



The Not-So-Bad Apple

How to bring your “so-so” employees back from the borderline.

by Jen Reeder

Like most managers in veterinary practices, Katherine Hobbs, RVT, CVPM, PHR, has had to deal with employees who needed improvement.

She remembers Tony, an excellent veterinary assistant who worked well with patients and clients but was frequently late for his shift.

Samantha was another borderline employee — she was a good veterinary technician who had worked hard for her credentials but was abrupt and aloof with clients.

“Frankly, I think that if you define a borderline employee as an employee who performs well in one respect but poorly in another, then every employee fits this description,” says Hobbs, who founded interFace Veterinary HR Systems. “There just simply isn’t anyone out there with no flaws whatsoever. The job of the manager or managing owner is to reward the strong traits. . . . There’s typically more ‘bad management’ than there are ‘bad employees.’”

Start talking . . . keep talking

Many experts agree that the key to turning a borderline employee into a good one is communication — and it should start from the get-go.

“I have found that borderline employees are, more often than not, great employees who have ‘become disillusioned’ due to the work environment,” says Frankie Williams, MAOM, a consultant with



The key to turning a borderline employee into a good one is communication.

Gatto McFerson, a financial services and managing consulting firm for veterinarians. “They start out revved up and eager, but a lack of leadership and coaching can bring on complacency and they become borderline employees. There are instances when the employee is just innately borderline, but if we are using excellent hiring practices, we aren’t hiring borderline employees.”

Laurie Taylor, an international business speaker, business growth specialist and president of FlashPoint!, says there’s a disconnect when the hiring manager doesn’t clearly outline what the expectations are for the employee in the job interview.



Wait!
 Before you break ground
 on your animal care
 facility...talk to
Design Learned.

We Engineer:
 Air • Water
 Lighting • Power • Noise

Toll free: 866.DLI.7078
 www.designlearned.com

Help Pets Keep Their Homes.
 Expand Your Services.
 Increase Your Revenue.

New from AAHA Press!

First Steps with Puppies and Kittens
 A Practice-Team Approach to Behavior
 Linda M. White



Reviewed by
 Lisa Roberts, DVM, DACVB



Visit the AAHA Store
 online at press.aahanet.org
 or call 800/883-6301

Building Practice Success

“In normal interviews, we spend a lot of time asking questions about an employee’s work experience and about his or her background. We ask questions like, ‘What was your favorite part of your job?’ or ‘What did you like about your manager?’ Maybe toward the end of the process we talk about what the job entails,” she says. “In our interviewing process, we need to be much better at identifying the tasks, the skills and the expectations that the employee needs to be held accountable to before we even hire that person.”

Get it on paper

Bob Levoy, seminar speaker and author of *222 Secrets of Hiring, Managing, and Retaining Great Employees in Healthcare Practices*, says that two documents are necessary to help minimize borderline job performance in the early stages of employment: a written job description detailing the duties and responsibilities of the position and an employee handbook.

“[The job description] helps simplify the hiring process and ensures that employees know what’s expected of them; it provides managers with a guideline for performance reviews,” Levoy says.

“The employee handbook also helps eliminate misunderstandings, because employees know up front what’s expected of them,” he explains.

A typical employee handbook should include information about job performance standards, training periods, termination policies, severance pay, benefits, confidentiality, overtime, performance evaluations, salary reviews, dress codes, work schedules, punctuality, absenteeism, vacations, sick leave, family and medical leave and the rules regarding substance abuse, smoking, safety, and sexual harassment.

“And it can go on from there,” Levoy says. “It might cover such matters as general etiquette with clients or coworkers or telephone etiquette, like, ‘All calls have to be answered on the third

ring,’ or calling clients and pets by name. Again, if employees will read and understand this up front, it prevents a lot of the behavioral problems.”

According to Levoy, even businesses with existing employee handbooks may need to update them to address the growing problem of employees abusing computer privileges.

“The use of computers for Internet surfing and sending emails to friends and checking Facebook to see what’s up on the ‘wall’ and what have you — that’s all eliminated because you have the rules to go by. So it makes any intervention on your part have a basis — a benchmark,” he says.

Containing the “ripple effect”

Despite such well-defined, up-front expectations, borderline employees can still develop.

