

Katie Berlin: And the dog coughs just in time to lead us in to another episode of Central Line. Thank you so much for joining us today. I'm your host, Katie Berlin, and we have a special roundtable discussion today. I am so excited. We have four, so now we have including me, four voices for you to try to distinguish if you're listening. So we'll have our guests, who are three incredible technicians, we'll have them introduce themselves at the beginning and then maybe periodically, I might just ask you to pipe up who you are before you say something, so people can learn who's saying what. But I am so stoked for this conversation, this is gonna be great. So Natalie Boursiquot, Liz Hughston and Heather Prendergast, thank you so much for making this work.

Katie Berlin: We, this year, AAHA said it was the year of the team. Honestly, every year should be year of the team, but it is nice to have that theme in mind whenever we're thinking about content, whenever we're thinking about whose voices to feature because it really is something that we haven't seen enough of in the profession, and one of the things that I love most now is seeing technician voices being elevated and shared, and it's such a variety of perspectives from technicians. So this is gonna be one of the highlights of the year on the podcast for me. So I'm gonna ask the three of you to just share a little bit about yourselves, what you're doing now, and what you'd like people to know. Natalie, would you like to go first?

Natalie Boursiquot: Sure. And thank you again for having me. I'm so excited to have this conversation with three amazing technicians. So happy to be here. I am Natalie. I have been in the veterinary field for about 16 years now. Initially the plan like I think a lot of people was... I had that childhood dream of being a veterinarian, so that was my initial plan, and I actually completed my undergraduate degree and two and a half years of vet school before I shifted gears and ended up kind of switching my career path and became a registered veterinary technician which is where I am now. Kind of went the leadership route through being a registered vet tech on the floor to being a shift lead, to practice manager, and now an area manager within a specialty, so I made that shift as well from general practice to specialty. I tend to like to dabble and dabble on all kinds of things. So the current thing is cardiology, but I've been in oncology and dentistry, [0:02:38.1] ____, I like all the things, and especially the weird things that a lot of people don't tend to like, like eyeballs.

Katie Berlin: Like eyeballs, yeah. It's always the eyeballs.

[chuckle]

Natalie Boursiquot: Yes. I am the one that likes eyeballs, I don't know. So yeah, currently in cardiology and hoping to stick here. My passion is obviously elevating veterinary technicians and making sure that we're truly utilizing them in practice and really getting the true benefit of having a technician in practice, to the practice, to the staff, to the doctors, just to have a well-rounded veterinary team, so that's kind of my biggest passion and why I'm here now.

Katie Berlin: Love it and perfect for our conversation today. We're gonna be talking about... I didn't even say that. It doesn't matter, we have the three of you just talk about whatever, but we are gonna be talking about team retention today, specifically technicians, how do we keep technicians from leaving, how could we get them to not ever want to leave? And that is a question that everybody I think wants to know. And Natalie, what you just said in your bio, I hadn't really thought about that as being something really specific to technicians versus veterinarians, that you can hop specialties if you want to. You can work for an ophthalmologist for a while and then go work for cardiologists, and it's really cool because you never have to get bored with one specialty

and you can always go back to general practice or ER. I love that so much and I never thought about it that way.

Natalie Boursiquot: Yeah, it's awesome.

Katie Berlin: All right, Liz, you're up.

Liz Hughston: Hi, I'm Liz Hughston. I am an RVT. I actually hold every available US credential for technicians, so I'm a CVT, LVT, LVMT, RVT, and I'm a veterinary technician specialist...

Katie Berlin: Nice.

Liz Hughston: In small animal internal medicine and emergency and critical care. I have been registered for 17 years now which seems crazy. I think what Natalie said is so spot on. I'm just passionate about veterinary medicine, I love working in the field, I love veterinary technicians, veterinary assistants. I love everything that we do in this profession, and I am very positive about the direction that our profession is taking, especially in terms of elevating the roles of veterinary technicians, and I'm really looking forward to this conversation today.

Katie Berlin: Love it. And that passion shows for sure, we need... And we need people who are passionate, both in and out of the clinic. It takes everybody. So, Heather.

Heather Prendergast: Thank you. I'm Heather Prendergast, a registered veterinary technician, and I hate to age myself, but I've been in this field for over 30 years, I can't believe that either, but I've served every role in our practice, from a kennel assistant because I was so young when I started, all the way up to hospital administrator, and I would like to say that I have retired out of my last hospital that I was in for about 20 years, and really started doing more consulting and helping more practices on a broader level, because being in hospital, I was only able to impact my team, but leadership is definitely what drove me and drove the success of our hospital, and that's where I really started when I started consulting, that leadership is the key. And having a great leader team, having a great culture, that is priority and as I'm consulting with hospitals, while we can work on financials, the culture is the key, and if we can make the culture work and have a great place to work, which leads to employee retention, then ultimately the practice is gonna succeed, so that piece has really driven my passion for this industry and not willing to give up. We can get there, it just takes all of us to be able to make that happen, so that's my passion.

Katie Berlin: And a worthy passion and one I deeply believe in too, that good leaders are absolutely, it's something that we have to invest in if we want this profession to grow and evolve, and to keep people in it, because I definitely have had experiences where I know that if the leadership in place had been different, I might even still be there. And I'm not, I'm doing this, which is great, and I love it. [laughter] But there were a lot of factors for why I left the clinic, but I think that it was definitely a big part of that in a lot of the situations I've found myself in, and it's so applicable to so many different areas of vet med. People who work in corporate versus independent practices, and people who work in academia and people who work outside of the clinic, leadership is important everywhere, and it's something that none of us really have a lot of background in by the time we get into the field, so yeah, big hearty agree on that there. Here's a question, Heather, do you feel like when you were a kennel assistant, if someone had said leadership is gonna be really important to you and you're gonna end up having all these leader positions, do you think you would

have believed them? Is it something you always wanted?

Heather Prendergast: It was not something I would have believed in when I was that young. I just didn't understand enough about that role and responsibility, that has completely shifted where yes, even kennel assistants need some leadership because they are going to be leading clients in some way, and they're gonna be leading on maybe another team member. And so the more that we can share the growth while it may not be as high level as it is for a practice administrator or manager, I still think that they need it, and that also helps them lead themselves better, both personally and professionally. So it's a nice way to grow individual team members, even if they're just kennel assistants.

