



PART TWO

SLOWING THE
REVOLVING

Strategies for Improving Staff Retention

BY KATINA ANTONIADES



At the Progressive Animal Welfare Society in Lynnwood, Washington, the writing is on the wall: Respect and trust one another, it says. Communicate. Seek to understand.

Seemingly simple platitudes, but not ones the organization takes lightly. The “workplace culture agreement,” posted in the shelter and also highlighted in employee and volunteer manuals, outlines steps toward achieving a healthy, supportive environment. “We are drawn to work at PAWS because of its mission to advocate for animals,” the introduction reads. “And while we spend our lives together doing this work, we can choose to create a humane and healthy workplace for ourselves.”

The agreement includes suggestions like “Respect others’ response to emotions—help them find creative and appropriate outlets to express their feelings.” It also includes more specific, concrete advice: “If you must interrupt someone, give them a chance to say if it’s a good time or not, and schedule a later time if need be.”

Just as important as courtesy and respect is social support from coworkers. “Healthy shelters have a more supportive work envi-

ronment,” says Steven Rogelberg, PhD, associate professor and director of the industrial organizational psychology program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. “There’s good coworker support, and probably even more importantly, there’s supervisory support. Support has been a really key factor in understanding employee attitudes.”

When Rogelberg and his UNC colleague, Charlie Reeve, PhD, asked hundreds of shelter employees across the country what recommendations they’d offer newcomers to the field, a common suggestion was to find social support, Rogelberg says.

Backing from colleagues can help lessen the pain of disparaging or ignorant comments that people outside the field often make. Even loved ones can be a source of stress when they don’t understand what their friend or family member does at the shelter. In such situations, the sense of support a shelter staffer gets from her colleagues can do wonders.

DOOR

Maybe your staff already understand their job descriptions, receive sufficient feedback, and feel appreciated for the work they perform; maybe the lines of communication are open and staff input is welcomed. If so, congratulations! All of those things go a long way toward keeping good people around. But efforts to curb staff turnover, especially in the animal care and control field, should also involve providing training and room for growth. This second article in a two-part series examines support systems for staff and explores ideas for helping employees advance their careers.



might sound, they have the ability to provide that smile in your darkest moments that really has the ability to lift you.”

But this kind of supportive environment doesn't appear out of thin air: Management and supervisors can set an example and help create an environment where honesty, openness, caring, and respect thrive—and where gossip and backstabbing are discouraged.

Shelter employees are often misunderstood by those outside the shelter; they shouldn't have to deal with more of the same lack of understanding from fellow employees. “Using any insensitive term is a problem—[saying] ‘killed’ versus euthanize, calling the euthanasia people by other names ... ‘needle-happy’ is one I was called once,” says Kim Intino, a former shelter director and now manager of The HSUS's Animal Services Consultation program.

between people,” says Rogelberg.

Laurie Adams, an administrative assistant who has worked as a kennel attendant, animal control officer, and road commander at Johnson County Animal Control in Indiana, has found an internal network of support at her agency.

“It's kind of like a miniature family, in a way,” she says, noting that her coworkers always have a place to vent—her desk. “They know that a lot of times there's nothing I can do but just listen. And that's what's important, because you have so many people not listening to you, and it's really aggravating.”

Employees often discuss the emotional effects of the job, says Adams. “We talk about how we feel ... that's really important ... when we all sit down and say, ‘You know what, it's okay to feel that way.’ And it is. It is okay to feel that way, it's okay to cry, it's okay to feel anger.”

Although she says some people

Just as important as courtesy and respect in the shelter environment is the social support staff receive from their coworkers.

Feeling supported doesn't require finding soul mates or best friends. It doesn't even have to mean finding coworkers to hang out with outside of work—although that can help, too.

Social support, says Rogelberg, is “feeling like another individual or group of individuals is there for you, that they empathize with how you feel ... they're there to listen when you need to talk. They might not necessarily agree with you, and in fact, they might not necessarily like you, but ... they're still available; you know that they're not judging you. They appreciate the difficulty of the situation that you're in. And as simple and as silly as it

Mentoring and Support Systems

Management can create arrangements that help employees build relationships. Pairing new staff with long-timers provides an opportunity for veterans to share their knowledge and gives less experienced workers a mentor who can answer questions and offer advice. Bringing in snacks to share helps staff get together and talk casually, and asking employees to work together to solve a problem outside of their typical job tasks is another way for management to help staff spend time together. “In the process of doing that, you can often foster some really nice bonds

scoff at the idea, she believes that all agencies should form a support group—with an extrovert at the helm. Without the help she received from her boss, Adams herself probably would have left the field. “If it wasn't for somebody like her, if it wasn't for someone who was compassionate and understanding as she was, I can honestly tell you that I wouldn't have made it as far as I did [or be] able to go on and help other people,” she says.

