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JANUARY 2018

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Trends magazine

CULTURE THE ISSUE

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CULTURE?**

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Correction: In an article in November 2017 *Trends*, "Canine and Feline Diabetes Mellitus," the drug Vetsulin was incorrectly characterized as being for canines only. Vetsulin can also be used for feline patients. *Trends* regrets the error.



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from the editor's desk

WELCOME TO THE CULTURE ISSUE! You may be wondering what this is all about—why do a culture issue? Here at AAHA, we believe that workplace culture has a huge impact on staff wellbeing and mental health. If the practice (or office) is not a positive place to work, an employee is not going to be in a good place, either physically or mentally. And not having a defined culture is not usually a good option, because that leaves it out of your hands.

Our opening feature is all about defining culture: what is it, how does it come about, and why is it important? We also have a roundtable discussion on the topic, which was carefully moderated and edited by AAHA's very own Heather B. Loenser, DVM, and expert facilitator Ed Kanara, DVM, DABVP. The panel of experts come from a wide variety of backgrounds and create a broad picture of practice culture and its relation to employee productivity and wellbeing.

Rounding out the cultural gamut are articles on technicians and culture, the link between culture and wellbeing, and how a positive culture can help your bottom line.

This is the first themed issue of *Trends* that I have worked on, so I hope you enjoy it. Hopefully, this issue is a good contribution to the larger conversation going on in the veterinary world right now on wellbeing, mental health, and maintaining positivity in the workplace.

COMING NEXT MONTH: In February, look for an exciting exploration of content marketing (yes, it really can be exciting), as well as an update on the state of Telehealth, and how to educate your clients about dental health.

As always, let me know what you think at trends@aaha.org.

—Ben Williams, Editor

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Important Safety Information

BRAVECTO Chews for Dogs: The most common adverse reactions recorded in clinical trials were vomiting, decreased appetite, diarrhea, lethargy, polydipsia, and flatulence. Bravecto has not been shown to be effective for 12-weeks' duration in puppies less than 6 months of age. Bravecto is not effective against lone star ticks beyond 8 weeks after dosing. Please see Prescribing Information on following page.

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Federal (USA) law restricts this drug to use by or on the order of a licensed veterinarian.

Description:

Each chew is formulated to provide a minimum dose of 11.4 mg/lb (25 mg/kg) body weight.

The chemical name of fluralaner is (±)-4-[5-(3,5-dichlorophenyl)-5-(trifluoromethyl)-4,5-dihydroisoxazol-3-yl]-2-methyl-N-[2-oxo-2-(2,2,2-trifluoroethylamino) ethyl]benzamide.

Indications:

Bravecto kills adult fleas and is indicated for the treatment and prevention of flea infestations (*Ctenocephalides felis*) and the treatment and control of tick infestations [*Ixodes scapularis* (black-legged tick), *Dermacentor variabilis* (American dog tick), and *Rhipicephalus sanguineus* (brown dog tick)] for 12 weeks in dogs and puppies 6 months of age and older, and weighing 4.4 pounds or greater.

Bravecto is also indicated for the treatment and control of *Amblyomma americanum* (lone star tick) infestations for 8 weeks in dogs and puppies 6 months of age and older, and weighing 4.4 pounds or greater.

Dosage and Administration:

Bravecto should be administered orally as a single dose every 12 weeks according to the **Dosage Schedule** below to provide a minimum dose of 11.4 mg/lb (25 mg/kg) body weight.

Bravecto may be administered every 8 weeks in case of potential exposure to *Amblyomma americanum* ticks (see **Effectiveness**).

Bravecto should be administered with food.

Dosage Schedule

Body Weight Ranges (lb)	Fluralaner Content (mg)	Chews Administered
4.4 – 9.9	112.5	One
>9.9 – 22.0	250	One
>22.0 – 44.0	500	One
>44.0 – 88.0	1000	One
>88.0 – 123.0*	1400	One

*Dogs over 123.0 lb should be administered the appropriate combination of chews

Treatment with Bravecto may begin at any time of the year and can continue year round without interruption.

Contraindications:

There are no known contraindications for the use of the product.

Warnings:

Not for human use. Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children. Keep the product in the original packaging until use, in order to prevent children from getting direct access to the product.

Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling the product. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after use of the product.

Precautions:

Bravecto has not been shown to be effective for 12-weeks duration in puppies less than 6 months of age. Bravecto is not effective against *Amblyomma americanum* ticks beyond 8 weeks after dosing (see **Effectiveness**).

Adverse Reactions:

In a well-controlled U.S. field study, which included 294 dogs (224 dogs were administered Bravecto every 12 weeks and 70 dogs were administered an oral active control every 4 weeks and were provided with a tick collar); there were no serious adverse reactions. All potential adverse reactions were recorded in dogs treated with Bravecto over a 182-day period and in dogs treated with the active control over an 84-day period. The most frequently reported adverse reaction in dogs in the Bravecto and active control groups was vomiting.

Percentage of Dogs with Adverse Reactions in the Field Study

Adverse Reaction (AR)	Bravecto Group: Percentage of Dogs with the AR During the 182-Day Study (n=224 dogs)	Active Control Group: Percentage of Dogs with the AR During the 84-Day Study (n=70 dogs)
Vomiting	7.1	14.3
Decreased Appetite	6.7	0.0
Diarrhea	4.9	2.9
Lethargy	5.4	7.1
Polydipsia	1.8	4.3
Flatulence	1.3	0.0

In a well-controlled laboratory dose confirmation study, one dog developed edema and hyperemia of the upper lips within one hour of receiving Bravecto. The edema improved progressively through the day and had resolved without medical intervention by the next morning.

For technical assistance or to report a suspected adverse drug reaction, contact Merck Animal Health at 1-800-224-5318. Additional information can be found at www.bravecto.com. For additional information about adverse drug experience reporting for animal drugs, contact FDA at 1-888-FDA-VETS or online at <http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/SafetyHealth>.

Clinical Pharmacology:

Peak fluralaner concentrations are achieved between 2 hours and 3 days following oral administration, and the elimination half-life ranges between 9.3 to 16.2 days. Quantifiable drug concentrations can be measured (lower than necessary for effectiveness) through 112 days. Due to reduced drug bioavailability in the fasted state, fluralaner should be administered with food.

Mode of Action:

Fluralaner is for systemic use and belongs to the class of isoxazoline-substituted benzamide derivatives. Fluralaner is an inhibitor of the arthropod nervous system. The mode of action of fluralaner is the antagonism of the ligand-gated chloride channels (gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA)-receptor and glutamate-receptor).

Effectiveness:

Bravecto began to kill fleas within two hours after administration in a well-controlled laboratory study. In a European laboratory study, Bravecto killed fleas and *Ixodes ricinus* ticks and reduced the numbers of live fleas and *Ixodes ricinus* ticks on dogs by >98% within 12 hours for 12 weeks. In a well-controlled laboratory study, Bravecto demonstrated 100% effectiveness against adult fleas 48 hours post-infestation for 12 weeks. In well-controlled laboratory studies, Bravecto demonstrated >93% effectiveness against *Dermacentor variabilis*, *Ixodes scapularis* and *Rhipicephalus sanguineus* ticks 48 hours post-infestation for 12 weeks. Bravecto demonstrated >90% effectiveness against *Amblyomma americanum* 72 hours post-infestation for 8 weeks, but failed to demonstrate >90% effectiveness beyond 8 weeks.

In a well-controlled U.S. field study, a single dose of Bravecto reduced fleas by >99.7% for 12 weeks. Dogs with signs of flea allergy dermatitis showed improvement in erythema, alopecia, papules, scales, crusts, and excoriation as a direct result of eliminating flea infestations.

Palatability: In a well-controlled U.S. field study, which included 559 doses administered to 224 dogs, 80.7% of dogs voluntarily consumed Bravecto within 5 minutes, an additional 12.5% voluntarily consumed Bravecto within 5 minutes when offered with food, and 6.8% refused the dose or required forced administration.

Animal Safety:

Margin of Safety Study: In a margin of safety study, Bravecto was administered orally to 8- to 9-week-old puppies at 1, 3, and 5X the maximum label dose of 56 mg/kg at three, 8-week intervals. The dogs in the control group (0X) were untreated.

There were no clinically-relevant, treatment-related effects on physical examinations, body weights, food consumption, clinical pathology (hematology, clinical chemistries, coagulation tests, and urinalysis), gross pathology, histopathology, or organ weights. Diarrhea, mucoid and bloody feces were the most common observations in this study, occurring at a similar incidence in the treated and control groups. Five of the twelve treated dogs that experienced one or more of these signs did so within 6 hours of the first dosing. One dog in the 3X treatment group was observed to be dull, inappetent, with evidence of bloody diarrhea, vomiting, and weight loss beginning five days after the first treatment. One dog in the 1X treatment group vomited food 4 hours following the first treatment.

Reproductive Safety Study: Bravecto was administered orally to intact, reproductively-sound male and female Beagles at a dose of up to 168 mg/kg (equivalent to 3X the maximum label dose) on three to four occasions at 8-week intervals. The dogs in the control group (0X) were untreated.

There were no clinically-relevant, treatment-related effects on the body weights, food consumption, reproductive performance, semen analysis, litter data, gross necropsy (adult dogs) or histopathology findings (adult dogs and puppies). One adult treated dog suffered a seizure during the course of the study (46 days after the second treatment). Abnormal salivation was observed on 17 occasions: in six treated dogs (11 occasions) after dosing and four control dogs (6 occasions).

The following abnormalities were noted in 7 pups from 2 of the 10 dams in only the treated group during gross necropsy examination: limb deformity (4 pups), enlarged heart (2 pups), enlarged spleen (3 pups), and cleft palate (2 pups). During veterinary examination at Week 7, two pups from the control group had inguinal testicles, and two and four pups from the treated group had inguinal and cryptorchid testicles, respectively. No undescended testicles were observed at the time of necropsy (days 50 to 71).

In a well-controlled field study Bravecto was used concurrently with other medications, such as vaccines, anthelmintics, antibiotics, and steroids. No adverse reactions were observed from the concurrent use of Bravecto with other medications.

Storage Information:

Do not store above 86°F (30°C).

How Supplied:

Bravecto is available in five strengths (112.5, 250, 500, 1000, and 1400 mg fluralaner per chew). Each chew is packaged individually into aluminum foil blister packs sealed with a peelable paper backed foil lid stock. Product may be packaged in 1, 2, or 4 chews per package.

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View from AAHA

The Culture Issue

I once had a colleague tell me, “My practice doesn’t have a culture.”

I’m sure you’ll join me in my disbelief. Culture is the heart and soul of any business. It has a tremendous impact on productivity, job satisfaction, and employee engagement—or disengagement.

We at AAHA believe that culture is critically important for both practice and team member wellbeing. It’s so important, in fact, that we are dedicating this entire issue of *Trends* to it, and the AAHA Board of Directors is committed to supporting AAHA’s Healthy Workplace Culture Initiative for the next five years.

We believe workplace culture has a profound effect on the people immersed in it day in and day out. Life is complicated enough already—imagine bringing everyday issues like relationships and finances into a toxic work environment, and you can see how easy it is to become disheartened.

What if you came to a caring and supportive work environment? You might actually feel better—not only about work but life in general—by the end of the day. In the right culture, work could even become your refuge from your crazy life!

One component of AAHA’s mission statement is to enable veterinarians to successfully conduct their practices and maintain their facilities with high standards of excellence. If we can help our members improve the culture in their hospitals, we will absolutely contribute to their business success. If we have unhappy, disengaged employees, how can we expect them to deliver excellent service to clients and excellent care to patients? Why would those employees want to stay in their positions when every day is a major struggle for them? Why would clients choose to continue bringing their beloved pets into an environment that is palpably tense, with a high degree of employee dissatisfaction and turnover?

