

Team Building with a Difference!

by Diane Whatling

IN THE BLACK Essay Competition in association with Boehringer Ingelheim



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The inaugural winner of the **In The Black** essay competition is Diane Whatling, Practice Manager of the Companion Animal Health Centre at the University of Adelaide's Roseworthy Campus. Her essay was judged the best by a panel comprising John Heath, National Sales & Marketing Manager, Boehringer Ingelheim; Mark Amott, Business Manager, Southern Animal Referral Centre and AVBA Director and; Susan Halloran, Editor, In The Black. Diane's prize is valued at \$1,000.00.

Mark Amott commented, "Diane's essay provides a practical and real-life account of how she made, executed and reviewed a plan for team building with a difference. She discusses the actual plan along with some of the challenges and trade-offs of organising such an event."

I have been involved in the veterinary industry for 34 years and still believe that team players are the most important asset in veterinary business. Maintaining a dynamic team approach to case load, going that extra step and involving others needs a constant driving commitment from someone within a practice. Encouraging a hunger for continuing education, self-improvement, enthusiasm and general workplace satisfaction is a starting point in supporting a team ethos.

In reality, a team-based approach peaks and troughs to a certain degree, depending on a particular moment in time and circumstances. It is necessary to boost enthusiasm for a team-based work ethic, so the following is something that I instigated in small animal practice which proved to be successful.

Consider this idea to improve team-based work culture, achieve up-skilling and develop an action plan for the next 12 months.



IN THE BLACK
SPRING 2011



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On an annual basis two practice co-ordinators and I worked up a mini-conference – off-site and for one full weekend (Friday night until Sunday afternoon). The two practice co-ordinators assisted in obtaining accommodation, speakers and entertainment for Saturday evening. Staff were paid to attend or took the opportunity to take time off in lieu. Other stakeholders, such as wholesalers, pharmaceutical representatives and even the part-time bookkeeper were encouraged to attend.

Annual conferences were held in different venues; housing about 25 people, providing catering and detailing some point of difference in order to organise entertainment for Saturday night.

The objective of the mini-conference was to establish a list of what the business required for the next 12 months to improve systems, processes and growth. It also identified the needs of individuals in relation to training and development, product knowledge, systems, protocols and changes in the workplace.

In order to obtain this information a questionnaire was sent to each individual staff member focusing on their perceived individual and practice needs for the next 12 months. These were then collated and a tentative program organised. Interestingly many of the surveys returned led to common streams. One year the theme was emergency medicine, client communication and wellness programs. Another year we had physically extended the practice building to offer a 'One Stop Veterinary Facility' (*increasing professional services, boarding, grooming and extended merchandising*). This required major planning, changes in business structure and staff numbers. Speakers were identified from within the industry or outside depending on the topic. Some were paid speakers, other services were provided gratis.

A formal program and travel/accommodation instructions were given to all staff members prior to the event. The practice was closed for the entire weekend; with two months notice provided to staff and clients. Clients recognised it as a positive inconvenience and staff recognised the benefits both at an individual level and for the business.

On Saturday night the nurse co-ordinators and I provided entertainment ranging from a quiz night to a Christmas in July theme with games and Father Christmas! Speakers, wholesalers and staff were encouraged to mingle during the social event.

The seminar ran in a similar format to a conference with meals and regular time-out breaks. Team members were encouraged to establish action plans from ideas and suggestions discussed throughout the weekend. The last session of the weekend was dedicated to developing an action plan for the following 12 months; identifying areas of change, who was going to drive it, costing, resources required and time frames.

Vets and nurses were provided with specific areas of interest to work up and, presentations and progress reports were presented at weekly staff meetings. Slowly the action plan items were instigated and at the end of 12

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months we had completed a large number of items. Developing action plans also led to identifying individual needs for continuing education – a positive outcome for staff and the practice. Both the practice co-ordinators and I drove the action plan but it was left to individuals to take up ownership and work up action items.

From a practice management perspective this initiative proved successful in many ways – primarily as a team building project but also as a vehicle to complete a list of actions determined by staff and business needs. It encouraged ownership of specific areas of the practice and allowed individuals to become empowered to make decisions and action them.

It may appear to be a major exercise to organise something like this but the benefits far outweigh any negatives such as cost. I'd highly recommend this action to practices small or large. It's interesting what you learn about your team when you are outside the workplace environment! ❖

The second placed essay "The Business of Being a Vet", by Dr Joan Gibbons, will appear in the Summer issue.

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