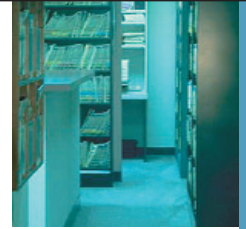


Staff team building, or just FISHing?



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Have you ever wondered whether the risk of losing 'touch' with your work colleagues is escalating as the delivery of general practice medicine becomes more administrative, group practice more practical, and the 'enterprises' we work in become bigger?

We started a small country practice over 13 years ago. In those days, we celebrated not only the birthdays of all our general practitioners and staff, but the ever increasing number of offspring. Thirteen years later, 11 GPs, four nurses, nine administrative and reception staff, an accountant, a solicitor, a cleaner and a gardener (and their partners) and more children than half the combined local primary schools – all have a stake in our business.

A few years ago, we realised there was an increasing risk that this group of people could become 'disconnected' if there was no active process to strengthen the links between them. It became imperative to instigate some team building.

Initially this revolved around social activities. Various people encouraged others to join them in travelling to Melbourne to attend concerts or sporting events. We gave massage vouchers at a local health spa to staff as Christmas presents and they attended in small groups. However, we soon realised we needed to have a 'whole group' activity to foster a sense of teamwork.

At our first attempt, we instigated a 'night out' for all medical staff. They were gradually 'drip fed' information and were prepared for what could have been anything from a rock

climbing expedition to a torchlit exploration of Melbourne's sewers! We formed staff into teams, which reflected natural 'work groups' within the practice, and asked them to undertake a series of unusual (but not life threatening) activities in which each team could gain points toward a prize. Activities required a mix of basic physical skills and both lateral and common sense, as well as teamwork. At the end of the night, the teams arrived at a mystery location. A local chef cooked a meal and the practice owners were waiters for the evening – a deliberate juxtaposition!

Reports were very favourable but a few staff hadn't attended as they were too scared at what they might be asked to do! The process of reflection was born, and we considered our options for the following year. We decided to review the readily available literature on team building and take some guidance from the more mainstream corporate sector.

We were intrigued by the teambuilding approach 'FISH'. FISH is based on the success of the Seattle Pike Place Fish Market, which grew from a small fish stand in the 1960s to become a world famous market where fish-mongers can be seen throwing fish and having fun with their customers, as well as selling high quality seafood. A desire to be famous, a commitment to customer service, and a playful and positive attitude of staff formed the basis of their success. Details of the FISH approach are documented on their website (<http://www.charthouse.com>). The basis of FISH is not 'rocket science', but revolves around the four basic principles of:

- be present
- make their day
- choose your attitude, and
- be playful.

We considered how to get our staff to recognise these four principles and relate them to our workplace. A locum came in for the night, and we undertook a series of team building activities highlighting each principle, over-arched by the notion that directors would undertake any or all of the tasks (as we would never ask our staff to do anything we were not prepared to do ourselves). The resultant energy and enthusiasm has been sustained with staff looking forward to the next 'exercise'. If you come into our workplace you can feel the positive energy irrespective of whom you have contact with.

This might seem like a big step to some. Why not start by spending an hour or two at the front desk as a receptionist in your practice – what better way to understand the myriad of tasks receptionists deal with. Don't underestimate the mutual respect this can generate. Think beyond the purely social 'get together' to opportunities to build on existing relationships to strengthen the public face of your business.

FISH is just one example of team building strategies, there are plenty of approaches that are applicable to the business of general practice. A happier workplace is a healthier workplace for all.

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