, it is really showing flexibility upon the part of the upper levels being able to weigh pros and cons and short and long term effects on the business; knowledge that the majority of the employees may not have at their fingertips.

Finally, communication for our stakeholders needs to not be confused with 'talking at' the employees. Too often meeting after meeting is held in the assumption this is how we should communicate. Evaluate what that meeting is really doing:
- Who is doing all the talking?
- Is there a topic of discussion or investigation and open brainstorming to work toward a solution or new design implementation?
- Is there active continual education presented at staff meetings? (For example: short 10-15 minute excerpts that allow individuals or small teams to communicate what has been learned recently to the entire staff to really show knowledge and benefit to the whole team, engagement, excitement?)
- Who responds? Does anyone give any input?
- Is anything being learned and if so, what is the retention rate – how often does something have to be repeated? (Hint: If it has to be repeated a lot…. The current format is probably not being effective)

It's time to take a good look AND listen to your team. How many of them get to evaluate you? Your listening skills, attention to detail, etc. are all on the line for them to give input on. And you should respond! None of us are perfect even though we may have reached our self-actualization and transcended at some point, we come down the other side to re-assess, learn, and grow again. It's like climbing along the ridgeline of the Continental Divide or any other mountain ridgeline. Ups and downs, and hopefully never a fully all the way down.

©2008 NWalkerSmith

Stakeholders should also have the opportunity to evaluate each other. These are peer evaluations. There are a few rules you need to put into play to make evaluations and future planning a positive experience or at least something that everyone can gain a wealth of insight from. There are those who downplay the importance of evaluations, but I'm here to tell you that they are essential and EVERY level. Feedback and communication are paramount to hearing your employees, having them hear each other, and having them realize the impact each of them has on each other AND YOU and vice versa. The entire topic of evaluations and assessments could cover an entire day of lectures so I'll give you a couple of take home points now to think about. The most important rule of an evaluation and assessment is there should be NO "yes/no" answers. The second most important rule is that when doing an evaluation on someone else, a negative input (destructive criticism) cannot be given unless it is preceded and followed immediately by a positive (constructive criticism) one. This requires the evaluator to minimize dwelling on pointed, sometimes very specific single items and overlook other qualities the person has because the evaluator is so hung up on 'nailing' the person for a single point that really irritated the evaluator (for example).

After that, employing a number system to get you started can be helpful in peer interviews, although people tend not to be truthful and rank people higher than they truly feel unless they want them to be rated low. Employing a single sentence descriptive per item/point like the military uses which includes descriptive adjectives and the duty or circumstance is another method that minimizes long tirades. The manager or supervisor can tally, compile, summarize, or do a bare minimum change in compilations to give the person being evaluated the peer responses. The responses should reviewed and discussed at least briefly. Some will be easily identifiable no matter what (Suzy said that about me) and rather than making it a she said/he said; discuss how that makes the person feel? If s/he dismisses it, there may be an underlying reason worth delving into deeper in a different manner, but you just got your 'heads' up' that you likely wouldn't have until an explosion took place in the clinic somewhere one day down the road and catches way too many people off guard.

Full scale evaluations that include peers should be done annually – merely because they take a lot of time and you want people to really concentrate on supplying good information. Be sure to ask those who have input on the person outside of the tight little team. You may get some really good feedback on a person from outside the team if the team has a blackballing system going that you aren't aware of. You'd be surprised at how significantly that sticks out and how refreshing it is to have a completely different point of view. It can provide you with a different viewpoint on how this person's career might need to change to survive in your workplace rather than having to type up termination papers.

Sometimes it can allow a very positive outlook and open discussion to occur if the person was previously expecting doom and gloom because s/he knew, even if you didn't, that everyone else was going to rant poorly. It's a wonderful thing to see someone's face light up with good comments where none were expected.

Self-evaluations should be done quarterly. These are short 1-2 page short answer questions that help individuals and you stay on top of short term progresses and the baby steps to long term progress to keep those in check and make sure progress IS in fact being made. These help avoid the annual (or forgetful biannual) 'well I haven't done anything remarkable in the last year or two' from happening. Likewise it keeps the communication lines open so you HAVE talked about progression and future endeavors with the employee so the 'I don't know where I see myself in 2-5 years' is minimal. Again the communication provides the opportunity to get to know the employee. The manager or supervisor then takes these results and sends them up the pyramid to HR and they should be summarized or corroborated to the pinnacle. The attentive pinnacle takes note and subtly follows through on communication with each individual. The manager and upper levels should take this time to reward the individual – not necessarily monetarily, but sincerely and thankfully for specifics that are then recorded on the evaluation as a sort of recorded timeline that can be referred back to. Ignoring this crucial input from your management/supervisory team is dismissing a critical communication tool that your management team is expecting you to be clued in to.

Another twist on evaluations that can drive home the stakeholder is to ask the stakeholder for that one thing (or more) that s/he would change if there were all the appropriate resources to do so. This could be a personal mission, something that would change a constant problem that would help the entire team do their job better, etc. (Hamel, 2011 & Catanzaro, 2014). This question and those on the self-evaluation should be given and a few days to review, reflect, and answer before they are discussed with management. Information of this time can be life changing for the practice! The next big practice change could bud out of this. If an idea or concept arises – take the opportunity to bring it to light to the entire staff at a team meeting and brainstorm! Remember – brainstorming means no 'NO' and ideas only – no one gets shot down. Thus, the person whose idea it was doesn't get publicly trashed (whether you announce his/her name or not). A stakeholder created and supported!

REFERENCES

Catanzaro, T. E. (2014). Importance of Interpersonal Skills. Retrieved from VCI Monographs on Veterinary Information Network™ June 15, 2014.
Catanzaro, T. E. (2014). VCI Newsletter, May 1, 2014.
Hamel, G. (2011). *First, Let's Fire All The Managers* in Harvard Business Review. Retrieved December 18, 2011 from http://hbr.org/2011/12/first-lets-fire-all-the-managers/ar/