



Promoting within the practice seems like a great way to build capabilities within the team, yet when ill considered can cause chaos within the business. By **John Burfitt**

WRONG MOVE

In most cases, a promotion is a time to celebrate as a member of the team takes a step up into a new role, usually taking on a greater range of responsibilities as well as a new place within the practice structure.

And when that works, it's great in terms of building capabilities, creating new opportunities and staff morale. But when an internal promotion goes wrong, it can cause major damage throughout the practice.

Such was the case with Jane (not her real name), the star-performer receptionist at a busy Melbourne veterinary practice. Jane kept the front desk running like clockwork, was personable with clients, a vibrant colleague among the team and loved working with animals.

The day the practice manager left, and Jane was swiftly promoted into the bigger role, was when it all went wrong. She quickly proved to be an ill fit and despite ongoing training, the

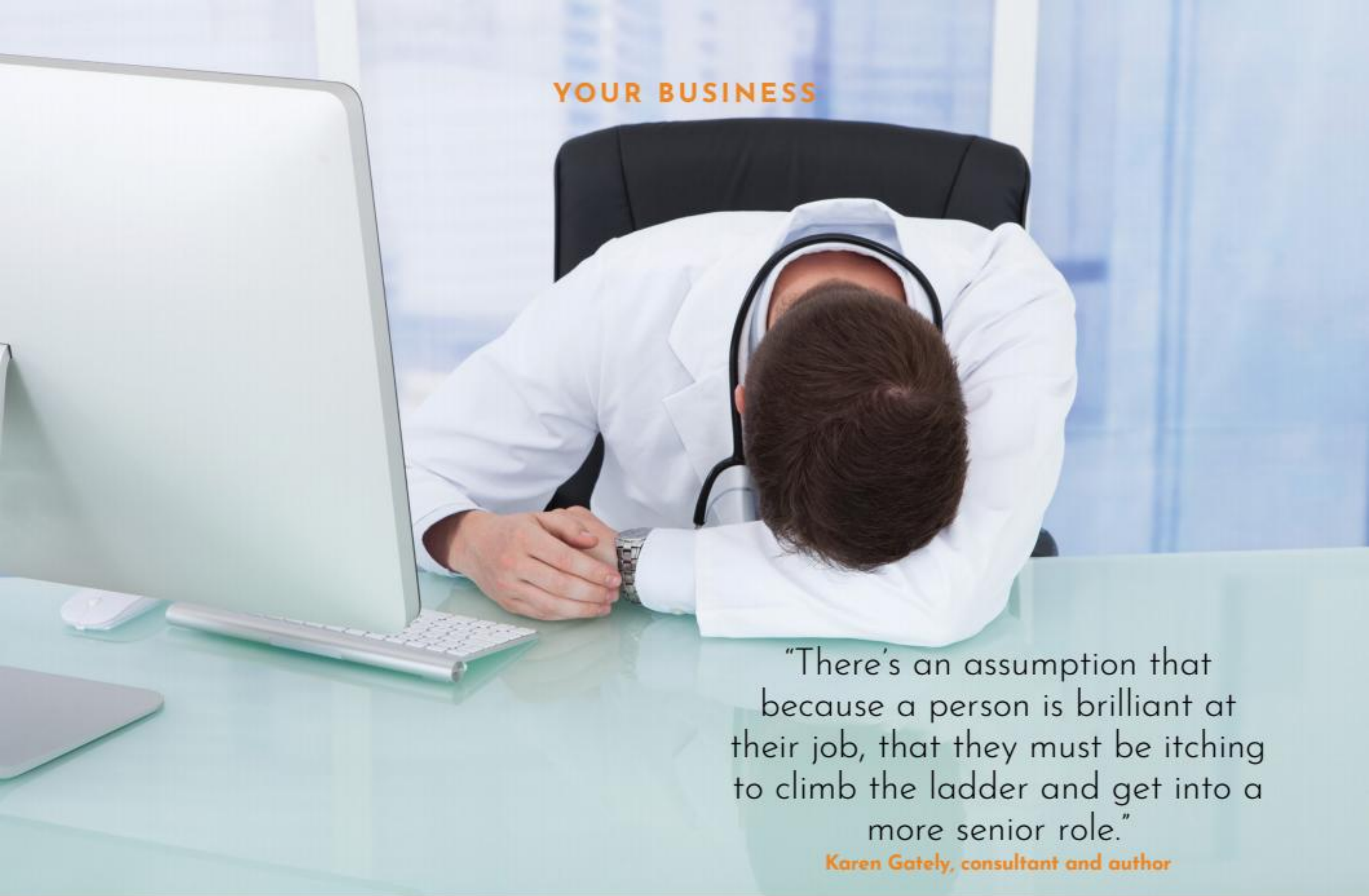
day-to-day functioning of the business turned into chaos.