Katie Berlin: Yeah, for sure, leading from within the team is something that I feel like we're starting to hear a little bit more about. As an associate vet, I often felt sort of like in a similar boat to a lot of technicians, I think, where I just kind of felt like I was supposed to show up and do the things that I was supposed to do, and I wasn't really supposed to have an opinion about how we did them because it wasn't always welcome. Is that something that... I could see a lot of nodding. Natalie, is that something that in your experience you've had to...

Natalie Boursiquot: Yeah. And I think it's interesting because a lot of times, I don't think we give veterinarians enough credit for the leadership role that they play, for RVTs and for the whole team, for assistants, for kennel assistants. I think it's important to recognize that because even myself, as I was learning as an RVT, even though the veterinarian doesn't have the same skills as I have, most of my mentors have been veterinarians, and so that role within the hospital is really important I think for us to foster it, I think as a leader, so having been in that practice manager role and currently in a manager role, I think that's important from the leadership side to kind of build that relationship between the veterinarian and the RVT or any staff member really, I tend to lean towards the technicians because that's what I have most experience with, but I think fostering that relationship is what really helps develop the environment that we need to be able to... Everyone do their job the best that they can.

Katie Berlin: Yeah, I love that. Liz, do you have thoughts on that?

Liz Hughston: Yeah, I have thoughts on that. Yeah, I think that leading from within is one of the most difficult things that we can do as team members. And I think so much of it is based on the... This has become kind of the buzz word around veterinary medicine right now, but it really is about the culture of the practice. And I'll put in a plug for AAHA Publishing and just talk about Josh Vaisman's new book that just came out, which is fantastic. And I think if you have an environment of positive psychology and psychological safety, then it becomes much easier to lead from within. And I would urge leaders to take a really hard look at whether your environment is fostering that kind of psychological safety so that people feel comfortable to speak up when they see something that is wrong or that they wanna change. Or they see a way that they want to develop. Dr. Berlin, Katie, I've listened to you talk enough on Central Line to know like you hate surgery, so if you had been in a psychologically...

Katie Berlin: Hate is a strong word.

[laughter]

Liz Hughston: Hey, I hate anesthesia, so I'm right there with you. But if you had been in a psychologically safe environment, you could have spoken up maybe and said to your management, "Hey, I don't like surgery, it's not my strong suit. Allow me to focus on the outpatient side, on..." Or even if you were working in an environment that had a hospital, "On the hospital side, allow me to care for the hospitalized patients," or "Let me do all of the client education around these diseases," or whatever it might be, but when you're in an environment where it's not safe to talk about your hopes, your dreams, the direction you wanna go, I think it becomes really difficult, no matter what role you're in, whether you're an associate veterinarian, whether you're a credential technician, whether you're an assistant, whether you work at the front desk, we all have ideas about how we can make things better at the practice, not just for ourselves, but sometimes for everybody, and to be shut down, to be ignored, to feel like your voice isn't heard, I think is a major issue. And I do think that that dovetails really perfectly with our discussion today, because I think that's what forces people out. That's one thing.

Liz Hughston: So you say to your boss, "Hey, I feel like I'm not growing, I want to learn more, I wanna get my VTS, I want to move into leadership. How can I do that?" And a boss says something like, "Well, no, I mean, you're a technician, that's what you do, and you're doing what you do, and there's nowhere for you to go." Why would a person stay in an environment like that if they're told no, there's no more money for you, there's no more responsibility, there's no growth opportunity? But all of that comes from a lack of leadership. Because a leader, I think a true leader is someone who is open to hearing that kind of feedback and to finding ways to maximize the team that they have, and not only that's just gonna help the team members, it's gonna help the practice, it's gonna help the bottom line, it's gonna help everything, overall. So, I think that's where the leadership is really key, especially in terms of retention.

Katie Berlin: That is such a good observation, and as you were saying that, I was just thinking of all the people who are listening and are probably like, "But in my practice, that wouldn't work because..." My favorite that I have heard many times is like, "Well, you can do that if you want to, but I can't pay you more," and it's like, oh well, let me just do it out of the goodness of my heart then, that I wanna bring this special set of skills to the practice, and then use them for free, especially that they cost me money to get. And thinking about that, I'm thinking about the leaders I've had that are really good and the leaders that have not been so great in a lot of respects. And the big difference is that when you ask them something, the good leaders don't say, "We can't." And then list all the reasons that we can't. They don't automatically say yes, because everything isn't possible, but they'll say, "Well, what would that look like if we could do that?" And then start that train of thought. And they might give you homework to do, like leg work, "Okay, you go figure this out, and then we'll see if we can make it happen," but they don't just say no, and that is a huge... Just a huge culture shift on its own. Heather, you've been in every role in the hospital, and so I'm very curious about your perspective here. We're talking about how to keep... Oh no...

Natalie Boursiquot: Uh-oh.

Katie Berlin: Oh no, as soon as I asked Heather a direct question, she disappeared!

Natalie Boursiquot: I know.

Katie Berlin: Oh, it's a sign! Okay, so I'm gonna ask because we're still recording, so hopefully she'll come back, so I'm gonna ask you both then, like Natalie, having grown through this

profession a little bit, like the more you learn, do you find yourself thinking of all the reasons why something can't be done? Do you find yourself identifying more with that sort of practice owner role, where their job is to keep ahold of the finances and make sure we don't get too out of line, and don't set a precedent, or do you feel like the more you learn, the more you realize it's possible?

Natalie Boursiquot: I think definitely in my baby stages as a leader, I fell into that mindset for sure, always thinking about, well, that's not gonna work because of this. Or what's our labor costs gonna look like if I add that extra technician that this doctor is saying that they absolutely need? That's always how it starts out but I think as you grow in the profession, just similar to what Liz was saying that the environment is what becomes important and building that culture. I'm gonna use the buzzword too, 'cause it's really important to me, I think it's a huge part of how we keep our technicians and how we keep any staff member really is culture, more than anything, but I think as I started to learn that, then I started to look at all sides of things.

Natalie Boursiquot: Okay, what would it look like if I add an additional technician, do we have the space to see an additional patient and may get a return on that investment? We can still look at it from a business standpoint, but being open to that, I think has definitely been something that I have to flex my leadership skills on and learn how to incorporate into my role, but yeah, for sure, it started off as, "No, that's not gonna work and these are the reasons why that's not gonna work," which I think that perspective also is helpful to have, to know in the back of your mind what your challenges might be, that's still, you can't ignore that there are gonna be labor costs, that there are gonna be obstacles that will come across, but not leading with that. I think leading with a yes and then kind of sprinkling in the challenges and how do we work around that, I think is how you get there.