George Cyr, who works for the Piedmont and Emeryville police departments in California, is one of two animal services officers. He often works alone, but during a few hours each week, he and his part-

ner work together, giving them a chance to discuss what they've experienced throughout the week. "I feel pretty comfortable in talking to her about just anything, how I feel about things ..." he says. "I don't really feel that great about sharing like that with the [police] officers. Although they're good people and everything, it's just different. ... A lot of times we're concerned with the welfare of animals and things, and they say, 'Oh, well just shoot it.' That's kind of their philosophy sometimes, and it's just a different world."

In a recent staff meeting at Woods Humane Society, director of shelter operations Leigh Ann Harms asked if other employees are troubled when they get home and family members ask, "How was your day?" Since Harms faces her own struggles in finding an answer to that question, she wanted to make sure her staff knew that if they need

challenged by board members who often overturned or criticized decisions that she and her staff had already agreed upon. "Making those decisions is hard enough without ... having to be harassed by somebody afterwards when my staff and I pretty much agreed," she says. She eventually left the shelter when she found it too stressful to deal with a contrary board.

Performing euthanasia is easier to deal with if you feel supported, says Intino. "I think that most of the internal struggle comes from not being understood, not being accepted, not being supported—not [from] actually having to do it, because I think anybody who's been in the business long enough realizes it needs to be done. So even though you're not happy about it, you can handle that as long as you feel that people are behind you."

It's important to observe the differences among your staff, says

kennel staff; however you guys work is however you work, but this is how I work.' That's not good."

One of the kinds of support that staff most appreciate is being allowed a break when they need one. Coworkers who take over for a while can provide great relief, says Linda Workman, assistant director at the Tuscaloosa Metro Animal Shelter in Alabama. Especially when performing tasks like euthanasia or receiving surrendered animals, staff members should be on a rotating schedule, and when the going gets tough, Workman says, coworkers should be able to offer each other the chance to take a breather. "Sometimes we have some people that come in our office and just scream. Because they're going crazy—just let them scream and get it out, and have a backup person to back them up so they're not stuck there all day," she says.

Harms agrees, and she lets her

One kind of support staff appreciate most is the opportunity to take a break when needed.

a safe place to vent about that or anything else, her door was always open. "And if it looks like I'm busy, let me know," she tells employees. "I'll make time."

Employees who feel trusted by their superiors—and who know that others will back them up if needed—get a better sense of organizational support. During what he calls a "very involved" dangerous dog hearing, which required officers to appear in court, Cyr felt supported by a police captain. "Captain was right here with us every second," he says.

Intino recalls her own shelter experiences prior to her work at The HSUS. At one shelter, she felt

Keane Menefee, animal control supervisor at Fort Worth Animal Care and Control, who cautions against viewing all staff as cut from the same cloth. Managers should recognize that people have different personalities and motivations—for example, Menefee has taken note of the nurturing tendencies in the animal attendants he supervises.

Harms lets her staff know that she's organized and "anal," she says, and they eventually learn it themselves by working alongside her. Sharing that part of herself up front encourages others to share, too. "You can create a working environment that's going to benefit both of you. Rather than just, 'You're the

staff know that when they become stressed by continually listening to people explain why they are relinquishing their animals—and by making decisions about the disposition of those animals—they can take a break if they need it. "If it's a person that's difficult or you're at that point where you don't have it in you to be compassionate toward them, come and get me and I'll do it for you. I'll give you a ... little break from your normal duties," she says.

By pitching in, supervisors can show that they don't consider themselves above the work their employees perform—and demonstrate their empathy with what





say 'please' and 'thank you.' Because that's mutual respect. ... I can't pay them as much as I'd like to pay them, so I need to show them that I am very grateful for what they do to help me ensure that these animals and people are cared for."

Provide Opportunities for Advancement

Promoting from within is another way to create an atmosphere of respect—while also providing employees with a powerful motivator. Hosing down kennels, scrubbing cat cages, or picking up stray animals for hours on end may be a

Adams says. "You don't have someone who just walks in off the street."