Six months later, Jane wanted to quit, and admitted she never wanted the promotion in the first place. Once she returned to reception and a new practice manager was hired, the business returned to running at full steam.

"This is like a textbook story of a classic mistake I see being made all the time in small businesses," consultant Karen Gately, author of *The People Manager's Toolkit*, says.

"There's an assumption that because a person is brilliant at their job, that they must be itching to climb the ladder and get into a more senior role. How disrespectful is that to assume they feel what they are doing is not enough and must be pushed further into higher roles! And yet, it happens all the time.

"This situation highlights a lack of understanding about that individual's character, skill set and aspirations. It also can be a highly dangerous way to run your business by setting people up for



“There’s an assumption that because a person is brilliant at their job, that they must be itching to climb the ladder and get into a more senior role.”

Karen Gately, consultant and author

failure. Promoting from within is a great way to work, but it needs to be done with serious consideration.”

Usually, promoting from within is seen by practice owners as a reward for loyal service and extending new opportunities. But that’s not always the way employees see it.

According to the global leadership consulting firm DDI, workers who felt compelled to comply with a promotion were three times more dissatisfied with the new role and twice as likely to consider leaving. The DDI research also revealed almost 41 per cent of workers accepted a promotion to gain greater respect from their peers.

The promotion of staff members into roles they are unsuited for was the topic of the landmark business book *The Peter Principle* by Canadian sociologist, Dr Laurence J. Peter. The book explored the idea that competent employees will, at some point, be promoted into positions for which they are incompetent. It also stated an employee’s inability to fulfil the requirements of a new position may be due to the fact the position simply requires different skills than the employee actually possesses.

“I see vet practices do this a lot, and it highlights we need to be looking at the management of staff in different ways,” Dr Peter Higgins, veterinary science lecturer at The University of Sydney, says.

“If that person is a great receptionist or nurse or junior vet, you should not be in a rush to promote them, assuming that’s how to make the practice stronger. It can do damage.”

The more effective way, Dr Higgins advises, is for regular engagement with team members, to learn where they are within their own career cycle.

“This is why regular check-ins with staff—either formal or informal—and performance reviews throughout the year are essential to know exactly where that employee is, how they are

doing in the role and where they see themselves headed,” he explains.

“I have done performance reviews where half the people say they want the boss’s job and the other half want to stay in their current job that they love. Those kinds of discussions are so valuable and can prevent promotions being offered to people who never wanted them in the first place.”

Karen Gately claims a systematic process must be adopted that fully outlines the responsibilities of the new role, through a comprehensive job description, along with an exploration of the intentions and suitability of the internal candidate.

“It’s a matter of letting that person know all that the job entails so they can make an informed decision,” Gately says. “It’s then important to consider what kind of training that person might need over time and if you or another senior member of the practice team is really prepared to train them up.

“Basically, you need to know they’re up for it, they understand the learning curve and know what the strategy is to support them.”

Just as importantly, candidates should be given the permission to knock back the offer without any fear. “I hear of people being scared not to accept a new job as they fear it will reflect badly on them,” she says. “We need to change our mindset on that one, and allow people to be identified as the master of their existing role.”

Gately says identifying the range of ways to reward good staff without a knee jerk rush to promote them, is vital to job satisfaction. “It’s allowing your team to be the very best in the role they are doing. So if that person wants to remain in the same job for 10 years—and is brilliant at it—then that person is gold and you should be doing everything to encourage them to evolve so they remain amazing in their role.” **V**