Liz Hughston: I think that is super challenging because I do... I get why the knee-jerk reaction is a no or... Because it does, it takes a lot of effort on the part of leadership to think about how things might be different. And we all... Change is scary, and historically, in veterinary medicine, we've been a little bit risk-averse, a little bit change fearful, just a little. So I think that part is also difficult. And I think the more that leadership focuses on self-awareness, not just as on individual self-awareness, but kind of institutional profession-wide self-awareness, I think leaders are now recognizing that oftentimes they're put in a position without training, without mentorship, without their own growth in mind, it's because they've been there the longest or someone, they want more money and they're told the only way they can get more money is if they go into a management role, even if they don't want a management role, so I think the industry is starting to wake up to the idea that this isn't the best way to create leaders in the practice.

Liz Hughston: And so now, I think there's a much bigger focus on how do we make sure we have the best leaders that we can, and I think it's because we're in this moment of crisis where we don't have enough people in the profession to do the work, to care for the pets that we need to care for. And we have to find a way. We can't graduate our way out of this crisis, we have to find a way to keep people, we have to find a way to bring people back to the profession. I can't tell you how many veterinary technician groups I'm in where people say, I left to go to nursing school and I regret it every day. I left Vet med because of X, Y, Z, and I miss it so much. I wish I could come back. I wish that I could make a living and work only one job. I wish that I was respected as a professional. I wish that my title meant something.

Liz Hughston: All of these pieces, I think the industry is starting to finally recognize that these are

the keys to how we move forward, we have to find a way to not only hold on to people, but to bring people back in, and while we're also encouraging people to come in. There's that stat about veterinarians, what they surveyed veterinarians, and 60% of them said they wouldn't recommend this as a career if someone came to or if their kid came to them, or if someone came to them and said, "Would you be a veterinarian?" Or, "I wanna be a veterinarian." They would actually dissuade them from entering the profession, I think that's a tragedy, but I do see why. [laughter]

Katie Berlin: Yeah, there's so many reasons why. I'm just thinking about, so like I did an externship, 'cause vet med is my second career. I was in art history before this, and I did an externship in my senior year of high school with a horse vet, Dr. Francie Luther, she was great, she was the vet for all of our horses, like when I was taking riding lessons growing up, and I'd always look forward to her being out there, and I did ride along with her. And she pretty much was like, "Do not do this." [laughter] And she also had the perspective of the solo equine practitioner who had just got an Associate after 25 years of being on call, so she probably wasn't the one to listen to, but she really did try to talk me out of it and it worked. I was a Liberal Arts major, and then came back to it, and I think that's just sort of a small, tiny, little nutshell version of what we see overall in the profession. It's not that people are running away from Vet Med because they hate it, it's a work that really is a calling for a lot of people, and they just can't imagine doing anything else but are forced to, either to care for themselves or to care for their families, or to be able to go home at night sometimes instead of going to be a hostess at whatever restaurant because they can't make ends meet.

Liz Hughston: Yeah, and to escape the toxicity, which is there, which is so prevalent in our profession. And I think it's hard with the group of folks we have on this call, like these are the anathema, these are the antithesis of toxic leaders. But they are out there, and that makes it even more difficult. This mean girl ethos, this, the cliqueness, the eat our young kind of idea.

Katie Berlin: I suffered, so you have to also.

Liz Hughston: It's prevalent.

Katie Berlin: Yeah.

Natalie Boursiquot: I think you made a good point also of that a lot of times the leaders are not who's best for the position, but who's been there the longest, who knows someone or it's not always the best choice and that makes a huge difference. I think one of the things that I've always taken pride in is making sure that my, whoever follows me knows who I am as a person, so that they can make a decision on their own if I'm the right leader for them. And they can tell me if they think I'm doing something that they disagree with or whatever the case may be. But I'm not gonna come in and be like, oh, because I've been in the field for X amount of years, then I'm your leader. That doesn't make sense to me.

Katie Berlin: Right, I've been here longer. That's my spot.

Liz Hughston: Natalie, I'm guessing you can probably look at your statistics and point to your retention, your turnover rates, and I think that is how we're gonna move the needle. We can talk until we're blue in the face about psychological safety and the importance of culture and all of that, but there are going to be some entities in our profession who are only gonna look at the bottom line.

And I think there's an argument to be made. I know that we need data on this. I know we need probably someone out there to do a study on this and kind of looking at that Flourish Veterinary Consulting for that study. But I think that we could look at, we know how much turnover costs, and so I think you could find a way to figure out how much psychological safety and a positive environment is actually contributing to the bottom line...

Natalie Boursiquot: Absolutely.

Liz Hughston: In terms of attracting people to the practice. I don't know... Natalie, you tell me. Do you guys have a backlog of people who wanna work at your practice or are you as desperate as everyone out there to find people? [chuckle]

Natalie Boursiquot: Well, I don't know if I can take credit because I haven't been at my current practice for very long. It just been about a year, but I will say that there is a positive culture of people who come, they really only leave if there's something like a major life event or some reason that's not job related that they tend to leave. And I think it's well known that we foster a culture of everybody's opinion counts. Everyone feels comfortable and safe. And so I do think that is a huge thing of not just my leadership specifically, but the leadership that they incorporate into the structure of the company as a whole. I think they don't pick anyone to be a leader within this company. So I do think there's something to be said of that.

Natalie Boursiquot: And looking back at my leadership in other companies, I have historically taken over clinics that have been struggling a little bit and they've had some toxic leadership before me. And so there's been a lot of challenges of changing that mindset, and showing them that you can have a practice manager that cares about you. You can have someone that's gonna put on scrubs and get in next to you when somebody calls out and not just say, oh well, deal with it. I think that showing them rather than just being that name and the face, I think that has made a huge impact. And I've had technicians come up to me and say, "I'm so glad that you're a technician because you understand." And that's not always the case with some leadership. So, yeah.

Liz Hughston: Yeah, for sure.