On the other hand, if employees are working in a healthy workplace, they let it show. They deliver better customer service and patient care. They stay in their roles because they love their work. Turnover is extremely costly; therefore, reducing it aids in the financial success of the practice. When clients sense a caring, happy environment, they will not only continue bringing their pets to the practice but they’ll also be telling their friends to do the same. This scenario paints a picture of improved wellbeing for hospital staff, clients, and patients.

If you haven’t yet seen this guide, I urge you to review *AAHA’s Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*, now available at aaha.org/culture. Be sure to also review the roundtable featured in this issue of *Trends*, in which experts who contributed to the guide share even more of their knowledge and ideas for creating a healthy workplace culture.

Watch for additional tools and resources this year to help you on your journey to a healthy workplace culture. Consider this work to be an investment in you, your team, your clients, and your patients. AAHA will be there to support you along the way; we absolutely believe your investment in yourself, your practice team, your clients, and your patients is worth it.

Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus), is the CEO of AAHA. He is a dedicated proponent of positive workplace culture for veterinary practices—and in the AAHA office.



CE Roundup

From short, on-demand webinars to immersive onsite programs, AAHA's CE offerings have you covered. Check out the lineup below, then read on for our CE Highlight of the Month.

Conferences

AAHA@VMX

Join AAHA and NAVC for a distinct learning experience at VMX 2018

February 3–6, 2018 | Orlando, Florida

aaha.org/vmx

Connexity

Reimagine your veterinary conference

September 13–16, 2018 | Denver, Colorado

aaha.org/connexity

Practice Management CE

Veterinary Management Institute (VMI)

An executive-level, veterinary-specific management program

First 2018 session: February 15–17, 2018 | Denver, Colorado

aaha.org/vmi

Veterinary Management School (VMS)

Take your management skills—and your practice—from good to great

April 18–21 or August 9–11, 2018 | Lakewood, Colorado

aaha.org/vms

Adventure CE

SkiCE

Come for the education, stay for the winter fun

January 28–31, 2018 | Vail, Colorado

aaha.org/adventure

AAHA Pack Trip

Disconnect from the real world—connect with real people

August 2–5, 2018 | Jackson Hole, Wyoming

aaha.org/adventure

Online and On-Demand Programs

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Online CE when it's convenient for you

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Animal Hospice and Palliative Care Certificate Program

Provide better, more compassionate care at the end of life

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CE Highlight of the Month

Connexity vs. AAHA@VMX:

Finding the Right Fit for You

A new year means new learning opportunities.

Two brand-new conferences geared toward AAHA members—Connexity and AAHA@VMX—are arriving on the veterinary CE scene in 2018. Can only attend one?

Let us help!



Connexity may be for you if:

- You're a member of an AAHA-accredited practice
- You want the intimate feel of a smaller conference
- You're looking for a new and unique conference experience
- You want your CE options to include a focus on practice culture, profitability, marketing, human resources, and personal and professional wellbeing (scientific education will also be available)
- You prefer interactive and experiential learning, such as field trips, breakout sessions, team-building activities, and case study work
- You're a key leader at your practice and/or want fellow key leaders to attend with you
- You want to connect with fellow guests in an exclusive environment



AAHA@VMX may be for you if:

- You're not a member of an AAHA-accredited practice
- You want the amenities and benefits of a large conference
- You're interested in a more traditional conference experience
- You want your CE options to include a wide selection of scientific education in order to meet license requirements (practice management education will also be available)
- You prefer learning in a conventional group setting
- You want your entire team to attend with you
- You want broad networking opportunities

Learn more and register for the conference that fits you best at aaha.org/conferences.



Healthy Cultures, Healthy Teams: It Starts with Us

Your vibe attracts your tribe.

If you look closely at the AAHA logo, you'll notice the following tagline: "The Standard of Veterinary Excellence." This idea—a mutual commitment to excellence in veterinary medicine—is what has brought AAHA and its accredited practice teams together since 1933.

Since then, however, the concept of "veterinary excellence" itself has evolved. While AAHA's standards largely apply to excellence in patient care, critically important issues on the human side of veterinary medicine—including compassion fatigue, perfectionism, career burnout, depression, and even suicide—have made a focus on practice culture and professional wellness an ever-growing piece of the puzzle.

To address these issues, AAHA recently launched the Healthy Workplace Culture Initiative. Through this initiative, AAHA will provide resources to address, mitigate, and prevent mental health issues in veterinary practice teams and offer guidance in building healthy workplace cultures. After all, we cannot provide excellent care if we're not taking care of ourselves.

In addition to providing these tools, however, it is imperative that we lead by example.

At AAHA, it starts with us. We are committed to setting the bar for personal and professional wellness—both for ourselves and the veterinary community. We hope these positive vibes will attract advocates for safer, happier, and more supportive work environments that, in turn, will bring us full circle in our mission to deliver veterinary excellence.

So, what does the culture at AAHA headquarters look like, exactly? Take a look.



- 1 The team does a Wellness Walk around Union Square Park in Lakewood, Colorado.
- 2 The group relaxes during Mindfulness Monday's guided meditation.
- 3 H. Jeannie Yu, MD, visits the AAHA office for an acupuncture session.
- 4 Maria Nieto does a quick routine of yoga with Michael Cavanaugh at the office.
- 5 H. Jeannie Yu treats Amanda Martin's stiff neck and shoulders.
- 6 Panda and Remi share a tree branch during a Wellness Walk.
- 7 Christine Panek and Brett Gorges chat while on a Wellness Walk.





AAHA's Culture Identity

In light of AAHA's recent transition to an accredited-only hospital membership model, we took the time earlier this year to examine our internal culture and develop a written credo that reflects the core values of our team members.



Our People

We are champions for excellence. We embody a people-first, team-centric approach to doing business. We are animal lovers, do-gooders, eternal optimists, and forward thinkers. We are engaged in and dedicated to making a difference and celebrating our successes together as a team.

Our Vision

We envision a world in which all veterinary practices deliver the highest-quality care available today. We hold high standards—both for our practices and for ourselves. AAHA accreditation is the only accreditation available for veterinary practices in the United States and Canada, and we strive to help all practices achieve that accreditation.



Our Credo

1. Deliver excellence—every time. We choose to deliver excellence in all we do, from the veterinary care standards we write to the services we provide our members and our team. Excellence is at our core, and we live it every day.
2. Choose to be positive. We believe that a positive mindset can take us to extraordinary places, and we share this positive outlook with the community that surrounds us.
3. Embrace and welcome change. We believe in continual evolution and growth. We welcome change with open arms and focus on adapting to the future.
4. Pursue innovative solutions. We consistently break the status quo and drive new thinking in order to lead the veterinary profession. We approach every problem as an opportunity.
5. Communicate openly and honestly. We believe that open and honest communication is the truest form of communication. This is the foundation for successful relationships with our members and our team.

There's a Committee for That

In 2016, AAHA also implemented three volunteer-based staff committees for the corporate office, each tasked with promoting a different aspect of healthy workplace culture.

Fun Committee

At AAHA headquarters, there's no such thing as all work and no play. The Fun Committee is dedicated to helping colleagues unwind at work by organizing regular activities and celebrations, including holiday parties, happy hours, teambuilding exercises, and other social events, such as a book club and bakeoffs.

Health and Wellness Committee

Physical, mental, and emotional wellness can have a significant impact on employee engagement, job satisfaction, and productivity. The Health and Wellness Committee helps keep these barriers at bay with 10-minute meditation breaks, weekly team walks, educational demonstrations (acupuncture, anyone?), and yoga with the CEO.

Oz Award Committee

Team members who feel valued are invaluable. The Oz Award Committee provides regular opportunities for meaningful recognition by asking team members to nominate peers who have gone above and beyond to exemplify AAHA's culture identity credo (see page 15).

Ready to develop a healthy workplace culture and promote professional wellness in your practice?

Visit aaha.org/culture or visit the AAHA-Accredited Members Facebook group (facebook.com/groups/aahaaccredited) for ideas!



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HillsVet.com

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²Based on a survey of published literature.
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Team Up on Tech

When you're going crazy because you can't get a simple task on your computer to work, don't give up! The problem might be how your brain is wired.

Everyone sees the world differently, and solving computer problems is no exception. Our brains skip over details, and we tend to see what we expect to see on screen.

Two brains are better than one. Ask a coworker to read the instructions aloud and watch you follow each one to be sure you are doing them exactly. Don't go on to the next instruction until both of you agree that you've gotten the first one right.

If that doesn't work, switch places. Ask your buddy to give it a try while you read the instructions aloud and observe.

And if that doesn't work? Maybe it's time to call IT.

notebook

Fight Gossip with Protocols

"Believe it or not, there is conflict in veterinary hospitals," says Louise Dunn. She should know. After 21 years as a practice manager, she turned to consulting. In both careers, she's seen her share of conflict and its BFF, gossip.

Veterinary practices experience conflict because we have incredibly passionate people on staff who care about what they're doing, but they're not always educated on how to handle conflict or how to interact or communicate. So, they turn to gossip. They gossip about the pets, they gossip about the clients, and they gossip about each other, Dunn says in a video (aaha.org/HRquestions).

A chief bone of contention? The right way to do things. The best way to avoid it? Protocols.

We all say we want consistency: providing the same service to every patient, every client, every record, every time. But it doesn't happen. Why not? Because we don't have SOPs or protocols—or we don't use the ones we have.

A protocol or an SOP is something that is done consistently to maintain the quality of standards for patient care, client experience, and the operations of the practice, Dunn explains.

"Setting up protocols and using them as working documents is the key" to workplace agreement.

Louise Dunn is the owner of Snowgoose Veterinary Management Consulting and coauthor of *101 Veterinary Human Resources Questions Answered*, which is published by AAHA Press.



QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"It's not a good day if I don't have dog hair on my slacks."

—Kathryn Turman, associate director,
FBI Office for Victim Assistance

Why We Work

When the informal polling website rrrrather.com asked, would you rather have “more work that you actually enjoy doing” or “less work to do”? Three-fourths of people voted for less work, posting comments like the following: “sleep, computer, TV shows all day . . . yeah, I could live like that!” (Belgium). Other people agreed with the voter who commented, “If you find a job that you love you will never work a day in your life” (UK).

It’s easy to appreciate a job you love, but even a job that isn’t ideal may be worth having. According to Mind (mind.org.uk), a British nonprofit devoted to workplace wellness, a job shores up our mental health with:

- regular income
- a sense of identity
- contact and friendship with others
- a steady routine and structure
- opportunities to gain achievements and contribute

Meanwhile, a classic study of German workers found that unemployed people suffer from a lack of four essential “gifts,” or latent functions, of employment: structured time, social contact, shared purpose, and activity.

As it turns out, work answers our important psychological needs. As a matter of fact, a job may be the key to happiness.

“Only employment can provide these latent functions in a sufficient amount in modern societies,” the authors of a metastudy conclude.

Now, if they could just find some benefits in rush hour. . . .

Read More

Mind, “How to Be Mentally Healthy at Work.” bit.ly/2vLdlnw. Accessed Sept. 25, 2017.

Karsten I. Paul and Klaus Moser, “Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 74 (2009), p 265. bit.ly/2wrSy6e. Accessed Sept. 25, 2017.

BFFs@Work

Gallup observed that employees who report having a best friend at work were:

- **43%** more likely to report having received praise or recognition for their work in the last seven days;
- **37%** more likely to report that someone at work encourages their development;
- **35%** more likely to report coworker commitment to quality;
- **28%** more likely to report that, in the last six months, someone at work has talked to them about their progress;
- **27%** more likely to report that the mission of their company makes them feel their job is important;
- **27%** more likely to report that their opinions seem to count at work; and
- **21%** more likely to report that, at work, they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day.

Flu Season Is Peaking Now!



