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A beginner's guide to effective delegation

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ABSTRACT: Delegation isn't just about telling someone what to do and expecting them to get on with it! It is a two-way process which, if managed well, can help to build teams, improve efficiency in the workplace and help with staff retention through motivation. In every situation, veterinary surgeons and RVNs must ensure that tasks are delegated only to those who have the appropriate competence to handle them. When delegating, who is responsible and accountable for the task carried out? How can the RVN know that tasks will be carried out competently and without compromising patient care? How is successful delegation achieved?

Delegation is not just about telling someone what to do and expecting them to get on with it! Delegation is a two-way process which, if managed well, can help to build teams, improve efficiency in the workplace and help with staff retention through motivation.

Managed badly it will have the exact opposite effect. Delegation can be defined as 'a person authorised to act as representative for another'. Importantly, delegation moves the 'responsibility' for a task to another, although the 'accountability' may remain in part – or in full – with the person delegating the task.

Delegation and RVNs

The RCVS *Code of Professional Conduct*[1] states, 'Veterinary nurses must work together and with others in the veterinary team and business, to co-ordinate the care of animals and the delivery of services'.

This highlights the importance of effective delegation within a team, as only through working well together can a co-ordinated approach to maintain the highest standard of care for patients be achieved. This is a goal that should be at the heart of every veterinary professional.

In most veterinary practices, where there is more than one veterinary nurse employed, there will be a level of hierarchy. This may include a team of RVNs led by a head nurse. Or in larger practices there may be a tertiary level of staff – SVNs, veterinary nursing assistants or other support staff who may also have responsibilities for certain aspects of patient care or practice cleanliness.

In every situation veterinary surgeons and RVNs must ensure that tasks are delegated only to those who have the appropriate competence. There are some duties which the vet must delegate only to RVNs. However, there are many tasks which the RVN may be responsible for delegating to other support staff. How can the RVN know that these will be carried out competently and without compromising patient care?

Firstly the Veterinary Surgeons Act, Schedule 3 amendment[2] must be considered before any task is delegated to a non-RVN. If there is confusion, RVNs should seek advice from senior practice staff. Tasks which may be suitable to be delegated could include:

- TPR checks on routine and intensive care patients
- instrument cleaning and sterilisation
- bathing patients
- theatre cleaning
- assisting veterinary surgeons with in-patient restraint and checks
- some pre-surgical preparation
- administrative duties.

If an RVN is considering delegating tasks to support staff, training, level of capability and job descriptions will need to be considered. Reviews and feedback will also need to be managed to ensure the level of care provided for patients is not compromised.

Why delegate?

RVNs are often a significantly under-utilised asset in the practice. Practice managers/owners can use effective

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delegation to harness and build upon the skills of RVNs. Head nurses can use delegation to help re-energise staff who are becoming stale.

Encouragement, training and introducing new areas of responsibility to support staff may be used as a first step on the ladder to their becoming an SVN. Ultimately, a lack of enthusiasm to delegate can lead to paralysis of the team.

Could RVNs in your practice assist with:

- practice marketing and promotion?
- improving work practices and efficiencies?
- collaborating with suppliers to reduce costs of consumables?

The answer is "Yes they could!" If there is the willingness and structure in place to support them to do so.

Why don't people delegate?

Delegation takes planning, time and effort. There is often a belief that the task is better and more quickly carried out by yourself. This may be true, but ask yourself is this the best use of your time? By involving other people, you develop those people's skills and abilities. Staff development is a key aspect of team building and motivation.

Delegation process

When the decision to delegate has been made, the next step is to look at how it will be managed. There are three steps to getting started and they require you to identify:

- what you want to delegate
- how much of it you want to delegate
- to whom you want to delegate it.

Make a list of the tasks you currently perform on a regular basis. Delete the tasks you must do yourself – and be honest!

The tasks that have not been deleted from the list are those that potentially could be delegated – either totally or partially – to someone else. Ask yourself, "Which of these tasks will free up the most time, so that I can concentrate on those tasks only I can do?"

Identify the most suitable person to whom tasks may be delegated. Consider the 'best fit. Is the task an extension of their current work? Do they have the time? Could some of their work in turn be delegated? Have they shown an interest in the task/area?

All this may have been discussed at appraisal, or gleaned simply though general observation. The delegated task may help to meet a training or career development need. So does the person in question already have the skills/knowledge to complete the task?

Levels of delegation

There are different levels of delegation which can be applied depending upon the task, and the people involved in the process:

Contributory delegation – whereby the task is incrementally delegated. The delegate is not ready to take on a large part of the task but may contribute to some part of it.

Shared delegation – whereby the task and responsibility are equally shared. This is useful when the delegate is not ready to take full responsibility, but can do elements of it now and learn others later.

Full delegation – whereby the delegate takes over the task in full. The responsibility for the task is with the delegate. However the accountability may remain shared, or fully with the delegator.

Responsibilities

Once the task and the persons involved have been identified, and the level of delegation has been decided, the process can begin.

The 'delegator' will lead the process. She or he must be confident that the delegate is capable of fulfilling the task. They will need to maintain a degree of accountability for the task, but will relegate responsibility to the delegate. They must be available to provide support when required. The aim should be to promote job satisfaction and increase morale.

The 'delegate' has to be in agreement to take on the task and she or he must ask for assistance if required. They must accept responsibility for what they have been asked to do.

There should be a clear path of communication in order to discuss and agree on a time-scale and any deadline for task completion. Depending upon the nature of the task, there may be a need to have review periods to look at progress where any adjustments can be made.

It is worth repeating too that there must be a provision of adequate support and the delegator should be available to answer any questions.

If a problem arises, the delegator should provide support; but should not allow the person to shift responsibility for the task back to them. Focus on results; not how it should be done! Allow the person to make decisions on the process. Provide recognition where deserved.

Troubleshooting

Don't expect the process to go smoothly all of the time – everyday work pressures can often leave the best made plans in disarray. If the results of the process are not as expected, that could be the result of one of the following:

lack of communication

- Has there been enough support for the delegate through the process? If not what can be done to change this?

lack of understanding

- This could be the consequence of a 'mis-match' of expectations.

a training issue

- Does the delegate need improvement to their skills or knowledge?

incorrect balance between support v. independence

- This will take practice, especially if you are new to delegation. Are you stifling the delegate with too much support, or leaving them to fend for themselves with a hands-off approach?

Summary

There are a few basic principles of delegation and they can be summarised.

- Delegation is not about giving orders!
- Determine the What, Who, and How!
- Be honest and open minded in what can be delegated.
- Communicate, evaluate and provide feedback.
- Remember responsibility is different to accountability.
- Know yourself and those with whom you work!

References

1. RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses.
2. The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (Schedule 3 Amendment) Order (2002)