Katie Berlin: That's for sure. And here's a question because I know there are a lot of places that have good intentions and execution may be lagging behind the intentions a little bit, because life is super busy and stressful and like, even if you have a study that says it's worth this much to really work on the culture of your practice and really work on psychological safety, it's still hard to prioritize that when you have a wait list for clients of six weeks and like somebody is calling out every day or whatever and you still have maybe some toxic team members that you're not really sure what to do with, so how would you think or how have you seen that process kind of get jump-started? Like where the heck do we start?

[chuckle]

Liz Hughston: I think it's start... You hear this a lot, it seems kind of trite, but it really does start at the top. So I think if you have a commitment from the leadership and the top can be your hospital manager if you're in a corporate chain, the top is a little bit, it's kind of in the cloud, you don't really understand who is the top, where is the top, but you can...

Katie Berlin: Right, you're not gonna get the CEO to take a leadership course.

Liz Hughston: You could, that would be awesome and amazing. But you can start at your level at the hospital. I think we can all start at our own level to bring that to our work every day. The idea, Natalie hit it exactly right, that personal caring. I care about you as a person. I wanna know what's happening with you as a person. And I want you to bring your whole self to work. You hear a lot about, oh, leave home at home and... But I think we all have to bring our whole self to work.

Katie Berlin: I'm [0:28:14.2] _____ that.

Liz Hughston: Yeah. And if we're struggling outside of work, that struggle is gonna spill over into our work. And I think it's important that you don't have to share everything. I'm not talking about being TMI and like laying it all out on the table, but the space to be able to say to a coworker, or if you are the hospital manager to your leads or on down, like, hey, not just the through the treatment area, "Hey, everybody doing okay? Okay, great, see you later." Like, hey, a sit down, a check in once a week, once every two weeks. How are things going? How are you feeling? Are things... Do you need... Is there a support you need from us, from the practice? Are there things that you see we could change? Whatever it might be. Those small steps. It doesn't have to be a big thing, a 10 minute check-in where you can say to someone, I personally care about you. I am here listening to you, I am connected to you, and I really want to hear what you say.

Liz Hughston: But then I think the bigger piece is the follow through, showing that you actually listened and doing what you can to then demonstrate that you have heard, that you've internalized this, whatever it is that they've talked about or brought to you or they said something is amazing. Like how do you do more of that, then demonstrating that? Because I think without the demonstration, I think that's where it all falls apart because then people are like, oh, well they're just another, like talking head. They don't really care. They're not really doing anything. And I think we all have little things that we can do, no matter our level, but I do think it starts at the top. And I think if the manager starts that, that process, and I know we're slammed with clients, we feel like we don't have time to do any of these things.

Liz Hughston: And I think we have to make time to do these things, because these are the things that are gonna make the biggest difference down the line. It's gonna make much more of an impact if you can take a little bit of time every day to demonstrate to people on your team that you personally care about them while you're dealing with all of the myriad of other things that come up for a manager that you have to deal with. But that one, pick a team member a day, and take 10 minutes, seven minutes, whatever it might be, to just like have that personal connection. I think that's where it starts, and then it builds from there. Because once you start doing that, and people feel more connected, they feel more connected to you, they feel more invested in the practice, they recognize that you are invested in them, they're going to give back. That is what team members do. We want that. When we think about generational differences, I think that's the biggest thing. Millennials, Gen Z, that's what they want. They want to know that they matter, that their work matters, that what they're doing has an impact and matters to someone beyond just what they're bringing in terms of a financial difference.

Katie Berlin: That's so true. Technically, I'm Gen X depending on...

Liz Hughston: Me too.

Katie Berlin: Yeah. Depending, but people forget about us anyway, so we might as well just lump ourselves in with the millennials, but...

Liz Hughston: No...

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: But that idea of you matter, people take it and they distort it into, everybody wants a participation prize for just doing their job. But the fact is that, I have never seen a group of people as committed and dedicated for so little return as veterinary technicians. Like you all have been beaten down for a long time. It is a hard physical job. It's an impossible emotional job. You get basically no recognition from pet owners about it, and very little recognition from the rest of the profession and you don't even have the sole right to call yourselves veterinary technicians at this point. And so it is amazing to me how much technicians do for so little and how absolutely committed as a group you are to stick with it as long as you can. And just knowing that so many technicians leave the profession, I mean, what is the average career, like five years or something before people leave? And they almost all say, I want to go back, but I can't. Or these things would have to be true if I went back. They're already saying them. It's already out there. It's not a mystery. And they're asking for like, please treat me like a human, and pay me enough so that I can pay my bills. Like, that's it. That's literally it.

Liz Hughston: Literally it. [chuckle]

Katie Berlin: Yeah. And I feel like we... I feel like that's a solvable problem.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: I feel like that it's not one of those things that's like, oh gosh, what should we do? I feel like we know what we need to do, so why is it so hard for us to do it?

Natalie Boursiquot: I think that's the million dollar question, right?

Katie Berlin: It is. Yeah.

Natalie Boursiquot: I think a lot of us leaders know what the barriers are and we know why they exist. It's the movement that I think is hard. There's so many of us that are trying to take these baby steps and making a difference within our practice and making a difference within a certain specialty or whatever we can put our hands on and touch. We're trying to make what little difference we can, but I think until we start to have more of these conversations, more of these, get these podcasts out there, get all of this type of continuous motion with discussing the issues and bringing it to light, I think that's what's gonna help us get there. It's just really getting every leader in the profession to be like, what can I do? What little bit can I do to make a change within my own practice that will contribute to the bigger picture?

Liz Hughston: I think there are, I mean there are big systemic things that we can do, but those take real commitment and leadership that I think many people don't feel they have the bandwidth for, or maybe they just feel like, I'm just a lonely technician, what can I do to fix these systemic issues?

And I think Natalie, again, just spot on. It's continuing to have the conversations and finding ways to get yourself in to the places where these discussions are happening. So I'm here on this podcast, Natalie's here on this podcast. We're talking about it. We have a platform to amplify the voices of other folks. But one big way, and I'm just gonna put in a plug here for state veterinary technician associations, because I think they are doing huge, they are just doing hugely heavy lifting right now in the profession to fix issues on a systemic basis and really pushing the conversation forward in their own states.