1 in 5

Employees likely to call in sick with the flu



December to March

Flu activity peaks in the US.



8 days

Healthy adults may infect others starting one day before symptoms appear and up to five to seven days after becoming sick.



1 to 4+ Days

Flu-struck employees miss work.



Have you had your flu shot?

It's not too late!

Source: US Centers for Disease Control

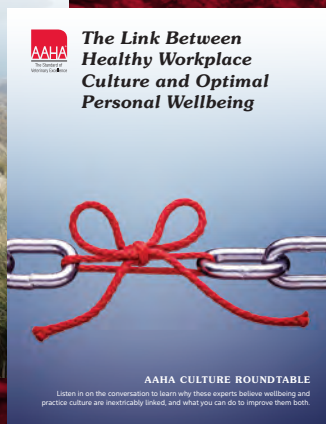
POSITIVE PRACTICE CULTURE begins with you



Healthy practice cultures don't happen by accident—they start with purposeful steps toward change.

AAHA has always defined excellence in veterinary care, and now, we are also proud to promote excellence in workplace culture and team member wellbeing with the launch of our Healthy Workplace Culture Initiative.

At a time when depression, career burnout, compassion fatigue, and suicide have become increasingly common, AAHA's free practice resources are meant to serve as a springboard for discussion and lead to action that will make a difference in your personal and professional life.



WANT TO SHARE WITH THE ENTIRE TEAM?
Pick up free copies of AAHA's Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing and AAHA Culture Roundtable at AAHA@VMX!



Take the first step toward individual and workplace wellness.

aaha.org/culture



WHAT IS CULTURE?



Creating a Positive Atmosphere Is Ultra Important

by Marie Rosenthal, MS

WORKPLACE CULTURE IS A SET OF REQUIREMENTS that enables staff to work in harmony and to facilitate the care of animals and clients. Most people think of it as the personality of the practice, or the ideas and attitudes that shape the practice environment.

Any workplace culture can be healthy or toxic, autocratic or collaborative. It can be a place where the team works together or everyone works in silos. It can be comprised of supportive, trusting individuals, or cliques and backstabbers. One thing is certain: If veterinary practices do not establish a culture that defines the practice, the staff will develop one—and it might not be the environment a practice owner wants.

“Practices must define the culture that they want to create. Otherwise, culture just happens—like weather,” says Randy Hall, founder of 4th Gear Consulting in Huntersville, North Carolina, who provides leadership development and helps veterinary practices create a better environment.

“Organizational culture is a set of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that govern the behavior of individuals within the organization,” says Mark McConnell, BVMS, MRCVS, AAHA

president. “It is basically shared values and beliefs. It is that simple and that complicated.”

In the past, a good veterinary hospital strove to care for animals and did not pay too much attention to the health and wellbeing of the staff, but that is changing, according to McConnell, who is also codirector of Emergency Veterinary Hospital in Springfield, Oregon.

Why Culture Is Important

“For years, the veterinary industry focused on practicing great medicine and providing great client service and interactions. We are in veterinary medicine to take care of pets and take care of the people who love the pets. What we didn’t understand was that to do that means providing a good place to work, a healthy place to work, a stable place to work. The practice should be a place where people want to come to work,” McConnell says.

Whether the patients are animals or people, the values of the practice help establish the rules that the staff agree to follow in order to work in harmony, adds Ernest R. Anderson, Jr., MS, FASHP, FMSHP, of Consulting Inc. in Brockton, Massachusetts, a pharmacy leadership professional who provides services for human pharmacies and hospitals. “You want a culture that is effective and empowers people to do well and achieve and to work together as a team,” he says.

Creating a healthy environment where people are challenged, empowered, and make a decent living reduces chaos, drama, and turnover; helps to attract and retain clients; and enables veterinarians and technicians to provide the best care for their patients. The practice cannot deliver the level of care that is needed without a good practice culture.

“Contributing to a healthy work environment will benefit all the patients and the clients, and it is incredibly good business,” says John D. Jacobson, DVM, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at Duke Integrative Medicine at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

Some veterinarians believe that clients can’t tell if a hospital is dysfunctional, but clients can tell, Jacobson says. If the staff is practicing in a toxic culture, it will leak out to the front of the hospital like an infection.



Hall agrees, noting, “The reality is, if the staff are focused on how stressful it is and how miserable they are, who is fighting with whom, why the chart can’t be found or the information is not in the computer, they can’t focus on creating the client experience that attracts and retains clients. If clients don’t feel welcome, they don’t feel great about the service, or [if they] did not connect with the staff, they can leave—and they will.”

Having a good hospital culture makes it easier for staff to take care of the animals, which is why they got into veterinary medicine in the first place. “If you have a good hospital culture, then the medicine and the client experience falls into place,” McConnell says.

Hall notes, “You will never find a hospital with phenomenal service that exceeds expectations, with reasonable wait times and great client education, and that builds strong bonds with clients in a poor culture.”

Stress Management Is Critical

Veterinary hospitals are crazy, chaotic, fast-paced, and stressful places to work. One visit is a new puppy or kitten, and the next is a trauma patient that needs to be euthanized. That type of emotional rollercoaster can take its toll on staff. Burnout is common in the industry.

“Practices must define the culture that they want to create. Otherwise, culture just happens—like weather.”

—RANDY HALL

“This actually wears and tears on you over time, and you are exposing yourself to potential wellness issues,” McConnell explains. His hospital offers an employee-assistance plan that allows someone who is dealing with compassion fatigue or burnout, or who is having a hard time at home, to have access to a certain number of free counseling sessions per year.

“I think that a veterinary hospital with a good culture [that] recognizes how different coworkers deal with grief and stress is very important. Giving employees time to deal with those things is important. We need to provide these types of resources,” McConnell says.

Just being able to take a break and go for a walk, or having an opportunity to sit down with a colleague and discuss a situation that is bothering them, might help prevent burnout in the first place.

“When you become a practice owner, I think you have a responsibility to provide a good place to work, and I think you need to take that responsibility seriously,” McConnell points out.

Even so, practices with healthy working environments will not totally prevent team members from experiencing significant anxiety, depression, or problems with substance use, according to Jacobson. Healthy practice cultures will, however, make it as easy as possible for team members to ask for help.

“Mental health issues are not something that veterinarians are supposed to be able to diagnose or treat or evaluate. However, we are incredible observers of behavior. We know ADR—ain’t doin’ right—and we can detect it in our patients, our colleagues, and our employees,” he says.

Having an environment that is supportive and can help facilitate professional help for employees is important.

“Most people are reluctant to say something,” Jacobson notes, but that is the first step in getting help, especially if a person has a substance abuse problem.

Reducing work hours, being flexible with scheduling, and switching responsibilities—practices he calls unusual in most veterinary medicine—can help with some personal problems. But others require a mental health professional.

Hall reiterates that approach. “We shouldn’t overstep our bounds and coach someone through a domestic abuse situation, for instance. That is a much bigger problem. They need to find the right people who are trained to deal with [that]. What we can do is give them time to find those resources and have a list of resources available for them.”

Remember, one person’s actions can take a good practice culture and turn it toxic.

Before talking with *Trends*, AAHA President Mark McConnell, BVMS, MRCVS, codirector of Emergency Veterinary Hospital in Springfield, Oregon, a 24/7 emergency hospital with a staff of about 40 people, asked a couple of the staff what they thought of their hospital’s culture. Here are some of their responses.

“A good hospital culture brings us together as a community.”

“It helps with communications with clients.”

“Clients pick up our culture right away.”

“It fosters better medicine because you share, and it brings out best practices.”

“If you have a bad culture at work, you take that home with you. If you have a place where you have a good culture, you are going to want to go to work.”



Changing the Norm

To change the culture of a practice, one must first understand the current environment. Is it a place where people are allowed to communicate ideas, one that is collaborative and supportive, in which people are treated with dignity and respect? Is the goal to create an environment that allows a practice to provide the best veterinary care for animals and support for clients? Do staff members want to come to work every day?

Or is it a place where no one takes responsibility for their actions, where there is a lot of bickering and blaming, where people just do things because “that’s the way it’s always been done,” but no one understands why?

Deciding what the culture should be is unique to every practice, but there are certain elements that help organizations function really well. These include:

- Fully engaged employees
- Empowered and collaborative teams
- A common set of goals and ideas for the future of the practice
- Opportunities for training and professional growth
- Strong communication
- Agreements about how individuals will be treated
- Agreements about settling disagreements

Culture is not something that one can set and forget, however. Practices must be willing to adapt to and change with new situations. “Changing hospital culture is not a sprint, it is a marathon, and it requires constant work,” McConnell says.

Old Versus New Management Styles

The workplace used to be a system where all ideas came from the top, everyone did what they were told, and, in exchange, they received a paycheck. “That is a severely outdated approach to management,” Hall says. Although there has to be leadership in every organization, he describes a better way to build a strong culture: “Everyone comes and contributes ideas, helps with innovations, [and] thinks about ways to make us better instead of the idea that all the solutions, ideas, and instructions reside within a manager or veterinarian. That has been proven not to work.”

Jacobson notes that change can be the most difficult aspect for a veterinarian to accept. “Veterinarians are

notorious for thinking they can do everything, and if there is a problem, they should be able to solve it. And if they are unable to solve it, there must be something wrong with them,” he says.

But accepting that staff might have some of the answers and fostering collaboration among the team will help the practice develop better protocols and practices.

The most important part of creating a practice culture is setting expectations, according to Anderson, and that is the role of the leadership. All staff members, from associate veterinarians to the person who cleans the cages, need to know what is expected of them and have the tools to meet the expectations.

Anderson says that he promotes the idea that everyone should be humble, hungry, and smart. He explains, “We want the culture to be one in which people have humility in the way that they operate and treat one another, one where they are hungry, meaning that they have high work expectations and will give 110% regardless of their job. And we want people with emotional intelligence, so they are treating each other in a way that is smart.”

They should also encourage each other and work as a team, Anderson adds.

Hall agrees there has to be teamwork, saying, “As leaders, we have to provide the environment for

In the past, a good veterinary hospital strove to care for animals and did not pay too much attention to the health and wellbeing of the staff, but that is changing.

collaboration. There has to be discussion. People need a safe environment where they can share ideas and not be penalized for it. We have to be flexible and let everyone have some power. We want to build a group of people who are engaged.”

Organizations that forget to include the staff when making changes tend to be unsuccessful. “People have to be involved,” Hall says. “There is a lot of research that says if we are trying to drive through one set of ideas that other people have to adopt, rather than involving them in a collective set of ideas, we are going to fail somewhere north of 80% of the time. Behavior change happens when people choose, they know how, and they believe they can.”

Staff members need to know what is expected of them and agree to work by these rules, according to McConnell. When a new person is hired, the culture needs to be explained to them before they start.

Hall goes on to recommend that practices consider not just a person’s skills but also their emotional intelligence. He says practices need to hire, train, and coach people to be effective in the culture.



Behaviors for a Highly Successful Practice

1. Fully engaged employees
2. Empowered and collaborative teams
3. A common set of goals and ideas for the future of the practice
4. Opportunities for training and professional growth
5. Strong communication
6. Agreements about how individuals will be treated
7. Agreements about settling disagreements



Another issue that is important to veterinary medicine is providing an environment for professional growth, according to Jacobson. “Young career veterinarians are trained, but they don’t know how to practice. Encourage their professional development. Recognize that they don’t have all the skills they need, but encourage them to learn and give them the opportunity to learn.”

Remember, he said, that human beings, even veterinarians, make mistakes.

Having a good practice culture will also enable the practice to attract the best people, McConnell adds. “What I love about AAHA is we are focused on accreditation,” he says, which provides guidelines and protocols to help practices be of the highest quality. “I want AAHA hospitals to be known as the best place to work because AAHA hospitals are trying to focus on hospital culture.”

