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# Editorial

## Promises to Keep (Part 2)

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The prior installment of this editorial (December, 2003) stressed the importance of job satisfaction for animal care technicians; whose working lives are dominated by repetitious tasks, demanding standards, and inadequate recognition. Grappling with the effects of these conditions on performance and morale tests the sensitivity, vision, and leadership of resource directors and managers. We revisit here six relevant issues raised in Part 1 by suggesting some strategies to address them.

*Compensation* is obviously a primary contributor to job satisfaction. It follows that wages and benefits that meet or exceed regional norms will attract and retain the best workers in competitive job markets. Compensation for animal care workers can fare poorly in institutional wage and salary grids due, in no small measure, to outdated perceptions of the complexity and demands of animal technology. A director must champion correction of such gaps and be the leading advocate for full worth compensation. S/he must convince institutional leaders, qualitatively and quantitatively, of the scientific and financial benefits of pay that adequately rewards skill, experience, reliability, and merit. This may include revision of job descriptions and titles which reflect, accurately and completely, that the experience and expertise essential for animal technology is comparable to those of laboratory technicians and other biomedical staff members. The closer the director's voice can remain to senior administrative ears, including those of the leadership of human resources departments, the more effective advocacy can be. We lobbied successfully for a standing policy committee which includes the resource director, senior campus administrators (including those holding the power of the purse), and representative animal users. The committee, which meets monthly, gives the resource director a timely, knowledgeable, and action-oriented forum to pursue issues, especially those with financial hues, that strengthen animal-related research and infrastructure.

*Self-esteem* is a seminal factor in job satisfaction. Animal resource staff members deserve a clear perception of their noble role in health research, and the respect of bosses, peers, and clients that should flow from it. A resource director with a highly developed sense of candor and an open management style should have no trouble communicating this view and promoting esprit de corps, from the bully pulpit and through informal encounters. Small, but important gestures, such as greeting workers by name or acknowledging individual triumph or trial, or listening thoughtfully to staff suggestions for improvements communicate leadership that fosters respect and self-esteem. It is equally important to empower capable workers by fostering trust, independence, and consultation. Effective communication

is a key to this strategy. It requires an organic management style and structure that provides staff members with easy access to the resource leadership. Thus, the leadership should encourage staff-generated recommendations that "challenge the system" and promote effective change while promoting empowerment and self-esteem.

Public recognition of laudatory performance is a worthy propellant toward self-esteem. While it can utilize venerable modes such as awards, certificates, or plaques, embellishment of the very best performance by incremental steps such as financial rewards consistent with labor rules or trips to regional or national scientific meetings should be considered.

Exhorting animal resource clients to follow suit is extremely important and often more challenging. As noted in the December installment, investigators can be dismissive of animal care workers, knowingly or unknowingly. Technicians are left with rudimentary understanding of what or how the animals under their care are being used and are ill-prepared to comprehend or articulate the personal or societal value of their work. Initiatives to encourage interaction between clients and providers can help to improve attitudes in both camps. Even the busiest investigator can find time, if properly courted, to educate animal care staff about his/her research over a collective lunch, through invitation to a laboratory staff meeting or through invited seminars. The director should encourage investigators to acknowledge contributions of animal technicians in scientific papers. Additionally, the director should develop new resource-based services, as highlighted below, that leverage animal technology skills for the direct benefit of research laboratories and the intellectual satisfaction of resource staff.

As illustrated with melancholy humor by Charlie Chaplin in a classic scene which found him hammering balancing weights on an endless assembly line of automobile tires, repetition is a formidable drag on job satisfaction and a pathway to stress. The relevance of Chaplin's dilemma to the demands of animal care calls for *diversity* as an antidote. Cross-training with multiple species or technics, and AALAS training per se, are well known launching pads for stimulating diversity and opportunities for advancement. They also can lead to new and novel programs. One such initiative emerged in our resource from the need to optimize production and microbiological stability of genetically engineered rodents. We call it the Rodent Service. The program is run by technicians and technologists who have been trained in quality assurance monitoring, rodent colony management, rodent genetics, sample collection, drug delivery, and a variety of other tasks that ease the burden of individual laboratories during their animal-based research. Several faculty members in our Section of Comparative Medicine serve as advisors.