Liz Hughston: And I think that that is the place where the impact is starting to be felt. And I think that state veterinary medical associations are feeling that a little bit more, and what happens then is it starts to trickle up. Because if your state vet tech association is out there advocating in the legislature, at veterinary medical board meetings, having these discussions, making sure that the veterinary medical board is paying attention to credentialed technician issues in the state, and reminding them what those issues are and like continuing to push that envelope at that level, what happens is the state VMA pays attention to that. They hear those discussions, they see what's happening. They go to a House of Delegates meeting for the state, and they talk about those issues there. And then what happens is that gets up to the AVMA House of Delegates meeting. People say they don't like politics, they don't wanna play politics, I just wanna come to work and do my job, but if we truly want to create the big change, we have to push it from the grassroots up into the areas of the profession where the decisions are really being made.

Natalie Boursiquot: Liz, I'm so glad you said that. Actually the state I'm in, our Veterinary Technician Association dissolved within the past couple of years. And it broke my heart because they were doing amazing things, putting on CEs, doing events, but they just didn't have the support, they didn't have the bandwidth. It was a couple of people doing all of the work, and just not having a pipeline of leaders to follow. And I wonder, is there anything that we can do to kind of encourage that within the technicians that I would talk to and say, hey, why don't you consider being a part of that? They, just like you were saying, they'd say, "Well, I'm just a technician. What do I have to contribute? I don't know anything about leadership and things like that." So I'm wondering what we can do to help encourage that? Encouraging not just being a member of your state association, but taking those leadership roles and helping build upon that so that we don't have situations like that, 'cause I do think that we're feeling a loss in the state that I'm in because of that.

Liz Hughston: Yeah, that makes me so sad. I think that... I think a big thing that practices can do is actually invest in their technicians and pay the dues...

Natalie Boursiquot: Absolutely.

Liz Hughston: For the state Vet Tech Association. Because sometimes that's... The dues are not that expensive, they're sometimes \$50 a year, \$30... Somewhere between \$30 and \$100 a year. So depending on how many technicians you have, it's not that huge of an investment, and I think that that is... If you pay their dues, then the practice can say, hey, we've paid your dues to join the association, have you gone to any of their CE, have you volunteered to be on a committee, are you, like how can we also support you in getting more involved in your state association, and maybe it's, you know, we'll pay you half-time for the time that you're volunteering for your state association, we'll pay you a quarter time or we'll pay you 50 bucks or whatever it is, you figure out the financials and how they work. But that's how you can incentivize people getting involved because you can say, hey, if you're volunteering for your state association, I'm a member of two VTS

academies, and I do a lot of volunteer work for the VTS academies, and we incentivize our members to be involved by giving them recertification points, so like everything they get involved in, they get a little thank you.

Liz Hughston: And hey, you can do this and we'll give you a little bit of points that helps you recertify in five years, and I think that kind of a thing is how a practice group, how practice leadership can encourage the folks in their organization to get involved. The other side of that, of course, is helping to make sure they have good work-life balance, which is what technicians all want, and Katie mentioned it, we want to be paid enough so that we can pay our bills with one job. And when you have technicians who are out there having to sell their plasma or do a bunch of work on the side, or have three jobs just to get to the end of the month, then they can't even conceive of having any time to do anything outside of that. So there really is a fundamental systemic and basic issue that they need before they can think about taking that next step and getting involved, so I think that is... It's number one, making sure they're taken care of, that they're able to work one job, that they are compensated and have benefits that they need to survive.

Liz Hughston: Okay, now we have that part done, now we're gonna make sure that you're getting out on time because we're gonna be adequately staffed, we're gonna manage our schedule appropriately so that everyone is doing what they're supposed to do so you can get out on time and utilizing technicians to the full extent helps everybody get out of the practice on time, don't make your technicians and your assistants be your cleaning staff, like hire janitorial services so that people aren't staying after the hospital is closed to clean bathrooms, to mop floors, like let's stop having that be a thing, and give other people that work. And then people are getting home on time, then they have enough money to pay their bills, they don't have to work three jobs, then they can start thinking about what can I do, how can I get involved to help change things for more people? And then you can talk about, okay, we're paying your dues for your state association, how are you being involved in your association, what are you doing to move the needle in the direction we want the profession to go?

Katie Berlin: Listening to you going through sort of that, it's like a list of... It's like a continuum of what you can do to make this possible for your team members, and none of those things are like absolutely earth shaking changes. You could be like, oh, janitorial staff, I could look for that now, and that would mean at least one or two staff members might get out earlier every day. That's one thing, and I think it's just like so many things where we realized that it's the one step at a time approach, just do the next thing, and maybe not it is a long game. But you can't focus on the end of the tunnel all the time because it is a long tunnel, like we've been in this tunnel for a long time, we live in this tunnel, this is where we live.

[chuckle]

Katie Berlin: So could we at least take a step towards the end of the tunnel this week. And I was also thinking, when you were saying like there are so many people that are just doing what they need to do to get by that they can't possibly think of anything they'd rather do less, even if they could find the time than like sit in a room with other technicians, argue about what we should be doing next, let's face it, there's a lot of strong personalities in those rooms, and there should be, because that's how things get done. If everybody is just like, okay, then things... We would all just stay the same, but that means that that selects for only a certain type of person with a certain set of circumstances that's going to be making the rules and helping get things changed, and that has led to

a lot of things in Vet Med that are causing us to stagnate. So people in hospitals where they really haven't historically had a great culture and work-life balance and they have not been able to empower their teams, need to think about this maybe the most, because those staff members need to have a voice and figure out how to fix the system so that it's not like that forever.

Katie Berlin: And one thing that I've noticed in talking to some technicians is that, like you said, they might... I'm just one technician, like what can I do, but they also, and I'm generalizing obviously, but associate vets are kind of like this too. People have not empowered them before. And it's not a group of people that I feel like have had people telling them forever, you can do whatever you want, you can make a difference, like no matter what your title is. What can we do about that? Like how can we get technicians to feel like they can make a huge change and it's worth their time to try?

Natalie Boursiquot: Yeah, I think it all just goes back to leadership, just having someone in your corner that's encouraging you and showing that they see you, that they see your strengths, that they see what you're capable of, I think that's been something I was missing in my career early on, it was the same thing Liz was talking about, you show up, you do your job, you clean the bathroom and you go home.