People who have performed multiple jobs can help pitch in when coworkers call in sick or when the agency is otherwise shorthanded, Adams says. An officer or Adams herself often helps clean kennels, and Adams has also responded to field calls.

In this way, promoting current employees can produce managers who identify with the people they oversee. The reward is an environment of understanding and empathy, an atmosphere in which staff get inspiration and motivation from

Promoting from within can help create an atmosphere of mutual respect, while also providing employees with a powerful motivator.

their staff experience every day. "There are times where we're short-handed," Menefee says, "so I'll go help euthanize. ... I don't mind ... jumping in the truck and going to help try to capture a problem dog. I think that helps out immensely. Because a lot of ... staff, they'll tell you—they don't feel like you know what they do."

"I never ask my staff to do anything that I would not do," says Harms. "I will clean kennels and scoop poop right along with them. Even though I'm on salary, I still clock in and out with them. How can I expect them to do something that I myself would not do?"

Managers can take simple actions to create a respectful working environment. Harms, who grew up working in her family's restaurant and borrows ideas from that environment, tries to thank each employee every day for their hard work. "If you're going to ask somebody to do something, you always

little bit easier for employees to bear if they're aware of the potential for advancement and feel like they're working toward something. And management can profit from knowing someone's qualities and work habits before giving him a position of greater responsibility.

Internal promotion can also help staff see the big picture—and gain a better perspective on the inner workings of the entire organization. When Adams joined Johnson County Animal Control, she began by working in the kennels. Later, she rode along with officers to be certain she was interested in working in the field. Agency managers believe that when kennel workers are promoted, their past experiences make them more well-rounded officers on the streets, Adams says. It's especially beneficial because officers at the agency perform some of the same tasks that kennel staff do. "You will have someone who knows the facility from the inside out,"

the supervisors who were once in their place.

When speaking to an employee whose job she once performed, Adams says, "I know what you're up against and I know how aggravating it can be because I was there."

"It's so much better for the kennel people or the road officers or the administration staff to take if they know that I was there," she says. "They don't feel as threatened. They don't feel like, 'Well, she's just standing up there on her high horse.'"

One kennel staffer in particular has often expressed appreciation for Adams's empathy. "He looks at me lots of times and says, 'Well, Laurie, I know you understand that, because ... you used to be back there.' And that makes me feel good," she says.

In Tuscaloosa, recent changes have resulted in several promotions for employees. The receiving department, now physically separated from adoptions, is managed

by a three-year veteran of the kennels. Some kennel technicians in the adoptable and stray kennel areas earned new titles—Workman calls them zone leaders—and received raises. Tuscaloosa now has a specific coordinator position to handle adoptions. The changes have been positive for the staff, Workman says.

“It helped a lot and I think made them feel important—like they were doing more than just cleaning poop,” she says. “Nobody wants to do that forever. But they all paid their dues, too. They were all here for a couple years, just scooping poop, until they got those promotions.”

Harms, too, believes that more respectful titles can improve staff morale. The employees who were once called “kennel staff” are now called “animal caregivers,” a change Harms made to highlight the employees’ vital contributions to the organization. “It actually shows that [employees are] giving something rather than, ‘Oh, well, you’re just kennel staff,’” she says.

Although Menefee believes most of the officers he supervises could develop their jobs into lifelong careers, he has a different view of the animal attendants—not because of anything lacking in the people themselves, he says, but because the job is so draining. “With the physical demands that the animal attendant’s position requires, and the mental demands and having to just get yourself up every day ... for something like that, I don’t see the majority of them being able to make this a career.”

Because he knows how tough the job can be, Menefee often makes animal attendants aware of openings for officers. Most take him up on the offer. Like Adams, Menefee believes internal promotions make for stronger staff, and he points to the advantages over hiring out-

siders. “It’s nice because it gives me a chance to see how they perform in the shelter before I take them on as an officer and unleash them on the public. ... Instead of hiring someone off the street, it really works well as a recruiting agent here inside the building.”

Avoid the “Same Old, Same Old”

As an animal services officer, Cyr finds his routine peppered with unusual situations. “One call may be just a very common easy call or may be something that requires a whole lot of work—calling in an outside agency [like] the fire department, or putting on my coveralls and crawling under a building,” he says. “I never know, and it’s kind of interesting.”

Many point to the monotony of a kennel technician’s job when contrasted with the duties of an officer. Officers never quite know what they will face in their daily rounds, but most kennel attendants do—and aside from performing euthanasia, that often means cleaning, cleaning, and more cleaning.