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Although many technicians may enjoy opportunities to diversify, others will find unaltered assignment more forgiving and perform with valuable reliability. This preference is not hard to recognize and should be encouraged. It can provide stability for fundamental obligations of animal care while freeing up workers seeking greater diversity: a win-win outcome.

Opportunities for *advancement* clearly stimulate job satisfaction. Creative organizational structures including new outlets for contemporary skills, as exemplified above, facilitate promotion and retention of the best staff members and maximal utilization of AALAS-sponsored and other relevant training. Timely advancement is, unfortunately, not always easy to offer because of the “pyramid” effect inherent to organizational structures. Sometimes the only realistic way for a worker to advance is to move on. Resource directors recognize that turnover is inevitable. If it is not rampant, turnover can have a bright side by introducing new energy, skills, and ideas to the work force. It also can place experienced animal technicians in research laboratories thereby facilitating communication and cooperation between the laboratories and the animal resource. In this sense, a resource can be an educational gardener (in the best traditions of Johnny Appleseed) whose “fruits” can improve animal-based services for the broader scientific community.

Animal resources are often “esthetically challenged” in efforts to control physical plant costs, maximize space utilization, facilitate sanitation, and provide environmental and microbiological stability. However, spending a major share of one’s time in environmentally limited surroundings can be depressing. Productive response should seek to provide a more *humane ambience*. Introduction of natural light in non-sensitive areas and the effective use of color, music, artwork, and plants can lift mood and spirits significantly.

In thinking about the all important environment of animal rooms per se, we recall that The Jackson Laboratory appointed a technician task force to help design replacement facilities after a major fire. We borrowed from their experience in building a new mouse facility. One highly popular strategy included a full scale mock up of an animal holding room, using moveable walls, plywood replicas of cage racks, change stations, and so on. The task force experimented with various configurations until they arrived at a consensus that optimized efficiency and esthetics (lighting, color, etc.)—and their advice was used for the final design.

We close with the following caveat: Even the most innovative efforts to promote job satisfaction may produce mixed results. In other words, it may be easier to assuage dissatisfaction than to eliminate it. Task repetition, for example, goes—at some level—

“with the territory.” Tolerance for it, as noted above, is likely to vary among individual staff members. Highly motivated employees are more likely to perform routine work diligently if it is balanced by opportunities for diversity and advancement. By contrast, the least motivated workers, who sign on primarily to collect a paycheck, are more likely to seek complaint than solutions. The vast majority, however, often occupy the middle ground and can, over time, swing either way. The resource director’s ongoing challenge is to win this substantial undecided vote.

**Editor’s comment and correction.**

I am very pleased and grateful that Dr. James Macy agreed to co-author Part 2.

In the prior installment of this editorial *comparable* was used to describe financial compensation at the end of paragraph 2. The more appropriate word is *comparatively*.

**Web-based manuscript submission and review**

*Comparative Medicine* is pleased to announce the impending inauguration of on-line manuscript submission and review through our publishing contractors, Allen Press. The new system, called AllenTrack, is scheduled for activation on or about March 1, 2004. It will offer direct electronic submission of manuscripts including tables and figures to the editors, who, in turn, will be able to expedite review through web-based technology. The system is secure, and no specialized software will be required for authors or reviewers. Authors who are planning to submit manuscripts after March 1 are strongly encouraged to utilize the web-based process, which will be available at <http://cmed.allentrack.net>. The website will contain instructions on how to submit manuscripts and how to communicate with *Comparative Medicine* staff during manuscript review. Because we expect accommodation to the new system will take several months, the journal will continue to accept the current paper-based submission of manuscripts until June 1, 2004. During this transition period, the most up-to-date Information for Authors for both web- and paper-based submission of manuscripts will be found at <http://www.aalas.org> and also will be published in the June 2004 issue of *Comparative Medicine*. We are confident that this important step in the evolution of the journal will expedite review and publication significantly, an attribute that will benefit authors and subscribers.