[chuckle]

Natalie Boursiquot: It's hard to feel like you have anything to contribute when there's no one that's supporting that, so I think just having, whether it is your direct line manager or another technician in the clinic, whoever it is that can kind of partner with you and encourage you and say, "Hey, you're really good at that, you should teach a wet lab on making blood smears," or whatever the case is, encouraging that growth and then showing you that you have something to contribute is a huge part of that.

Liz Hughston: We have to continue to remind people, there is so much... We have a big self-confidence issue, generally speaking, as veterinary technicians, you know, veterinary assistants, veterinary team members period, the amount of times that I hear or see someone put just in front of their title, we have to stop doing that. We are co-equal members of the veterinary healthcare team, we serve a different role than the veterinarians do, and I get that there is a hierarchy in terms of supervision levels and things like that, and I also think that when we work together, that hierarchy is pretty flat in an organization where technicians are utilized fully and respected as professionals, and I think that it's slowly shifting now to understanding that technicians, credentialed veterinary technicians are professionals who have invested in their profession and in themselves, and that they feel a sense of duty and responsibility, and that's demonstrated by holding a license to practice. And so these veterinarians who say things like, well, it's all on my license if a mistake happens, it's like, you know what, it's not because I have a license that I also have to protect.

Liz Hughston: So I would like you veterinarian not to delegate things to an assistant, because guess what, that's my license, if something happens in the practice, that's on my license too. So how about we not do that, how about instead we respect each other as professionals, doing the things that we can do best or that we're limited to by law, veterinarians do four things, they do surgery, they make a diagnosis...

Katie Berlin: Or not.

[laughter]

Liz Hughston: Or not. They deliver a prognosis, and they write prescriptions, and everything else, depending on the level of supervision, depending on your state law should be either credentialed veterinary technician or a veterinary assistant doing those things. And if we do that, if we truly utilize people, elevate them to their full potential, their fullest level of education, skill, knowledge, then, I mean, it's a bit of a chicken and egg, but I do think the respect then comes because you can start proving yourself, what you know, what you can do, then you're gonna be trusted more, then you're going to be able to do more, to contribute more to the bottom line of the practice, which means that the practice is going to understand your value more. Until we get to that point where we stop denigrating ourselves, where we stop putting just in front of our title and really stand up and say, I am a proud RVT. And I am good at what I do, and I know what I know, I mastered 240 or demonstrated proficiency in 240 hands-on skills and passed a national exam, I can do these things, and hey veterinarian, allow me to do these things and I am okay starting in a low risk situation, an environment to demonstrate that I can do these things and build trust with you, and you have to give me the chance to do that.

Liz Hughston: And so I think that it really is, it's gonna take a whole profession-wide team effort, and we need veterinarians who are supportive of us to continue to push that with their associates because we're not in those rooms where discussions and decisions get made. If you're in a practice and they have doctors' meetings, I always just hope there's someone in that room advocating for the team, whether it be the hospital manager or whoever is leading that meeting, the medical director, someone, so the doctors are complaining, I'm not getting out on time because I can't get my records written, okay, well, what's your technician doing? What's your assistant doing? Are you placing catheters? Are you doing blood draws, what's happening here that is impinging on you being able to get home on time, that's affecting your quality of life that you're then coming to complain to me as the medical director about rather than, you just need to be more efficient, or you need to figure out how to manage your time better.

Liz Hughston: Those are the kinds of discussions, I think. And as those things filter through the profession, and it's happening, we have younger people coming in, more technicians, credentialed technicians who have worked really hard to get where they are, are demanding that kind of treatment and respect, which is so heartening to see, and I love to see it. And I think those of us who have the ability to have that voice, we're in a leadership position, or we're not dependent on a corporation to pay our bills or whatever it might be, those of us who can speak up on behalf of others, I think we encourage others to speak up for themselves. And so I think continuing to model that behavior and then not closing the door behind you, so we have come through a door, and instead of closing that door, we need to reach behind us and pull more people through the door with us. And I think if we can do that, that's how we're going to bring more of those people into these organizations and allow them to flourish in a way that they can really show what they can do.

Katie Berlin: Well, that's kind of a mic drop.

Natalie Boursiquot: Yeah.

[chuckle]

Katie Berlin: That was good. That was good. And I...

Natalie Boursiquot: Yeah, how do you follow that?

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: Right. Well, and I have a yes and to add to that, which is then when you've empowered people to speak up for themselves and encouraged them to do that, and given them the ability to go out and do things that they're skilled enough to do, don't punish them for doing that. And I speak from experience and also from watching this happen, which is like, oh, then suddenly a technician might be viewed as entitled because they actually do want CE money or they want to go to a training on something and learn how to do ultrasound or something like that. And it's like, how dare she ask for that money? And it's like you told her that you valued her and this is how she's responding, and that means you did a good job, and this is a good thing for everybody, and this is something... And I know it doesn't all come back to gendered issues, but I do feel like because there are so many people in this profession who identify as female and we're taught not to ask for things and to apologize if we ask for more than we're offered, and that's a whole other conversation, but I do think that comes up a lot in this because like negotiating contracts, I was never taught how to do that, were you? And I grew up with a lawyer dad. So it is...

Liz Hughston: I think AAHA should offer some assertiveness training and negotiation training. Honestly, I think it would be so valuable. We should have a whole track of that at AAHA Con...

Katie Berlin: I'm here for that.

Liz Hughston: The whole track on negotiating skills, asking for what you need and how to get it, and assertiveness, because there's a fine line, but there's a difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness and how do you walk that line and how to not be a doormat, and it is... We do have... We know, we have the studies to show we have certain personality types in this profession, and I think those are the personality types who need that kind of trade. [laughter]

Katie Berlin: Yeah, definitely. They're not leading to bring something up until it's an angry blow-up, which was very difficult for some of us to learn and now we can't shut up.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: So that is the downside. It's like you might have people who actually express their opinions on the regular even when you didn't ask. [chuckle] Natalie, I'm curious about your experience, because I know, Liz and I know each other on social media, and so I see some of the stuff she posts, I'm sure she sees what I post and I'm always like, I can identify with this, you know, [0:54:15.2] _____, but I was wondering if that's something you've experienced where you've had to grow into being more assertive and asking for what you want, or if you've been perceived as too aggressive, if you have done that?