Menefee believes that this monotony leads to the susceptibility of animal attendants to illness and injury—something he’s observed in his own staff. “You wake up in the morning and you’ve got that thought of, ‘Heck, I’ve got to go clean up after 200 dogs,’ or ‘I have to go euthanize 40 or 50 animals today.’ And I think over time ... that’s a lot of load to carry.”

Varied activities can add a little joy to an employee’s routine and offer relief from the daily grind. Fort Worth’s animal attendants get a break from cleaning when they accompany visitors who want to view adoptable animals. Giving kennel staff the chance to help adopters choose the right dog—and allowing them to showcase

dogs they’re fond of—can be an effective foil against the stress of euthanasia and other difficult parts of the job. “I think it gives them a chance to sort of show their expertise off, and their knowledge of the animals that they deal with on a day in, day out basis,” says Menefee.

Employers can create other situations that give staff a chance to show off their skills. Julie Justman, field service manager at Pueblo Animal Services in Colorado, holds contests for her officers. “I ... have competitions occasionally, such as I split them into teams of three and have them work one-handed to muzzle, pressure bandage, load onto the stretcher, and transport a very large stuffed dog across the finish line.” Coworkers can enjoy the friendly competition while practicing teamwork and honing critical skills.

Allowing employees to pitch in at shelter events can not only give them a change of scenery but also let them see the results of their hard work. When furry shelter alumni show up with their new families at events such as pet fairs, Johnson County employees get the chance to see the changes in the adopted animals they once cared for. The transformations are so complete that staff sometimes have a hard time recognizing the animals and often respond happily, “Oh my God, that dog was a wreck last time I saw it!”

When officers participate in these sorts of activities, the public develops more appreciation for them. “Especially at the schools, the kids get to see the officers,” says Adams. “They get to talk to the officers. And that’s really important to us; we want them to be able to identify an animal control officer, and know them as someone who ... they can report something to. ... It’s really

important that they understand that we're not mean people."

Offer Training Opportunities

For some small or cash-strapped organizations, giving raises or promotions may seem impossible. But whether or not an organization can move employees up the career ladder, providing ongoing training opportunities to staff can make them feel confident and appreciated.

When a training opportunity arises, managers should frame it as just

learning opportunities for staff: "It could be ... a certain employee who has some human resource interests taking a human resource class and then having the ability to do some human resource tasks for the shelter, or it could be getting some euthanasia skills training. It could be getting some financial training and then being given the opportunity to do those types of tasks."

Justman emphasizes the importance of training because, as a manager, she can clearly see the results. "Budget restrictions can make it tough, but it is worth it," she says. "They get to meet other ACOs and get valuable training and experience. They always come back with a skip in their step and regenerated."

Training can do more than boost employee morale—it can help managers and animals, too. "People have a need for competence, and to the extent that the training enables them to be more competent at their work, they'll derive greater satisfaction from the work," Rogelberg says.

That holds true especially in the parts of the job that cause stress—for example, euthanasia, which is always hard on those who perform it but is far worse when the person doing it feels inadequately prepared. "Euthanasia skills training allows people to engage in this difficult act with higher levels of competency; therefore, their success rates are going to be higher," Rogelberg says. "They're not going to have that random animal bite that could happen, or a missed injection."

Fort Worth participates in a staff certification program that includes basic, advanced, and instructor levels. A cooperative effort between the Texas Department of Health and the Texas Animal Control Association, the program has motivated employees to remain in the field and to learn more.

"We've set these people in motion,

so that we've created a career type of thing for them, and a lot of these people came in with little or no experience ..." Menefee says. "They didn't come in, I don't think, with the idea of it being a career. Most of them would skip from job to job. And so I've been able to get to see them develop and grow."

Menefee urges agencies across Texas to provide continuing training; better trained, more skilled employees will eventually lead to more respect for animal control—and corresponding higher salaries.

At training sessions, employees won't just learn new information or skills but will often gain perspective through networking with colleagues from other shelters. They can observe how things differ at other agencies while learning that the challenges they face—whether they arise from the work itself, management, or the public—are fairly universal. And, Menefee says, workshop attendees see that private nonprofits are working toward the same goals as municipal agencies. "The lines are so close together, they're almost blurred between animal control and animal welfare," he says.

Before putting on a training session yourself, identify your objectives, says Hilary Anne Hager, programs manager at PAWS. Do you want employees to learn a specific task such as disinfection that requires hands-on training? Or are you trying to impart general knowledge about an issue such as dog behavior that would require more conceptual training? "The goal of training really is going to dictate the format of the training," says Hager.