He adds, “For so many years, we have focused on the nuts and bolts of veterinary medicine, but I think if we actually focus on the employees and the culture, then everything else will just fall into place.” ❄



Marie Rosenthal is an award-winning freelance journalist based in New Jersey. ©burst.shopify.com

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Q: What does your competition charge for a digital dental radiograph?

- A. \$65
- B. \$89
- C. \$123

A: It depends on where you practice.*

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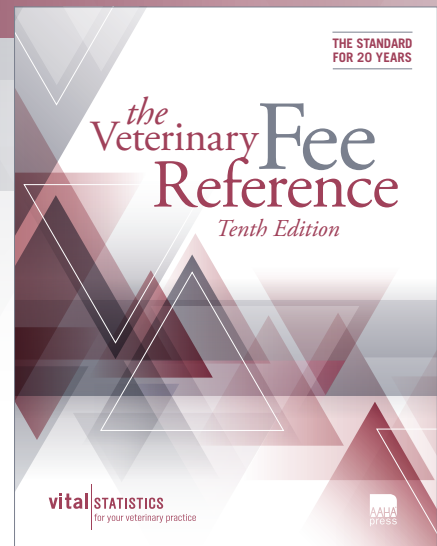
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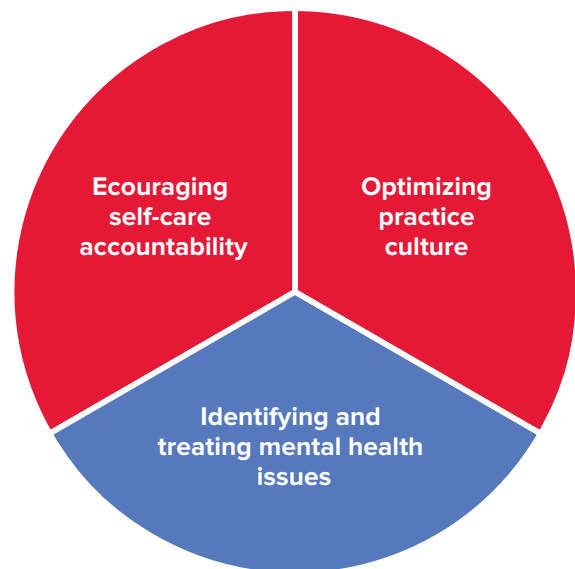


The Link Between Healthy Workplace Culture and Optimal Personal Wellbeing

AAHA IS LAUNCHING A MAJOR INITIATIVE to address wellbeing by using a positive, proactive approach to help prevent or mitigate mental health issues in veterinary practice teams. We intend to do this by encouraging practice team members to embrace the benefits of self-care and to provide practices with the resources to optimize their workplace culture.

Personal wellbeing and workplace culture impact and apply to every member of the veterinary practice team.

One of the ways we're supporting this initiative is by tapping into the expertise of those in the trenches of wellbeing and culture transformation. We've convened these experts for a roundtable discussion on this topic.



■ = Prevention (AAHA's expertise)
■ = Treatment (others' expertise)

Listen in on the conversation to learn why these experts believe wellbeing and practice culture are inextricably linked, and what you can do to improve them both.

Heather B. Loenser, DVM: Hello, everyone, and thank you for being here. The purpose of today's roundtable is to discuss the value of self-care and the value of a healthy workplace culture as it relates to the importance of personal wellbeing and practice wellbeing.

The Challenges We Face as Veterinary Healthcare Providers

“Recent research and even our own personal experiences suggest that veterinary caregivers may be at greater risk of mental health challenges than the population at large due to a multitude of factors, including perfectionism.”

—MICHELE GASPAR, DVM, DABVP (FELINE), MA, LCPC

HL: Why might the veterinary profession be predisposed to mental health challenges and be so affected by our workplace culture?

“It’s a joy for me to be a part of AAHA’s very inspired vision, which I think is novel and important in moving the conversation forward in a proactive instead of a reactive way in the profession.”

—ELIZABETH STRAND, PHD, LCSW

Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP (Feline), MA, LCPC: I think there are several reasons for that. Over the last 20 years, there’s been a gender shift in the profession, and research tells us women are more likely to suffer from mood disorders, particularly depression and anxiety. I also think that there is a subset of people who enter the veterinary profession who have significant trauma histories that make them vulnerable individuals in provocative environments.

Additionally, we see widespread perfectionism and unyielding standards, which, while helpful when competing academically to enter the profession, prove to be detrimental in the unpredictable environment of practicing the art of medicine under the scrutiny of the public.

So, in my opinion, it’s a potent combination of, perhaps, a gender shift, a way of thinking about ourselves that we need to be perfect, and then, for some of us, a history that makes us particularly prone to be hard on ourselves.

But the good news is there are definitely things we can do to address these issues, such as putting a focus on our own self-care.

The Importance of Self-Care

“I want to say to the veterinary professionals, you have to take care of yourself. This is nonnegotiable, and if you want to stay in practice and to achieve as a veterinarian, self-care is a requirement.”

—ELIZABETH STRAND, PHD, LCSW

“If we’re going to stay in this profession and be successful, then we really have to look after ourselves.”

—MARIE HOLOWAYCHUK, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

HL: Dr. Holowaychuk, you speak about finding simple ways for team members to improve their own personal wellness, but we often hear them say that they don’t have enough time, or they wonder if this can even help them. What advice would you give them?

Self-Care Strategies for Veterinary Teams

- Improving sleep hygiene
- Practicing gratitude
- Practicing mindfulness
- Doing yoga
- Volunteering



Marie Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT: I would say, start with things that are simple and achievable. Anything is possible. The important thing is for individuals to start where they are right now and recognize what works for them. For example, for many, going from getting four hours of sleep a night to getting eight hours of sleep a night is not realistic or possible, given all of the things we're balancing in our lives. However, even just adding 30 minutes a night to a person's sleep schedule can make a tremendous amount of difference.

When it comes to mindfulness, it may be before I go into every single appointment, I'm going to stop, and I'm going to take a deep breath, and I'm just going to notice how my body feels. I'm going to notice the thoughts in my mind, and I'm going to set an intention to be present with this client for this appointment.

HL: Dr. Gaspar, knowing what we know about how veterinary caregivers may be “hardwired,” what are specific actions they can take to improve their own wellbeing?

MG: Just because veterinary health professionals may be hardwired to be at greater risk to experience mental health challenges doesn't mean there aren't specific steps we can take to build up our own resiliency and rise above this predisposition.

I think the most important thing that I would like us to develop is a sense of self-compassion, and that is to treat ourselves as a good friend would. If your friend made a mistake or was feeling overwhelmed, you would encourage and support them, not berate them. We do the latter to ourselves all the time, and that is counterproductive.

We also need to develop a wide social network, and one of the things that I do think would be very helpful is if we disengage ourselves from—not all, but many—hobbies that tend to be animal-centric. Stepping into a hobby that doesn't call on our veterinary knowledge but rather creates a connection with others based on other interests allows our “veterinary brains” to quiet down. We know that we're biologically programmed to be in relationship with others, and that's absolutely where our healing takes place.

HL: Dr. Holowaychuk, I know you are a big proponent of yoga and expressing gratitude as self-care strategies. Tell us more about those practices.

MH: I think a lot of people have the misconception that yoga is just for “bendy people.” In reality, yoga has little to do with physical flexibility. Instead, the whole practice of yoga encourages us to notice our thoughts, those sensations, and train ourselves to stick with them. We observe them. We try to stay open, nonjudgmental, and curious about the experience. The more that we can practice that on the yoga mat, the more we bring open-minded attitudes into our daily life.

Practicing gratitude is an easy way for people to embrace an attitude that really fosters happiness. There's a lot of research that suggests that gratitude can override other negative emotions, like grief, sadness, and anger.

I know it seems overwhelming, but even if people just pick one of the many self-care strategies that feels doable, it can make a huge, huge difference in their personal wellbeing.



Providing Veterinary Care Is Challenging and Stressful, Even Under the Best of Conditions

“Veterinary teams experience predictable stress that affects us as individuals and as team members. We can’t decouple the impact that personal wellbeing has on practice wellbeing. To minimize stress for both the individual and the team . . . a healthy workplace culture is essential. Our goal is to harness the passion of team members, enabling them to deliver the highest quality patient and client care.”

—ED KANARA, DVM, DABVP

HL: Dr. Strand, in your experience, what are the common forms of workplace distress that veterinary teams experience?

Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW: Veterinarians and veterinary teams regularly face moral distress, which is having a gut feeling of what the right thing is to do, but external factors prevent you from being able to do it. A classic example is when there may be disagreement as to the appropriate time for euthanasia during the course of providing terminal critical care.

There’s also the distress of emotional labor, which occurs when team members cannot express publicly emotions that they may be feeling privately, such as having to seem joyful to meet a new puppy or kitten after just finishing a tough euthanasia. Veterinarians and veterinary teams are faced with that emotional stress every day, and that requires an emotional labor of having to conceal feelings that are socially inappropriate.

Both emotional labor and moral distress can be exhausting, often creating “short fuses” and team conflict. Veterinary team conflict is expected and normal; however, when not managed well or addressed, it can really negatively impact morale and, ultimately, patient care.

Randy Hall: I’d like to piggyback on what Dr. Strand said about “short fuses.” There is a term called “decision fatigue” that we’re learning really affects veterinary teams when making decisions, not only about medical cases, animals, and clients, but also coworkers and other colleagues. They need to be able to analyze and communicate their decisions quickly and compassionately—all the time. At some point, they get exhausted from all that self-regulation and “decision fatigue.” That filter that keeps us from saying things we shouldn’t or behaving in ways we shouldn’t breaks down. When this happens on a daily basis, conflict and negativity permeate the practice culture.

HL: So what can we do to lessen this inevitable distress?

ES: I’m a big proponent of the concept of “name it to tame it.” Human beings have natural resiliency and the ability to recover from stressful situations when they’re able to put into words what was stressful to them, in a supportive environment. I recommend veterinary practices’ leaders initiate weekly “moral distress meetings” that are designed to give an opportunity for everybody on the team to talk about those cases or interactions that kept them up at night. These feelings and thoughts can be shared in a supportive team environment and normalized. I also think that in these distress meetings, it’s important to engage in laughter. I have found when I started asking in the distress meetings, “What was funny about the stressful situation?” that laughing together helped the group to recover. I also recommend yearly practice team training in communication skills and conflict-resolution techniques.

HL: So, Dr. Kanara, do you see a link between the stressors that individuals and teams encounter and workplace culture?

Ed Kanara, DVM, DABVP: Absolutely. The stressors that Elizabeth and Randy have just discussed are either amplified by a toxic culture or lessened by a healthy culture because of the way a practice acknowledges and deals with these stressors.

However, we also have to recognize what motivates veterinary team members. We all want to make a difference. It's this desire—not money—that is the currency that often most motivates veterinary colleagues. With salaries for veterinarians not being particularly high and support staff's financial compensation being almost inadequate, that feeling of "making a difference" is vital to feeling valued and personal wellbeing. Really, all the preceding discussion has been about the importance of culture—creating a workplace that, in the face of inevitable stress, enables team members to realize their passion, to feel purpose, and to know they're making a difference doing what they love to do.

The Importance of a Healthy Workplace Culture

"The decision that an owner or partner makes to commit to a formal culture transformation process can be one of the most important decisions they will ever make as a leader of the practice. The positive outcomes that result because of a healthy culture will be 'game changing,' and the negative consequences of this unrealized opportunity can be profound and should not be underestimated."

—ED KANARA, DVM, DABVP

HL: Mr. Hall, how can a practice team get started working on their culture?

RH: Two steps: define and align. The first one is to define. Most practices have not defined, as a group, the culture they want to have. For example, "How do we want to deal with the stress here? How do we want to communicate and solve problems here? How do we want to support each other through the changes and challenges that we face?" And until we've done that, there's no way to align the behaviors that are expected versus the behaviors that are impulsive, so there's no compass associated with the culture.