Natalie Boursiquot: Yeah, and I follow Liz on social media as well, so I definitely identify with a lot of things she says as well, [chuckle] but I do think it's a good point to bring up that the profession is majority female, and so a lot of the coaching that I do with my technicians and with people that are under me is speaking up for themselves, because I think that's something that we

don't encourage enough, and so if you're in a weird place when you're a manager, so you have to look at the financial health of the business, but you also want these people to want more for themselves, so it doesn't make sense for me as a manager to tell you, you should ask for more, that doesn't benefit me as a business manager, but I also see these technicians in there, they don't know any better, 'cause like you're saying, they wanna talk, and so that's become something that I'm really passionate about because I've been there.

Natalie Boursiquot: I have been hired for positions that I should have been paid way more for, I've been hired in positions where my counterparts had the exact same experience, the same responsibilities and were paid more than me. They were White males. [chuckle] So I do feel like I have that additional layer also of being a woman of color, is that I have to be very mindful of how I come to the table and how I present myself, because there is that kind of the balance, like you guys are talking about of not being that angry person, but also I do wanna speak up for what I feel like I deserve, what my value is within the practice. So yeah, it's been something that I've grown into over many, many years, just after realizing and having people that poured into me, other women of color within the profession, veterinarians, vet techs, others that saw me and saw themselves in me and were able to help me kinda get to that point where I can still say what I mean, and I can be firm without being seen as inquisitive, because that is definitely a thing. But I don't think it's just a racial or ethnic thing, I think it comes down to just us as women, we all are taught, just like you said, that say thank you, say please and thank you and be soft.

Katie Berlin: And these conversations are coming back up in the dating world, and the conversations on social media, be feminine, be that soft feminine person that we're supposed to be, but that doesn't have to mean that we don't also value ourselves, I think that's a huge thing that we need to remind ourselves.

Liz Hughston: And Natalie, you said it, you had people pour into you, and I love that analogy or metaphor, and I think it's so perfect. It's what we need. It's what I strive to do with people I work with is to remind them how amazing they are. But if you don't have... If instead you have people draining you, pulling the plug out from the bottom instead of pouring more in, it's really difficult, and I think looking for those people, and if you're a leader being that person to pour into people, reminding them how amazing they are, how far they've come, how they're contributing. Even when you have to have those difficult coaching conversations, because that's still gonna be a thing, you can do that and still say, look, you are incredible and amazing, and I see how much potential you have, and that's why I'm having this conversation with you because if I didn't see how amazing you were, and if I didn't care about you, I would not have this conversation with you, and that is still even in that coaching environment, even in all the things you have to do as a manager and a leader.

Liz Hughston: And making sure that things are functioning well, you can still build people up and fill them up and remind them of those things. I'm glad you had people in your life who did that for you and in your career, and I was lucky enough to have people in my career who did that for me too, and I think it makes a huge difference in how we can then move forward and bring people up, not necessarily behind us, but alongside us to continue to advance where we are.

Katie Berlin: I love that whole exchange. There's something... I was thinking about that in light of my own experience as a very quiet kid who grew into a very loud adult somehow, and I think one of the biggest things for me that I saw different with good cultures versus not so good cultures was the ability to distinguish between what you do and who you are as a person. And Natalie, it goes back

to what you were saying when you were talking about being authentic with your team, showing them who you are, and that automatically earns you so much trust when you're willing to show them, like if you're having a bad day or you're like, I'm sorry, I am not really present right now because I've got something going on and I'm distracted, this makes you a good leader, not a bad leader, because we all bring all that stuff with us and not admitting it just makes it feel like there's a wall between us. And that trust is what allows them then if you give them feedback that isn't maybe... That is constructive. It's more about, okay, I see you and you see me. Here's a thing that you do that maybe we could talk about how we could do it a little bit differently.

Katie Berlin: Not, you are a person who does this and that's not acceptable, and I've been treated that way so many times by leaders who just... They put me in a category and said, she is this type of person, and it kept me really afraid for a long time because I was afraid to be put in a category I didn't feel like I belonged in, and the three of us here, it sounds like have had very similar experiences in some ways, which is that we've been taught to... Or it's been ingrained in us to keep things to ourselves because we didn't want to make waves, and we figured out that that wasn't good. Like we were not about that life. And Natalie, you do have an extra component of being a woman of color, I know the statistics, but I can't imagine being in a situation where automatically I sit down at the table and there's something else that's like another box that they put me in. I think as an industry we do still have a lot of work to do in this area, but we have an advantage, which is there are a lot of women and people who identify as women in this field, so if we decide as a group to do things differently, it will make a difference, it has to. And I love hearing from two strong women who have navigated this themselves and said, okay, I know that this is gonna be a thing and I'm gonna have to figure out how to navigate it, it might not be fair, but we do it.

Liz Hughston: I think that authenticity, and like you said, it engenders trust, which engenders commitment to the person that you're working for, if they trust you with that, with that piece of them, with being their true authentic self, then you feel... Maybe I should just speak for myself. I feel more committed to that person, and we know that people don't leave jobs, they leave managers, if I feel committed to my manager, I'm not gonna leave because I have a fuller understanding of what's going on, where they're coming from, how we can work together, I know they trust me, they're invested in me and I'm gonna invest right back.

Katie Berlin: Yeah. We're in this together, not, I'm telling you what to do and then you're telling them what to do, [chuckle] which is so much of how that life is a lot of the time, so... Okay, we started out to talk about team retention, specifically technician retention, because I think that's where the biggest pain is right now, and it evolved very quickly into a conversation about good leadership, positive leadership, good culture, and we've sort of wandered off a little bit a couple of times, but it's always come back to that and that seems very telling, and I have to shout out as well to Josh Vaisman because his book, *Lead to Thrive*, is... It's a fantastic resource. And also, being lucky enough to have had Josh in my life as a friend, he is the embodiment of what he describes in that book, so if you have not had a chance to hear Josh speak, definitely get that done and also pick up that book, available in the AAHA store. But his whole theory is positive leadership will change this profession, and he gives actionable steps for how to do it, and I feel so strongly in my bones that's true. And it seems like the two of you do as well.

Liz Hughston: It's the absolute key to retention. That's why we keep coming back to it.