Potential trainers should also think about the competence and experience of the employees who will attend. You should be "willing to adjust [the difficulty level] mid-training if you're realizing that people are glazing over because they've



that: an opportunity, says Rogelberg. Presenting the chance to get training as a recognition of sorts—rather than as an obligation—will make for a more positive outcome, he says.

Employees who learn new skills can help the organization while enriching their own work experiences. Rogelberg offers examples of

heard it 7,000 times,” says Hager.

Shelters can take advantage of local and national expertise. About twice a year, Woods Humane Society offers seminars by an area trainer and a veterinarian who specializes in behavior. The experts don't charge for these seminars, which Harms invites staff to attend.

Woods Humane Society is using in-house training as a way to reduce the turnover rate, create specific goals for staff, and reduce monotony for long-term employees. Harms recently instituted a three-tiered training program for kennel staff. As staff rise through the three levels, they are entrusted with additional responsibilities and given tasks that offer more variety than cleaning cages—like assisting in behavior evaluations and administering vaccinations. Training includes videos from Animal Care Training Programs and reading materials by Sue Sternberg; staff are also cross-trained in different areas of the shelter. Pending approval, the 2005 budget will assign a specific salary range to each level.

The program is still new, so Harms is waiting to gauge the results. But it has already helped her identify motivated employees. After asking staff to let her know if they'd be interested in moving through the levels, she received immediate interest. “I've had two people approach me and say, ‘Yes, I want to move up through the levels. When can we start and what do I need to do?’” she says. “Otherwise, I think pretty much everybody else was like, ‘Okay.’ It helped me to see where I had stronger staff.”

The new three-tiered program at Woods Humane Society offers employees the chance to take part in euthanasia decisions, depending on the level an employee has attained. Level-one staff don't have

a say in the matter because they haven't received enough training yet, says Harms. Level-two staff can participate in euthanasia discussions and assist in euthanasia itself, while those in the third level can vote in core group discussions and perform euthanasia.

Research by Rogelberg and Reeve supports the notion that allowing staff to have a say in the euthanasia process may lead to a healthier shelter environment, says Rogelberg. At Woods Humane Society, where some employees were questioning euthanasia decisions, the three-tiered training program has helped to create boundaries. “It's very easy for someone to sit there and say, ‘No, that animal shouldn't be euthanized,’ but they're not the one that has to go back there and do it,” says Harms. “So that's not the only reason I implemented the training programs, but it helped people understand, ‘This is where your place is.’”

When such a program is put in place, some employees may not be able to accept it. “I had one of my front office people come to me and say, ‘I see where my place is here now, and I know that I can't go any further, and I'm okay with that, so I need to look for another job.’” says Harms. While Harms says she didn't want to push anybody out the door by implementing the three-level training system, she needed to focus on the future. When the humane society follows through with its plans to move into a much larger facility, the need for employees to understand their roles will be even more pronounced.

Of all the reasons given for training, the one that may be the most overlooked is the chance it provides for employees to bond. What might have been a run-of-the-mill staff meeting and training exercise became a special treat for staff at the Tuscaloosa shelter. After a par-

ticularly stressful month, the shelter director set the site of the next meeting at the Black Warrior River in Tuscaloosa. Staff brought their own lunches and took a ride on a rented riverboat. For a dose of fun and grade school nostalgia, Workman required employees to bring in a signed permission slip. The activities on the boat included role playing to enhance the staff's customer service skills and a game to help new and old employees get to know each other.

This past summer, staff at Tuscaloosa attended a compassion fatigue seminar in nearby Mississippi. Although everyone at the shelter was offered the opportunity to attend, only eight employees were interested, Workman says.

“I don't know if they thought they were going to be put on the spot and people were going to make them reveal something about themselves, or if . . . they're very uncomfortable in the spotlight,” she says. Although she isn't sure why more employees didn't attend, she hopes that next time, the ones who took part will encourage the rest.

The night before the seminar, participating employees drove to a hotel to stay overnight, a stay that gave them the chance to go out to dinner as a group and spend time together away from work. “It was a great, great seminar,” Workman says. “And we're planning more . . . because the employees need that.” ❏

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FROM HSU

To find out about workshops, online courses, and degree programs offered by The HSUS's Humane Society University, visit www.humanesocietyu.org. Programs range from courses in dog bite prevention to a bachelor of science degree in humane leadership.