The second step is to align on the behaviors that are critical for the practice's success. For example, "We recognize that the gossiping in this practice is causing problems. So, we agree to give ourselves permission and

commit to call each other out on it and say we won't tolerate it or participate in it." Everybody doing simple things together can make a huge difference in the culture.

HL: Dr. Kanara, we've all been using the term "workplace culture" today, which can mean different things to different people. How do you define "workplace culture" per se?

EK: I define culture as what results from adherence to workplace behaviors that have been determined to be essential for achieving the organizational goals and consistent with the organization's values. So, as Randy just said, first you have to define what you want to be, and that's your values and your goals. Then you align the behaviors necessary to achieve those goals. It's also important for leadership to reward expected behavior and have the courage to address unacceptable behavior.

HL: So, Dr. Kanara, who do you consider responsible for developing a healthy practice culture?

EK: Some people suggest that developing a healthy culture is "everybody's job," and that's true, but only to a certain extent. I believe that culture is really leadership driven. It's a top-down effort since practice leadership must see the value, have an appreciation for the effort required, and enthusiastically champion what's in it for the entire practice team, as well as what's in it for patients and pet owners. But, most importantly, successfully assessing the current culture and implementing an improved one requires that every stakeholder have a

"I do want to emphasize that there is no substitute for professional intervention for mental health issues—really across the spectrum—and there is no shame in seeking out professional help."

—MICHELE GASPAR, DVM, DABVP (FELINE), MA, LCPC

significant voice in helping to shape the new culture. Without genuine buy-in from the entire team, successful culture transformation will not happen.

HL: Mr. Hall, what would you say to practice owners who may be concerned that culture transformation may be too difficult to tackle?

RH: I would reassure them that, while this is not easy, it's not as hard as many other challenges they or the practice have already faced and conquered—for example, going paperless or changing computer systems or adding new, sophisticated medical services. They can do this—there are proven diagnostics, tools, and processes that can guide them through the process—and I know that AAHA is going to help them make it happen.

Is It Worth the Time and Effort It May Take to Transform a Practice's Culture?

"I think it is definitely worth it, and the research backs this up . . . I see evidence of it every day working with practices."

—RANDY HALL

"I would say absolutely. I think that some of the mental health issues that we face can be prevented when we work in a healthy practice culture."

—MARIE HOLOWAYCHUK, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

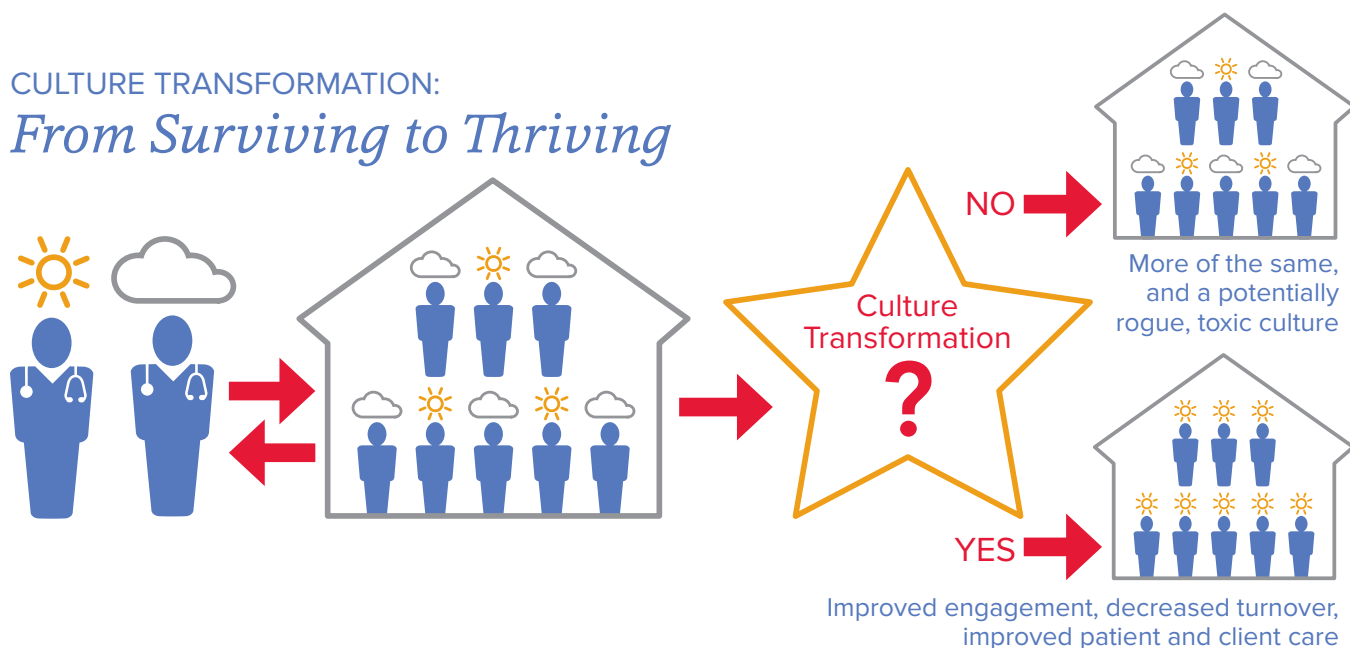
"Yes. If an organization does not take the time and effort to determine its culture, a 'rogue' culture will emerge, whether we recognize it as such or not. Often, when we just let culture 'happen,' it's characterized by ambiguity, lack of consistency of job expectations, and frustration over what may be perceived as a lack of leadership from practice owners or managers."

—ED KANARA, DVM, DABVP

HL: I'm going to go around the table and ask everybody this last question. Given that it will require time and effort for a practice to take the steps necessary to transform their culture, is it worth it?

ES: I think that some mental health issues can be remedied by a culture that supports the self-care techniques that have been mentioned: exercise, meditation, social support, and sleep. So, therefore, I do believe that

CULTURE TRANSFORMATION: *From Surviving to Thriving*



cultural transformation is worth it, based not only on my social work experience, but also grounded in the research on incivility and rudeness in the human medical environment and its impact on satisfaction in the workplace and on the bottom line: patient care. So it's definitely worth it!

MH: I think that practices are going to realize in the coming years that if we don't start to foster practice wellbeing and a healthy workplace culture, we're not going to be able to retain staff, and it's going to lead to more problems down the line. So, I think it is absolutely important to emphasize coming together as a group and holding each other accountable, which will have tremendous benefits for the practice team.

RH: I think it is definitely worth it, and the research backs this up, along with my experience in practices. There was a summary done of 12 or 13 different studies on employee engagement, and essentially what it said was engaged workplaces—places that have fully engaged employees—are more profitable, are more productive, can change faster, and have lower attrition rates. More highly capable and talented and productive people want to work there. They attract better talent.

EK: As a former practice owner, I understand taking on any initiative that involves behavior changes for your team is a significant commitment, but, from my perspective, the answer to Heather's question is irrefutably 'yes, it's worth it.' It would seem, then, based on the comments from our mental health experts, that we can certainly help prevent or help mitigate some of the mental health challenges that team members face. Of course, the positive business outcomes that result from culture transformation, such as increased productivity, decreased staff turnover, improved customer service, and even the quality of human patient care have been well documented.

"I think some of the mental health issues that we face can be prevented when we work in a healthy practice culture."

—MARIE HOLOWAYCHUK, DVM, DACVECC, CYT

MG: I do want to emphasize that there is no substitute for professional intervention for mental health issues—really across the spectrum—and there is no shame in seeking out professional help. However, research across multiple disciplines shows that mindfulness practice, gratitude, physical exercise, validation, support, having one's voice heard, and being able to have agency certainly ameliorate mood disorders and unhelpful ways of seeing ourselves. Taking an active role in our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others with whom we spend hours every day is worth it. It is something that we all need to jump into with both feet, because, as we take care of ourselves and take care of others, that just makes the entire world a better place.

HL: Thank you, everyone, for spending time with us today, sharing your insights and experience. I know I've learned a lot.

AAHA hopes that the recommendations of our experts have been helpful to you. Visit aaha.org/culture for more materials to help you begin to transform your culture. ✖



Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP (Feline), MA, LCPC, cares for pets and people as a practicing board-certified feline specialist, psychotherapist, and member of Vets4Vets, a service that helps veterinary students and veterinarians with personal and professional issues.



Marie Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT, is a board-certified emergency and critical care specialist and certified yoga instructor who champions wellness in the veterinary profession.



Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW, is the founding director of Veterinary Social Work and a clinical associate professor at the University of Tennessee Colleges of Social Work and Veterinary Medicine.



Randy Hall is a leadership trainer, executive coach, and CEO of 4th Gear Consulting, primarily serving veterinary hospitals to help them execute cultural change.



Edward Kanara, DVM, DABVP, has been a veterinary practice owner, held various senior executive positions at Pfizer Animal Health, led multiple culture-change efforts in both large and small organizations, and is the managing member of the Kanara Consulting Group, LLC.



Heather B. Loenser, DVM, is AAHA's Veterinary Advisor for Public and Professional Affairs, a veterinary communication coach, and a practicing general practice and emergency veterinarian.

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References: 1. Data on file, Study Report No. C863R-US-12-018, Zoetis Inc. 2. Gonzales AJ, Humphrey WR, Messamore JE, et al. Interleukin-31: its role in canine pruritus and naturally occurring canine atopic dermatitis. *Vet Dermatol.* 2013;24(1):48-53. doi:10.1111/j.1365-3164.2012.01098.x. 3. Data on file, Study Report No. C362N-US-13-042, Zoetis Inc. 4. Data on file, Study Report No. C961R-US-13-051, Zoetis Inc.

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Perspectives on Practice Cultures: Veterinary Technicians

Their View Can
Depend on How
They Are Viewed

by Maureen Blaney Flietner

How do veterinary technicians view the “culture” of their practice? It may depend to some extent on how their practice culture views them.

In this “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” scenario, veterinary technicians who have put in the time, money, and effort to graduate from an accredited or approved veterinary technology program might find themselves in one of two camps. One has been described as the “woe is me” camp. The other is the “it’s up to me” camp.

“Both schools of thinking exist, but I don’t think anyone necessarily belongs to just one or the other. I think there are many of us who may bounce back and forth between the two,” said Kelsey Beth Carpenter, RVT, a singer/songwriter and creator of the Instagram series “Things Heard at an Animal Hospital.”

“For example, I might have a bad day on Wednesday, and it may just put me into a total victim mentality in which I feel like no one cares about me as a tech. But maybe every other day of the week, I believe in taking control into my own hands and helping myself!

“It’s easy to fall into a train of thought where it feels like life as a technician is helpless. The pay is far from great, the benefits aren’t always there, the

“It’s easy to fall into a train of thought where it feels like life as a technician is helpless. The pay is far from great, the benefits aren’t always there, the recognition and respect are less than what they deserve, and the opportunities for growth can seem limited.”

—KELSEY BETH CARPENTER, RVT



8 Strategies for Coping with Stress

Speaking about veterinary technicians, Jean E. Wallace, PhD, a sociology professor at the University of Calgary, said, “I don’t think it’s simply a matter of ‘put on a happy face’ and the demands of the jobs will disappear, but I do think that the ways of coping with the stresses of their jobs are important. Some strategies are more effective than others, and others can make the situation even more stressful and emotionally draining.”

Use these coping tips gathered from her survey data for the 2013 Alberta Veterinary Medical Association’s Wellness Study:

1. Calm yourself during your work day. Take a time out, walk, or coffee break.
2. Do relaxing things, such as quiet time at work or other activities after work.
3. Avoid keeping it to yourself. Talk to others.
4. Ask colleagues for help, as they may be able to assist.
5. Don’t ignore stress. It isn’t likely to just go away.
6. Spend time and share activities with family and friends outside of work.
7. Try to avoid alcohol as a coping strategy.
8. Exercise several times a week. It helps!

recognition and respect are less than what they deserve, and the opportunities for growth can seem limited,” Carpenter explained.