Katie Berlin: Yeah. You two do something that... At least here you have, I haven't talked to you in

person all that much, hardly at all. Natalie I just met today. Very glad that we did. But you two have done something on this podcast that Josh does that I think makes him such a believable and trustworthy leader and teacher, which is he is fully present in the conversation. Being fully present in a conversation when you're talking to one of your direct reports and really showing that you're listening, and if you can't do that, tell them. Tell them why, it's okay if you have like 27 emails coming in and you're freaking out about something and something's on fire, it's okay, but if not, can you be present for them and really show that what they're saying matters because you both have given me that feeling today just in this one conversation, and it's really a gift to have a conversation with somebody who is fully there, so if there's one thing you could go forth and do for your team as a leader today, it's that, that takes no effort to sit down and say, here I am.

Natalie Boursiquot: Absolutely. I've built this kind of system with my direct reports where they know if they were to call me, because we have different modes of communication, if they need something taken care of by the end of the week, they'll email me, things they need by the end of the day, they'll text me, but if they call me, they know that I'm dropping everything that I'm doing, 'cause I know it's important that they need to speak to me on the phone, and I think that's a huge thing, is having that relationship so that we both know on both ends if I call them, it's the same thing, they're gonna make a way to, even if they can't pick it up at that point, they're gonna make a way to call me back right away because if we're putting forth that effort to reach out to you in that way, we know it's important, and I think that's a huge thing. I learned that from one of my leaders, building that kind of expectation so that we respect each other's time and we also know that we value each other in that way.

Liz Hughston: I love that so much.

Katie Berlin: Liz, do you have anything similar that you've either had a manager tell you or that you've instituted when you've been overseeing...

Liz Hughston: I think that is such an amazing way of... It's a really amazing way of demonstrating your respect, like you said, for their time and also communicating your boundaries, "Hey, don't call me if it's not something that you need me to drop everything for right now." And I think that is an issue that I have dealt with managers in the past, and I think it is kind of an ongoing issue is this... I don't know, it's a combination of feeling like you have to do everything, that no one else can do anything, which of course it feels not great as a team member because you know you're capable of helping and you wanna be helpful and... So that's one piece of it. And also just like this, I think some people who don't have good leadership training think that they have to be available all the time, that open door means like 100% availability all the time, like completely boundary-less, boundless, whichever, whatever word I'm looking for. And I think that doesn't work.

Katie Berlin: No, at least not for long. [chuckle]

Liz Hughston: Right. And if you have that kind of situation, then your people don't understand either, the people you're leading don't understand, and I think having that set up for the team so that they understand, if my phone rings and it's Natalie's name on there, I better answer this 'cause it's something really important because she wouldn't call me if it weren't something really important, and that that is a two-way street. I think that is so amazing, especially today with all of the ways we have to communicate with each other in the work environment, I just think that's just an incredible way of communicating that boundary, and also the respect, like you said, for someone's time, and I

love that and I wish more leaders have that kind of training or at least the ability to set something like that up. Because so many times your phone rings and you're like, I don't even know, like I'm one of these people who gets that full adrenal squeeze when you see the manager's name on my...

[laughter]

Liz Hughston: Phone. I'm like, I'm not sure what's coming, and that's the other piece of it is there's an expectation now, you know, okay, if the phone is ringing, it's not because she's gonna yell at me for something I forgot to do during my shift or some... That's not what it's gonna be, it's something that needs my attention for a reason right now that's really important, but it's not gonna be something that's like leading me down a path of destruction, I guess.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: That's true, that's so true though. Like you can yell at somebody, but it's not an emergency.

[laughter]

Liz Hughston: That's really it. I mean, feedback should be immediate, but like...

Katie Berlin: Yeah, but maybe the yelling could cool off a little bit, so it's not actually yelling, but yeah, that's really...

Liz Hughston: And I think that's the kind of thing, it all comes down to respect, communication, demonstrating that personal caring and you do that by respecting someone's boundaries, and I think that's so key, and that is, that's what people want in the workplace, that and to be able to work one job.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: Yes, expect a living wage, let's start there.

Liz Hughston: That is how we retain people.

Katie Berlin: We could have just had three-second podcast.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: What do I need? Respect, living wage, bye-bye.

Liz Hughston: Yeah, that's it.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: But it's so much harder in practice always than it is, and if you can't pay people as much as you would like to pay them, living wage, still important. But even if you want to pay them more than you're able to, the respect will go a long way there, none of us got into this field to be

rich and being able to pay bills is important, also going to work and coming home every day with the feeling that you're appreciated for the person you are, very important.

Liz Hughston: That's exactly it.

Katie Berlin: Yeah. So Natalie, I know you have to run here, and so I think this is a place... We lost Heather, she was like, "Bye-bye, you guys could have done this in three seconds, I'm out." We lost Heather to technical difficulties, so I'm very sad about that, but we'll get her back on. She's committed now. But Natalie, would you give our listeners a place where they can find out more about you or learn what you're working on or where you work.

Natalie Boursiquot: Sure, I don't really have a lot out there on social media...

[chuckle]

Katie Berlin: Power to you.

Natalie Boursiquot: That's not curly hair related, so...

[laughter]

[overlapping conversation]

Katie Berlin: My hair is curly. You have great hair.

[laughter]

Natalie Boursiquot: But I do have a vet tech page on Instagram, so you can follow that. It's natalie.b.rvt, so that is my professional Instagram page. [laughter] I'm gonna try to do better about updating that 'cause I do tend to do more of the curly hair fun stuff than vet tech stuff.

[chuckle]

Katie Berlin: Also important.

[chuckle]

Liz Hughston: I love the curly hair content.

Natalie Boursiquot: Great.

[chuckle]

Katie Berlin: I wish I had curly hair to neat girl your content.

Natalie Boursiquot: You can always watch, it's fun.

Liz Hughston: You can follow me, I'm @lizhughston, H-U-G-H-S-T-O-N on Instagram, and it's a

mix of vet tech stuff, and then what Instagram is, like pictures of my pets and food I eat and stuff like that, so...

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: Authenticity, that's what it's about.

Liz Hughston: There's a lot of authenticity, that is for sure. A lot of enneagram content too, but...

Katie Berlin: I always appreciate that, it makes me feel less alone.

Liz Hughston: And then because I'm an old light lady, you can find me on Facebook, also @lizhughston.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: Same, sis.

[laughter]

Katie Berlin: Well, thank you both. This was so much fun, and I'm sorry we lost Heather, but I really... You are both shining lights and I really, I feel optimistic too, about where the profession and veterinary technicians especially are headed with people like you at the helm. So thank you so much for spending this time.