“To me, borderline employees are defined in this way: They’re not quite bad enough to fire but not quite good enough to get you excited,” says Chester Elton, co-author of *The Carrot Principle*. “When you walk in and see them, what is your first thought? Is it, ‘I’m so glad to see you!’ or ‘Ohhhh . . .?’”

Elton says that it is important to address the problem immediately because of the effect it can have on the other employees.

“I’m really convinced that great organizations are built out of great teams,” Elton suggests. “Employees are not valuable if they detract from the team.”

If a borderline employee is allowed to get away with his or her weak job performance, it can lead to resentment by coworkers if they seem to be the exception to the rule.

“Now you don’t have one marginal employee — the whole team becomes a problem because of that ripple effect,” Elton states.

To deal with the situation, Elton maintains that communication with employees must be frequent, specific and timely.

For example, if a borderline employee is great with clients but habitually late to work, the manager should give reasons why it's important to be on time.

"Say, 'Tomorrow I really need you here right at 9:30, because Mrs. Wilson is bringing in her two terriers and there's no way that one person can handle both of them.'"

When the employee comes in on time, the manager should then acknowledge the employee's prompt arrival. Frequent reinforcement of desirable behavior also can make a difference, such as saying a simple, "Thank you for being here to help."

When to take action

If the tardiness becomes habitual, however, "Then you've got to pull the employee aside and say, 'Look, this job really requires that you be here at 9:30. So if you really can't do it, then we're

going to need to think of a way to transition' — which is a really nice way of saying 'fire you,'" says Elton.

"If you ever fire somebody and he or she is surprised, that's your fault," Elton maintains. "Communication is key. Be very frank, be very truthful and be very up front about what the problem is and what the consequences are going to be. Give the employee every opportunity to live up to that, but if he or she can't do it, you've got to let the person go."

Taylor says that employers are often hesitant to fire mediocre employees and keep them on for much longer than they should out of a sense of loyalty or concern over having to replace them with someone who requires a larger salary.

And if the employer does discuss the problem with the employee, the most common excuse is along the lines of, "I didn't realize I was doing my job in a way that upset you." To help such



"If you ever fire somebody and he or she is surprised, that's your fault."

— Chester Elton

CARING FOR YOU LIKE ONE OF OUR OWN.

AAHA Business Insurance Program



Call the AAHA Business Insurance Program today at **866-380-2242** for an evaluation.

Business Property/Liability
Flood
Workers' Compensation
Commercial Automobile
Special Coverage for Mobile Practitioners
Employment Practices Liability



A Run-Away Success



Brought back home,
thanks to the AVID Friendchip™

AVID

microchip identification

3185 Hamner Ave
Norco, CA 92860-1937

1-800-336-2843

Pettrac@avidid.com • www.avidid.com • fax 951-737-8967

Pick a Perfect Position



Choose a practice that fits *you*—
a practice with high professional standards
and high business standards.
Choose well so that you can be mentored,
earn a good living, and comfortably manage
your school debt.

Let us help!

Equine, Mixed, and Companion Animal Practices

www.findvmgjobs.com

WORK FORCE / Borderline Employees

One-on-one
weekly conver-
sations can be
crucial when
a normally
good employee
begins to slip
into borderline
work habits.

employees improve, Taylor also advocates open dialogue.

“I encourage anyone who manages people to meet for 30 minutes every week with every direct report (the people they manage),” she says.

At this meeting, the manager should ask three questions:

- What did you do last week that you were really proud of?
- What would you like to do or learn next week that will help make your job better?
- How can I help you?

“When I get a manager to do that each week, after 30 to 60 days, the change in that relationship is amazing,” Taylor claims. “It breaks down the barrier that exists between a manager and an employee.”

Keep them (and yourself) focused

Williams concurs that one-on-one weekly conversations are vital and can be crucial in identifying when a normally good employee begins to slip into borderline work habits.

“If staff managers are regularly talking to the line employees, they have a better handle on behavioral changes. This also makes it easier to have a courageous conversation with the employee,” she says.

Essentially, with frequent and positive interaction, managers can keep an open line of communication with employees without micromanaging, which can lead to resentment and paranoia. Instead, most borderline employees will feel valued and strive to do their best.

“What I believe is that every employee comes to the table wanting to succeed,” Taylor says. “The bottom line is, you’ve got to focus on your people.” ■

Jen Reeder is a freelance journalist who specializes in the environment, health and travel. She lives in Denver, Colo.