If postings on veterinary technician social media sites are any indication, some cultures cause a lot of angst. Comments frequently are about:

- Dealing with office gossip
- Getting little respect
- Feeling unappreciated
- Having to deal with poor communication and bullying
- Worrying about low wages and personal finances

A Job Like No Other

How do these perspectives develop? Beyond the mission and value statements on a hospital wall, a practice’s culture really shows itself in the day’s activities and interactions.

Let’s look at what might be a typical day for a veterinary technician.

She might:

- Handle animals who are frightened or in pain, risking injury and strain to herself
- Perform technical laboratory work
- Be exposed to solvents, chemicals, and gases
- Be urinated on, pooped on, vomited on, or hit with anal gland secretions
- Induce and monitor anesthesia
- Collect blood
- Manage unrealistic clients
- Educate clients
- Cope with the stresses of euthanasia

Veterinary technicians are the jacks-of-all-trades in hospitals, often functioning as receptionists, marketers, kennel staff, and

managers; they are heavily utilized by veterinarians. Because of this, they may bear the brunt of the stress from all aspects of the hospital, from managing intraoperative surgical complications to being the first line of defense for client complaints, said Heather B. Loenser, DVM, veterinary advisor for public and professional affairs at AAHA.

In addition, said Loenser, some receive a disproportionately low payrate—depending on the location and hospital structure—and may have to compete with people who are trained “on the job” and lack the foundation of formal education that credentialed technicians receive.

Studies and statistics back that up.

According to May 2016 figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual wage for veterinary technologists and technicians was \$32,490, or \$15.62 an hour before taxes. That is compared with the median annual wage for licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses: \$44,090, or \$21.20 an hour before taxes.

Challenges

A 2016 demographic survey conducted by the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) and sponsored by Merial found that the most significant problems that credentialed veterinary technicians face are low income, burnout, lack of recognition, lack of career advancement, underutilization of skills, and competition with on-the-job-trained technicians.

Of that survey, coauthor Kenichiro Yagi, RVT, VTS (ECC, SAIM), said the

results that most showed him that the profession faces many challenges were that:

- 51% of respondents said they were satisfied with their job
- 56% changed jobs within the first five to seven years
- Of those who changed jobs, 45% left the veterinary field.

Stressors

Interpersonal tensions and conflict are major stressors, according to the 2013 Alberta Veterinary Medical Association's Wellness Study conducted by Jean E. Wallace, PhD, a sociology professor at the University of Calgary. Research showed that toxic work environments can affect individuals by contributing to feelings of burnout, negatively impacting work performance, and leading individuals to consider leaving their profession.

The "Woe Is Me" Camp

Ellen Carozza, LVT, a licensed veterinary technician since 1996, remembers when she dreaded going to work. Early in her career, she worked at a small, rural hospital, a shelter, and then two corporate hospitals—and each had many problems. Moreover, Carozza loved cats, and none of these places cared about felines.

She said, "I knew I would be slammed with too many patients and being part of [a] quantity vs. quality [management approach]. I would get weekly reports with emoji faces, letting us know how we failed the company because our 'numbers' did not meet their requirements. We would have a goal of 'minimums.' We would have too many surgical procedures and not enough properly trained staff to notify the doctor(s) if any problems arose.

The most significant problems that credentialed veterinary technicians face are low income, burnout, lack of recognition, lack of career advancement, underutilization of skills, and competition with on-the-job-trained technicians.

"There was no true shift time. You showed up at the time you were supposed to, and maybe, if you were lucky, you got a break or even lunch. Many times, the doctors left the building, but you had to stay—and you definitely did not go home on time. The techs were always last to leave, and that was one to two hours after the veterinarian left, so you were still discharging patients with no doctor on the premises the majority of the time."

Carozza noted that in those situations, a veterinary technician gets "tired of being treated like crap. You live at the poverty level, so you can't live on your own. You either still live with parents, are married to a spouse who is the main breadwinner, or have roommates, in most cases—and you tend to live paycheck to paycheck. There is this cascade effect. You're not treated well, not paid enough, you have long, ridiculous hours. You love what you are doing but could be making much [more] as a human nurse."

"There are many factors at play in practice culture," said Jason Sweitzer, DVM, RVT, intern director and extern coordinator at the AAHA-accredited

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Conejo Valley Veterinary Hospital in Thousand Oaks, California, and a mental health and suicide prevention speaker.

“It is very easy to want to blame everyone for the situation, and venting can be therapeutic at times,” he said, noting, however, “It can be dangerous to vent too much, as it can focus the brain on the negative and cause you to look for it, just the same as it will do for the positive. Unless it is used as motivation to try and change negative factors, it can lead down a dangerous and nonproductive path.”

Carpenter agreed that, while everyone needs a day to wallow in despair once in a while, it’s not healthy for anyone to permanently exist in that way of thinking. Those

who choose to wallow contribute a negative energy to the group, which challenges the strength of the practice culture.

“We deserve so much more, but we aren’t going to get it by just sitting there being miserable. It’s only going to happen when we demand that it happen,” noted Carpenter.

The “It’s Up to Me” Camp

To move into the “it’s up to me” camp, people have to decide that they will no longer play the victim, says author Rebecca Rose, AAS, CVT, who also has worked as a practice manager and industry consultant. People have to recognize that they did not do their part in finding the right employer, one who would hire workers likely to contribute to a healthy culture and who would support career growth.

People in this camp need to be more self-aware and focus on what kind of ripples they are creating at work. If they can’t change the situation there, said Rose, then they need to look for a practice that works with their values and practices the medicine they want to support.

Carozza believed she deserved something better and that it was up to her to make the change. She found her way to the AAHA-accredited NOVA Cat Clinic in Arlington, Virginia, where she has worked for the past 15 years. She said she now feels that her voice counts, and she is “absolutely valued in her job 100%. There are no minimums, no emojis, no weekly corporate disappointment notices.

“We have a weekly meeting that lets us troubleshoot what we could have done better the week before if we

had a difficult client or case. While there are times I still do not get lunch, I have the liberty of leaving after procedures in the early afternoon. I have clients who ask for me by name. Our patients are respected, the entire staff is trained properly to understand the feline patient and to work with the cat and not against it, and we enjoy being the feline clinic everyone should strive to be.

4 Sources of Job Satisfaction

What might provide job satisfaction? Jean E. Wallace, PhD, said her survey data of veterinary technologists and veterinarians in Alberta found four key sources of job satisfaction:

1. Making a difference by helping animals
2. Making a difference by helping clients
3. Having challenging, interesting work
4. Having supportive coworker relationships



“Soul-search and see what you are really looking for in your job and life.”

—JASON SWEITZER, DVM, RVT

Checklist of Habits of a Healthy Culture

Veterinarians and owners ultimately determine the health of the culture, with how they act trickling down, said Jason Sweitzer, DVM, RVT. They control the traditions within the team, within the hospital, and within the community that make up the culture.

And if a practice doesn't design the culture, said Rebecca Rose, AAS, CVT, it will still have one by default. It's just that no one will be monitoring the culture by managing the daily activities and interactions.

Try this checklist of habits of a healthy culture. Are these habits part of your practice?

- ☐ Do you thank coworkers for their efforts and for doing a great job?
- ☐ Do you give constructive feedback in the POP format (positive statement, opportunity to improve, positive statement)?
- ☐ Do you express to clients your faith in your staff and that you will not tolerate disrespect of staff members?
- ☐ Are employees empowered to focus on their own personal wellness?
- ☐ Do hospital leaders focus on developing their own leadership skills and support others in doing the same?
- ☐ Is there compassionate care toward clients and animals in both the public areas and those reserved for staff?
- ☐ Are there frequent, productive, inclusive staff meetings and debriefing meetings after difficult cases or deaths?
- ☐ Are learning opportunities and professional growth for staff members supported?
- ☐ Is the practice operated like a business, having rules and enforcing them, or does it operate through bad-mouthing and gossip?
- ☐ Are management decisions that affect the medical team made clear as to why they were made, why they were necessary, and what other things were considered?
- ☐ Do employees feel comfortable approaching each other and asking questions?
- ☐ Are those in leadership positions accessible and approachable?



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Reduce the Burnout

Jean E. Wallace, PhD, said it is important to understand the factors that lead to burnout, given the strong relationships between burnout, compassion fatigue, and suicidal ideation. She suggested that to reduce burnout, a practice could:

Reduce physical stressors by:

- Promoting proper lifting and posture habits
- Exploring other ways to reduce the risk of injury in the workplace

Reduce client/patient stressors by:

- Promoting effective communication with clients about realistic expectations about animal welfare and animal care costs
- Accessing grief counseling for clients and animal healthcare workers

Reduce financial stressors by:

- Promoting effective communication about realistic financial expectations between employees and employers
- Accessing financial planning resources for staff

“We get to be passionate about our work, not just do the work. I am utilized 100% to what a credentialed technician is allowed to do by law. Our doctors are doctors; they do not play the role of a technician or assistant,” added Carozza.

Those who focus on taking control seem to improve hospital culture greatly, said Carpenter. They create a voice for themselves and their peers, contributing to the culture in a positive way. “Technicians who try to take their careers into their own hands seem to go the furthest, make the biggest difference, and find the most success,” she said.

“They are promoted to leadership positions where they not only make more money and learn more skills but [also] have the power to contribute to positive change for their fellow technicians. They push for change and growth and new ways of doing things. They see that something is missing and create it,” Carpenter concluded.

Tips for Making the Change

Sometimes, a person can quickly sense whether a practice culture is healthy, said Loenser. It may be just a gut feeling at first, but, eventually, whether coming to work drains or energizes the team becomes obvious, and then tough choices need to be made.

“Soul-search and see what you are really looking for in your job and life,” suggested Sweitzer. “Make a list of what you need to have, what you want to have, and what isn’t very important to you in your job and your life. Remember that these will change over time as you change.

“Look at your list and figure out how your current situation stacks up. Next, look for how you can change your situation to include your true needs. Then, look at whether you can change within your current situation to get most of your wants. Knowing what isn’t very important for you helps because then you can compromise. When you approach your boss or potential boss about your needs and wants, know what you can offer in exchange.”

Carpenter noted, “Sometimes, life doesn’t get better until you make it better. You’ve either got to ask for it, do something to deserve it, or, best of all, create it. If you want something more from your career and that something doesn’t already exist, then what is stopping you from trying to create an opportunity for yourself?

“We cannot always control what happens or why, but we can control how we react to it and how our reaction affects the people around us. You are allowed to be upset, or angry, or discouraged, or sad, or even miserable. To pretend to be happy all the time just isn’t real, and it isn’t doing you or anyone else any favors.”

Feel those negative feelings, added Carpenter, and then make a plan for how to react to them and try to turn them into something better. “That’s what creates a positive and powerful

“Technicians who try to take their careers into their own hands seem to go the furthest, make the biggest difference, and find the most success.”

—KELSEY BETH CARPENTER, RVT

individual, and it is those individuals who contribute to the creation of a healthy clinic culture.”

How to Find a Healthy Culture

Consider these suggestions for finding a healthy culture:

- Check out practice websites. Is the “About Us” section only about the individual veterinarians, with the rest of the staff relegated to just one big photo with first names only?
- Investigate possible employers by checking out all the practices in the area you want to work.
- If you find a potential employer, ask why there is a staff opening and about staff retention. Be wary if no one has been there more than two years.
- If you are considering a move, offer to shadow a shift at the practice first. Listen to how staff members communicate with each other and how they handle a frustrated client or a mistake. Try to let your personality shine through and watch their reactions.
- Get involved with the worldwide community of veterinary technicians found in Facebook groups, such as Veterinary Support Staff Unleashed and ER Vet Tech Rounds.
- Get involved in state and national associations, such as NAVTA, to keep informed and find resources for job searches and continuing education units. ✖



Maureen Blaney Flietner is an award-winning writer living in Wisconsin.

