

Tech Week Turbulence:

Creating a motivating and fulfilling “rewards” culture year-round

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Recently, a colleague reached out to vent about some unexpected turmoil in her clinic. The discord occurred after she hosted an appreciation event for National Veterinary Technician Week. Included in the event were fun games and snacks for the whole staff, and even thoughtful gifts for technicians. Many of her industry partners enthusiastically contributed. All of this was intended to express gratitude for the contributions of technicians to her practice. This was a new initiative, and, if it was successful, she planned on recognizing other staff members with similar events in the future.

Instead of the encouraging atmosphere she had aimed for, she encountered a host of hard feelings. Customer service staff were upset that they hadn't been given a similar event. One team member was miffed that a non-credentialed assistant was included among the technicians. Another employee felt that his contributions should have been recognized separately. After this conversation, I started to notice other complaints about tech week circulating in the veterinary community.

“These events are becoming more extravagant every year.”

“People don't seem to appreciate the appreciation.”

“What about boss's day? Someone always feels left out.”

Rewards and Psychology

To understand why something that was intended to be a positive experience turned sour, let's examine the psychology of rewards and motivation: Positive feedback for a job well done can be divided into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic.

Intrinsic Rewards

Intrinsic rewards refer to a person's positive internal experience related to their work. This can include a sense of accomplishment or pride, or a feeling of being capable and valuable. People are energized by work that is intrinsically rewarding.

Examples of intrinsic rewards from work include:

- A sense of true progress or completion
- A feeling of competence, credibility, and trustworthiness
- A sense of significance within the team
- A sense of autonomy and choice
- Knowledge that there is an opportunity to grow within the team
- A belief that the work is meaningful

Knowledge workers, especially those who are drawn to medical fields, are particularly motivated by intrinsic rewards. Veterinary professionals at all levels are passionate about their mission to improve the health and wellbeing of animals. They take great pride in their unique skills, and the high-quality work they perform.

Extrinsic Rewards

Extrinsic rewards include the basic terms of employment, such as a team member's salary and benefits. They also include other rewards that come from a person's employer or peers, such as bonuses, praise, promotions, and social standing.



Historically, extrinsic rewards were used to motivate people to do something they weren't already very driven to do. Monotonous tasks, like assembly line work, offer few intrinsic rewards, so extrinsic motivation may be the best way to increase productivity. But how do extrinsic rewards influence a person who is already very motivated to do a complex task, like caring for animals?

Rewards in the Veterinary Context

Unfortunately, the contentment experienced in response to extrinsic rewards can be very short-lived. Poorly designed rewards can sometimes have a negative influence on both the person you're recognizing, and the team ecosystem they work in. In fact, some studies have demonstrated that when extrinsic rewards are offered for tasks that a person was already performing for their

intrinsic value, the recipient may start to lose some of their positive internal experience.

The intent of this article is not to suggest that veterinary professionals shouldn't be paid well for their work... or even that they should never receive appreciation and creative rewards. It is to show how some rewards can backfire when they're not thoughtfully planned: when they're not offered in an environment that puts an emphasis on cultivating intrinsic motivation.

Fostering the Intrinsic

The key to unlocking intrinsic rewards for employees is to design a work environment that supports competence, autonomy, and growth. Additionally, it is essential to employ recognition strategies that nurture these rewards.

- Make sure each team member has an opportunity to work on tasks that allow them to feel a sense of progress or completion. This could be something as small as discharging a recovered patient, or as ambitious as building a client resource library.
- Ensure that all staff feel included and significant within the clinic team: Let them know that their job is a vital part of the process of saving lives.
- Create opportunities for career growth through continuing education and increased responsibilities.
- Trust team members. Give them space to exercise their skills and knowledge.
- Review job titles to ensure they reflect a team member's experience and expertise.
- Avoid using terms like "new grad" and "baby tech." These nicknames suggest inferior competence and tend to stick around too long. They don't reflect professionalism.

- Give team members some choice in the work they do and the projects they participate in. This could take the form of cross-training, facilitating more surgery time, or empowering a team member to work on a passion project.
- Find out what “meaningful work” means to each of your team members. Seek out ways to involve them in meaningful tasks.