REGISTRATION OPENS JUNE 2009!
OCTOBER 14-18, 2009 GRAND SIERRA RESORT RENO, NEVADA



FULFILL YOUR WILDEST EXPECTATIONS!

DON'T MISS OUT ON THESE WILD OPPORTUNITIES!

- More than 500 hours of outstanding educational sessions
- **NEW** Team-Based Training (designed for 4 members of the veterinary practice team)
- The Changing Face of Veterinary Medicine Symposium
- Veterinarian Technician Academy
- Laboratories on numerous topics
- Interact with more than 150 exhibits

PACK YOUR BAGS ✦
OCTOBER 14-18, 2009



Register for the Wild West Veterinary Conference, the best quality and value anywhere!
For up-to-date information, please visit www.wildwestvc.com.

Clean Sweep.

To stop fleas and ticks, your recommendation counts.

FRONTLINE® Plus, containing two powerful active ingredients, kills ticks and fleas (adults, eggs and larvae) to provide extra protection for pets.

- Fipronil kills adult fleas in multiple ways (by working on at least 3 different sites in their nervous system),^{1,2} kills ticks, and keeps killing all month long.
- (S)-methoprene kills flea eggs and larvae to break the flea life cycle.

That's how FRONTLINE Plus eliminates existing infestations and protects pets against reinfestation.

FRONTLINE Plus also:

- Aids in control of sarcoptic mange infestations in dogs.
- Rapidly eliminates infestations of chewing lice.
- Approved for use on breeding, pregnant or lactating dogs and cats, as well as puppies and kittens 8 weeks of age and older.

Kills Adult Fleas



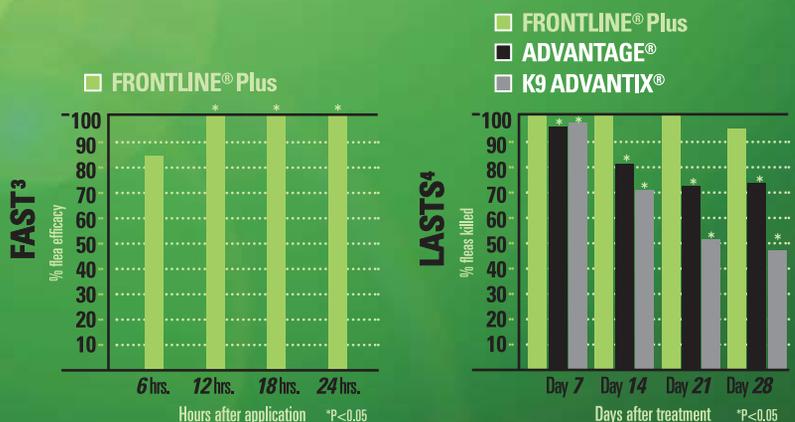
Kills Ticks



Kills Flea Eggs



Kills Flea Larvae



¹ Zhao X, Yeh JZ, Salgado VL, Narahashi T. Fipronil is a potent open channel blocker of glutamate-activated chloride channels in cockroach neurons. *J Pharm Exp Ther* 2004;310(1):192-201.

² Ikeda T, Zhao X, Kono Y, Yeh JZ, Narahashi T. Fipronil modulation of glutamate-induced chloride currents in cockroach thoracic ganglion neurons. *Neurotoxicology* 2003;24:807-815.

³ Data on file at Merial TS-USA-28701.

⁴ McCall JW, Alva R, Irwin JP et al. Comparative efficacy of a combination of fipronil/(S)-methoprene, a combination of imidacloprid/permethrin, and imidacloprid against fleas and ticks when administered topically to dogs. *J Appl Res Vet Med* 2004;2(1):74-77.

http://frontline.us.merial.com/products/products_comparison.asp# Accessed August 26, 2008.



©FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of Merial. ©ADVANTAGE is a registered trademark of Bayer Healthcare. ©K9 ADVANTIX is a registered trademark of Bayer Aktiengesellschaft. ©2008 Merial Limited, Duluth, GA. All rights reserved. FLE08ADCLEANSWP2.

For more details, visit www.FRONTLINE.com



Fast-Acting



Long-Lasting



Kills Fleas and Ticks



Waterproof



Great for Dogs and Cats

FRONTLINE®
Kills fleas and ticks fast...and lasts. *Plus*