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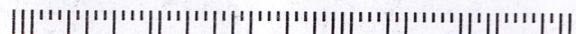
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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF STAFF

Here are a few tips to help keep staff motivated.

BY ALEJANDRA ABELLA

Director, Equestrian Management, LLC

Taking care of other people's animals can be a thankless job. Unfortunately, keeping clients happy is not easy for managers because employee hiring and turnover are the most difficult issues affecting our barns. Getting the most out of equestrian staff goes hand in hand with offering the most to staff, and that is a difficult proposition.

IT'S NOT SLAVERY

Ask any barn employee and you will likely hear more than one story about what we at Equestrian Management LLC have coined "emotional slavery," including long hours, low pay, few or no benefits, disrespectful treatment, and no time off—all because we love to be around horses! In order for staff members to act as professionals, they must be treated as such.

Beyond a greater financial commitment, however, employers have other tools to help staff feel and act like professionals. Employers must start by being clear about what they require from a staff member by putting it in writing. Our company requires professional resumes, cover letters and formal interviews from all candidates, and once we are ready to offer a position we do so with a formal letter and a written position description. We check references and we follow through with an application, written contracts, and all the necessary human resources documents because it sets the tone for our expectations and the employees have clear guidelines as to what their job is.

MAKING THE RIGHT MATCH

Matching staff members to the facility is important in getting the most out of them. During our interview process we ask questions about their back-

ground and expertise in terms of doing the job, but we also make sure to ask about personal interests and needs. The love of horses is what leads us to look for jobs, however burnout is a very real concern with equestrian employees—to give our best we all have to disengage and enjoy other activities.

We may think that barns are about the horses, but savvy managers know that it is the human clients that make the horses go round. We place a lot of emphasis on customer service in our facilities, so staff members that display a good attitude and understanding of the importance of clients are very important. Selecting staff that are focused on advancing their personal riding careers, or that do not have an appreciation of customer service, is setting them up to fail because they are not a good fit. At our company our desire is to hire the smiles and we will even go the extra mile to enhance an employee's skills if the right attitude is there.

Communication, of course, is paramount, as is feedback and evaluation. We ask our managers to hold regularly scheduled staff meetings, and we also stress an open door policy for any staff concerns. And we do regular staff evaluations. These vertical evaluations allow subordinates to rate their supervisors anonymously and also allow the supervisors to rate their staff. All parties have the chance to review their evaluations and receive feedback on their strengths and on areas where they need to improve. Interestingly, our experience has shown that those who take offense or who are surprised to find that they have several areas to work on were not committed to doing their best.

However, for the staff members that have used the evaluations to progress, the tool has set them up to succeed.

ASK, REWARD

When all else is said and done, a job well done must be rewarded, and it must be done in a timely manner. A glowing evaluation is always positive, but getting the most out of staff requires a constant effort to set them up to succeed. Research shows that employees value training and continued education, and that is a reward that also benefits the facility. Other rewards include giving employees challenging tasks, creating an amiable team environment where everyone's contributions count, hiring good managers that provide solid leadership, allowing proven employees to work autonomously and to be accountable for their work, and offering flexibility in terms of working hours and comp time when needed. When possible, but surprisingly less important if competitive wages are already being offered, bonuses and raises are also welcome rewards.

Getting the most out of equestrian staff takes a constant balancing act between the needs of the facility's clients, those of the horses, and those of the staff. But what it takes most of all is understanding that professionalism begets professionalism. [sm]

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