Considering Extrinsic Rewards

Once your team has channels through which they can be intrinsically rewarded for their work, careful consideration should still be applied to how you offer extrinsic rewards. Rewards can be big or small; monetary or intangible. Compliments, thanks, and praise can be just as powerful as prizes, promotions, or bonuses. You will likely use a variety of rewards in your practice.

Effective extrinsic rewards are:

Timely – If you are rewarding an employee for a job well done, the reward will be more impactful if it comes soon after the achievement.

Frequent – The emotional high tied to a reward fades quickly. Additionally, if efforts and achievements pass by without recognition, team members can lose motivation. Good staff should be rewarded frequently.

Specific – Recognition should be offered for a specific accomplishment or skill. “Thanks for your commitment to providing excellent client communication during curbside service,” is much more meaningful than “Thanks for all your hard work.”

Visible – Recognition of an employee should be visible to all team members.

This allows that person to become a role model. It also ensures that an employee’s accomplishments contribute to their esteem within the clinic.

Sufficient – Large accomplishments deserve significant rewards. Small accomplishments and positive behaviors flourish with simple rewards. When a small reward is offered to someone who put forth a considerable effort or achieved a major goal, the reward may be perceived as an insult.

Equitable, consistent, and transparent – The way that you reward team members should be clear to anyone working with you. The criteria for meeting your expectations and obtaining a reward should be straightforward. Rewards should be accessible to any staff who meet the criteria. Staff members meeting the same criteria should be recognized in fair and comparable ways.

Linked to clinic culture and values – Clearly define your hospital’s mission and goals. Reward efforts and accomplishments that support these pillars. This will give all team members a roadmap to delivering value and achieving competence, growth, and rewards.

So, What Went Wrong at Tech Week?

The once-a-year event was not timely or frequent enough to motivate employees and support intrinsic satisfaction. From the perspective of technicians, the reward perhaps didn’t follow accomplishments closely enough. From the perspective of other team members, many of their successes had gone by entirely unrewarded.

An event rewarding technicians for... being technicians... did not visibly showcase the specific talents and triumphs of individual

team members or work groups. In this scenario, the behaviours and efforts that contributed to the clinic's success appear to have been overlooked or homogenized. A technician who overhauled anesthetic safety protocols was recognized in the same way as a technician who did the bare minimum.

From the perspective of non-technician team members, the event did not appear equitable. They hadn't yet received a similar reward. And because the tech week event wasn't clearly linked to the clinic's goals and values, there was no clear path for non-tech employees to gain their own, equivalent recognition.

Let a "Rewards Culture" Act as a Differentiator

In today's competitive hiring climate, clinic managers know that they have to offer competitive salaries to attract and retain employees at every level. But salary is fungible... anyone can compete with you on dollars. Today, you need to find impactful ways to set yourself apart as a preferred employer. To foster team members who deliver excellence every day, you have to create a recognition and reward culture that is attractive, effective, and inspiring... not just for a day or a week, but all year long. You have to dare to go beyond the pizza party.

About the Author

Dr. Jennifer Sperry is a companion animal veterinarian and the Veterinary Advisor for Independence Pet Group. She assists the company by providing scientific insights and medical updates; and by sharing the perspectives and experiences of veterinary professionals in the trenches.

Dr. Sperry was attracted to her current role because she recognized an urgent need to spread awareness about financial tools that allow people to access vital but costly veterinary care.

As a veterinarian practicing in general and emergency medicine for more than a decade, she has a unique understanding of the needs of pets and their people. She witnessed first-hand how difficult it can be for pet owners to both predict and overcome the cost of quality veterinary care. She also experienced how difficult it can be for veterinary team members to share the emotional burden that occurs when financial limitations adversely impact the wellbeing of pets and their owners.



Since joining the team in 2020, Dr. Sperry has shared her medical experience for internal and external educational events, claims and underwriting process improvements, and even accessible policy wording. Dr. Sperry shares her home with her husband, two young boys, and a cranky old chihuahua. When she's not working, she can be found beside the nearest campfire.

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