“Sometimes, life doesn’t get better until you make it better. You’ve either got to ask for it, do something to deserve it, or, best of all, create it.”

—KELSEY BETH CARPENTER, RVT

Meet the Experts



Heather B. Loenser, DVM, veterinary advisor for public and professional affairs at the American Animal Hospital Association



Ellen Carozza, LVT, a licensed veterinary technician since 1996



Jason Sweitzer, DVM, RVT



Jean E. Wallace, PhD, University of Calgary, author of the 2013 Alberta Veterinary Medical Association's Wellness Study



Kelsey Beth Carpenter, RVT, singer/songwriter and creator of the Instagram series “Things Heard at an Animal Hospital”



Rebecca Rose, AAS, CVT

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Leadership Matters

Do You Have a Culture of Fear in Your Practice?

by Joanne Graham, CVPM,
SHRM-CP, CCFP

How would you describe the culture of your practice? If you ask this question of both leadership and your employees, you may get some very different responses. We can't reach out and touch culture, but boy, anyone who enters our practice can sure feel it! To me, culture is as indicative of the health of a practice as the bottom line is. So, what is culture? What impact do we, as leaders, have on it, and how can we use it to move our businesses forward?

Culture is the product of the collective learned behavior of the team. It is defined by the daily interactions among people—how we do things here. In the context of a team environment, the culture is successful when independent team members can identify with the practice's mission, core values, and strategic goals. A positive team culture is built around the agreed-upon rules of the team. These rules can be implied, explicitly stated, or both.

Every practice has a culture, a way of doing things that makes that practice unique. It is present in our dress code, the ways we speak to each other, and how we treat our clients and their pets.

It is vital that leadership have clarity around the current culture. Does your practice's leadership have a shared



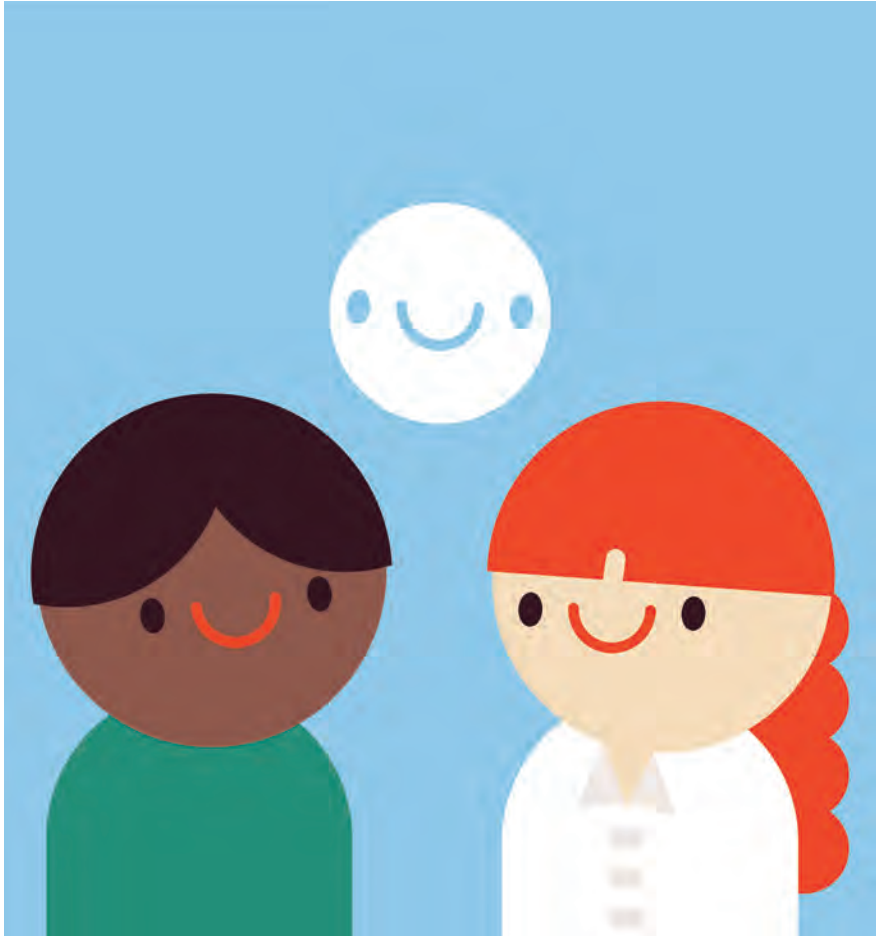
Culture is as indicative of the health of a practice as the bottom line is.

vision? Are they aligned in their processes and their commitment to upholding the vision of the practice? On the other hand, does your practice have a fear-based culture, in which team members are afraid to approach leadership or management with their concerns?

To create the culture you want, a mission statement must be developed, defined, and clearly communicated to the team, your clients, and the people with whom you do business. The mission statement can be further defined by connecting it to core values. Core values are guiding principles that an individual or practice possesses and lives by in day-to-day interactions with other people.

For core values to positively impact culture, they must be shared by a practice's leaders. If they are not, the culture of the practice can be negatively affected by the lack of clarity and absence of a clear mission for the team, or clients, to get behind. Companies that develop committable core values, values that can be upheld by all members of the team, are more easily able to maintain a positive culture and retain employees—and are usually more successful at implementing change.

Many of you have likely taken continuing education on the importance of creating your mission, vision, and values (MVV). Some of you may even have committed these statements to paper or a framed poster or had them painted on the wall of your practice. The truly dedicated among you may have learned your MVV by rote.



When leaders embody the behavior they wish their team to demonstrate, then the team will follow suit.

But how many of us really use those guiding principles and put them to work? If your company truly values respect, do you treat the customer service representative informing us of a walk-in emergency case at the end of the day in a respectful way? If you have a mission statement that values professional growth, do you offer and encourage continuing education by allowing team members the time and financial support to go?

We must decide to create values we can truly act on. As leaders, our role in this is key. When leaders embody the behavior they wish their team to demonstrate, then the team will follow suit. If not, team members have no buy-in and no reason to believe in a mission that, to them, becomes nothing but meaningless words on a page in the employee handbook.

Changing the culture of a practice can be hard. Sometimes it means that we, as individuals, may have to initiate change, and change can be difficult. We can so easily get stuck in the rut of “we’ve always done it that way”—costly words to any business.

To get a sense of how leadership impacts our business culture, we need to get some feedback on our leadership style. We can do this by participating in 360°-evaluations or other performance assessment tools. Only when we become aware of ourselves as we relate to others can we take steps to make the necessary improvements. As the management adage states, we cannot manage what we can’t measure, nor can we begin to change without truly knowing our strengths and weaknesses. Honest feedback is a gift we don’t often receive in our lives. It’s an important

part of personal and professional growth for any business leader.

Team members who are resistant to change are often so because they feel safe in what they already know. They may worry that they will not be able to adopt a new way of doing things, which can then jeopardize their security. As with animals, fear, anxiety, and stress do not create happy, cooperative employees. Our practices are filled with very different people from different walks of life. This is an important consideration when developing a plan to introduce something new into the practice.

Moreover, introducing a new concept to the team without involving those who will be expected to learn the new things is a sure recipe for disaster. Some team members will jump on board right away. These folks are the “early adopters,” those who are least resistant to change. We can strategically position these people to help management and the rest of the team by training them to provide reassurance to their colleagues. It is also important that leadership give staff the opportunity to discuss success stories and areas to improve as frequently as possible.

When choosing to implement Fear FreeSM into your practice, it becomes imperative that your team understands why and how Fear Free fits into the overall mission of your practice. It is important to evaluate your company culture and address any problematic issues; otherwise, you run the risk of alienating team members before you’ve even gotten started.

Practice leaders should develop a shared vision for how Fear Free

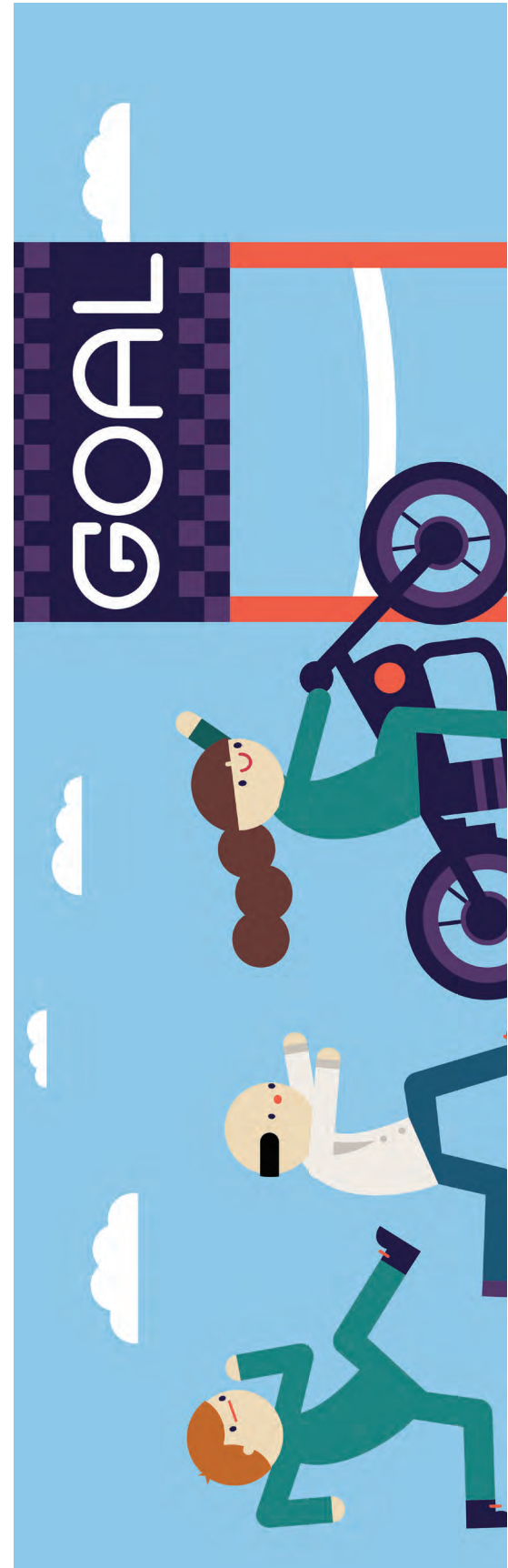
can improve their practice and then introduce it to team members, allowing them to ask questions and address concerns. Be patient with those who are skeptical. As leaders, we find ourselves heading up the charge, but it’s important to stop and listen. We have experts on our teams who can help us identify issues we may not have even thought of in all the excitement.

Fear Free concepts can have a hugely positive impact on culture. If it is apparent that our practice culture is not aligned with our strategic goals, then leaders need to get serious about changing. We have the power to influence, align, create team buy-in, and improve team morale, but if we want these things to change for the better, then first we have to change ourselves.

Ultimately, to successfully implement the Fear Free mission, the culture of your practice must support it. If leadership is divided or if Fear Free concepts are introduced without team buy-in or an understanding of the “why,” any plan you had will come crashing down quickly. On the other hand, with careful leadership that creates team buy-in and models behaviors aligned with your practice’s core values, Fear Free concepts can have a hugely positive impact on your practice’s culture. ❄



Joanne Graham is a certified veterinary practice manager and an emotional and social intelligence coach. She is also a certified compassion fatigue professional and an active member in the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association and the Arizona Veterinary Medical Association.



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Culture and the Bottom Line

Positive Workplace Culture Enhances Employee Satisfaction, Company Success

by Kelly Smith

Workplace culture is one of those things that can be tricky to define but easy to recognize. In the recently published *AAHA's Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*, writer Edward Kanara, DVM, DABVP, says, "Culture has been described as the overall character and personality of an organization. It is exemplified by the sum of the values, traditions, behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of an organization or business."

"Culture is how people behave when their boss isn't looking," notes Will Dean, CEO of the Tough Mudder endurance event series. Nearly everyone has had the experience of stepping into a dysfunctional work environment, either as a customer or a new employee; it is generally uncomfortable and often vividly recalled. A positive environment, on the other hand, goes hand-in-hand with employee satisfaction and morale and enhances the business climate, including the bottom line.

Characteristics of a Positive Workplace Culture

Tony DeCarlo, DVM, founder and CEO of the AAHA-accredited Red Bank Veterinary Healthcare Network, says, "Great cultures are creative, and all employees need to feel they are [the] source of that creativity. The goal of that creativity is to improve



"If you derive energy and joy and satisfaction from being in the workplace, then you have the elements of a good culture."

—MITCHELL MOSES, DVM, MBA, SHRM-SCP



“Admitting fault and not assigning blame, treating each other with respect, gratitude, and integrity, and an environment of trust are all indicators of a positive culture.”

—ROGER SMITH, PHD

the workplace and the customer experience every day. It’s also an environment in which the leader can be most effective by playing a minimal role.”

Mitchell Moses, DVM, MBA, SHRM-SCP, is the chief operating officer at AAHA. He is a former veterinary practice owner with a broad practice background and led the Organizational Efficiency and Colleague Development function within the Companion Animal Veterinary Professional Services group at Zoetis.

He describes the characteristics of a positive workplace culture in terms of how the employees feel, saying, “If you derive energy and

joy and satisfaction from being in the workplace, then you have the elements of a good culture.

Joy can come from a lot of different things, including knowing that you are contributing to something more important. It gives people energy to come to work when there are other people around them [who] are contributing positively to that culture. We tend to derive our energy from there.”

Moses cites various factors that a positive culture will exhibit, including the hard-to-define “vibe.” He says to look for “the things that are said between employees—are they positive, uplifting statements or negative, including gossip and backstabbing?”

Body language is another key marker of a culture, according to Moses—are customers greeted with a smile and enthusiasm or with a dour personality? Look around to see if everyone is on the same page regarding what they are trying to accomplish and how to accomplish it.

In addition, an environment of peace, serenity, and order, even in stressful conditions, is an indicator of a positive culture, as opposed to unbridled chaos. Finally, Moses points out, if you see different people every time you walk in, there is a possibility of high employee turnover, which may be an indicator of the culture.

These markers can be used both to observe a business environment you may encounter and as a lens for your own practice or business.

Roger Smith, PhD, is an organizational development consultant with more than 25 years of leadership development, change management, and executive coaching experience. He is the chief learning officer at Facilitated Leadership LLC and previously led the Center of Excellence for Leadership and Organizational Development for the Hospital Corporation of America, a Fortune 50 company with more than 220,000 employees and 35,000 affiliated physicians.

Smith says, “Workplace culture is the character, personality, and tenor of an organization. It flourishes in an environment of psychological safety, a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. If you’ve ever flown Southwest Airlines, you can feel the effects of a positive workplace culture. How often do you

hear flight attendants singing the safety demonstration, other than on Southwest?”

For him, the elements of a positive culture include leaders who care about the emotional wellbeing of their employees and who take an active role in helping their employees grow. “It’s about team members caring for one another, feeling valued and supported,” Smith says. “Admitting fault and not assigning blame, treating each other with respect, gratitude, and integrity, and an environment of trust are all indicators of a positive culture.”

Effect on the Bottom Line

Smith cites compelling statistics around the workplace and/or bottom line, relating that healthcare

The publicly traded companies on the annual list of the Great Place to Work Institute’s 100 Best Workplaces outperform the S&P 500 by a three-to-one ratio.

expenditures are 50% higher in high-pressure organizations and that \$500 billion is lost in the US economy due to workplace stress. “High-pressure organizations experience 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents, 18% lower productivity, 16% lower profitability, 37% lower job growth, and 50% higher voluntary turnover,” he says.

The Great Place to Work Institute has conducted a large amount of research, which all points to one thing: A positive workplace culture correlates with strong business

performance. The publicly traded companies on the annual list of the Institute’s 100 Best Workplaces outperform the S&P 500 by a three-to-one ratio. In addition, those 100 best companies average nearly twice the annualized stock market return of the general market. These organizations also report lower turnover, less shrinkage, and a higher caliber of job applicants than other companies.

“Great cultures make the difference between good and great companies. Without a great culture, all the



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useful information that management consultants give us cannot be effective,” says DeCarlo. “Great cultures allow us to make good decisions for the right reasons. That’s how great businesses maintain constant growth and become stronger over time.”

Moses relates that a positive work environment impacts the company bottom line in a number of ways. “There is a lot of research out there about how it contributes to decreased turnover, increased productivity, more efficiency, [and] decreased sick days. Every one of those things drops directly to the bottom line,” he says.

He notes that positive culture helps build an engaged workforce because people want to be there every day, and he further describes how culture impacts profitability, saying, “Customers know when they come into a toxic environment, and they will vote with their dollars; they will walk, which is a direct hit to the bottom line. Customers who feel welcome and invited in a retail environment will hang around and spend dollars, and in the medical profession, they will hang around, trust what you are telling them about their pet[s], and spend dollars.”

The ability to attract and keep talented employees is a key element of a positive culture, and thus, a healthy bottom line. “Right now, most places are in a talent war, especially with associate veterinarians,” Moses says. “We do not have enough people to fill positions, especially in an urban area, where there are a lot of choices for people to go to. Given the choice of working in a toxic culture versus a healthy culture, they will choose a healthy culture all the time.”



“It starts with trust, hiring great people at all positions, and giving them the educational tools and a believable and adoptable philosophy.”

—TONY DECARLO, DVM

Creating a Positive Environment

Clearly, it makes good sense to foster that positive environment. How does a business go about that?

Some clues come from Edgar Schein, MA, PhD, BPhil, an author and professor emeritus with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management who has written extensively about culture. He views culture and leadership as inseparable. In a recent interview with cultureuniversity.com, he says that leaders should not focus on culture change but rather on a business problem. “If a leader just starts with how you change the culture, then he already doesn’t understand the problem,” Schein says. “It’s like saying, ‘Would you decide someday to change your personality?’ The first question would be: ‘Why? Why would you want to do that?’ That’s the question I would ask any leader who comes to me and says, I think we need a culture change.”

Charlotte Weir is the senior operations manager at PetWell Partners, a nationwide network of veterinary hospitals. She echoes Schein’s philosophy, saying, “In order to build your workplace culture, it’s important to know your why. Why do we do what we do? It’s easy to say, ‘We provide world-class medical care and client service,’ but that is what you do, not *why* you do it. Your ‘why’ is personal and emotional, and it evokes passion and drive.”

Weir suggests asking the person next to you on an airplane or in line what it is they do for work; you will likely receive a quick reply. Then, ask them what their “why” is—why do they do what they do? Be prepared for a pause, followed by an emotional response. “It’s much more personal and thought provoking. Without your ‘why,’ you will never successfully be committed to your ‘what,’” she says.

Once you have established that overarching “why” of your company

culture, there are a number of tactics that can foster a positive culture. Smith says it starts with getting to know your employees. “Ask about their career and personal interests, and show empathy. A University of Michigan study suggests that leaders who demonstrate compassion toward employees foster individual and collective resilience in challenging times,” he says.

“As a leader, go out of your way to help your employees succeed. Employees are more cooperative [with] each other and customers when their leaders are self-sacrificing. Encourage people to talk to you, even about their problems. Kindness and generosity have been shown to be strong predictors of organizational effectiveness,” Smith notes.

According to DeCarlo, culture begins at the top. “It starts with trust, hiring great people at all positions, and giving them the educational tools

and a believable and adoptable philosophy. Good leaders don’t suffocate their culture with rules; rather, they give teams the freedom to do their jobs based on a sound philosophy,” he says.

Having an open, honest conversation with staff—and even clients—is a good starting point, Moses notes. “You will have a culture in your practice. You will either define it yourself and be intentional about getting there, or it will define itself, and you may not like the outcome. Let’s create something rather than allowing something to unfold,” he says.

For Weir, every job is important. She says, “In order for a team to win a game, each player has to know their role; this rule applies in each of our practices—every employee plays an intricate role in a successful client interaction or patient treatment.” It’s also important, she says, for each employee to understand their role

not only on a granular-task level but also how they contribute to the big picture; this speaks to providing adequate training.

Moses points out a discussion thread on the LinkedIn Organizational Development group, where “the question was, ‘Where does culture come from?’ and responses were split about half and half, with some saying it comes from the top [and] others from the bottom. I believe it starts at the top with defining the culture that we want because that’s leadership’s purpose. But it’s built from the bottom, when you have like-mindedness and agreement from everyone who works there, so they can hold each other accountable [and] pledge to show up and be present every day. The top can’t do that.”

The Chick-fil-A restaurant chain has a tagline when addressing customers that is used by every employee: “My pleasure.” It’s part of its culture, and it’s part of what defines the business. For Moses, that employee-driven communication is vital. He relates that AAHA is embarking on an intentional effort to embrace healthy workplace culture in the veterinary field. As part of that, he says, “It’s important to think with our heart as well as our head as we interact with our colleagues and that we treat each other tenderly, and gently, and don’t damage those bonds that we’re trying to improve.” ✨

Resources

AAHA’s Guide to Veterinary Practice Team WellBeing, recently published by AAHA, offers a plethora of information about culture specifically for the veterinary field along with further resources (aaha.org/culture).

Legacy by James Kerr is recommended by Charlotte Weir. This book details the cultural transformation of New Zealand’s beloved rugby team, the All Blacks. “For them, it is all about a jersey, and for me, it is all about happy, healthy pets,” she says.

It Takes a Tribe: Building the Tough Mudder Movement, Will Dean’s new book, explores culture and how it relates to success.

Culture Eats Strategy for Lunch by Curt Coffman and Kathie Sorensen, and *Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies* by Paul Zak are both recommended by Mitchell Moses.



Kelly Smith is a freelance writer and frequent *Trends* contributor. She lives in Littleton, Colorado.

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	Sunday, February 4, 2018	Monday, February 5, 2018	Tuesday, February 6, 2018
7:00-7:50 a.m.	SUNRISE SESSIONS Making Dollars & Sense of Veterinary Fees Dr. Lowell Ackerman <i>Sponsored by Zoetis</i> Leptospirosis: Why Awareness and Diagnosis Is Crucial to the Health of Your Patients, Clients, & Practice Dr. Natalie Marks <i>Sponsored by Merck Animal Health</i>	SUNRISE SESSIONS Growing Threats: Lyme, Leptospirosis, & CIV Dr. Richard Goldstein <i>Sponsored by Zoetis</i> Make the Routine Visit Remarkable: Attending to the Emotional Experience Dr. Jacqueline C. Neilson <i>Sponsored by Elanco</i> 7 Amazing Online Marketing Techniques for Veterinary Practices Troy Leonard <i>Sponsored by Doctor Multimedia</i>	SUNRISE SESSIONS Targeting Pain: Current & Future Tools for Managing OA Pain Dr. Bryan Torres <i>Sponsored by Zoetis</i> Rehabilitation for the Non-Rehab Practice Dr. Janice L. Huntingford <i>Sponsored by Companion Animal Health by LiteCure</i>
8:40-9:30 a.m.	CORPORATE SYMPOSIUM	Low-Stress Handling Emergency Care: Is It Possible? Yes! Dr. Sally Foote <i>Sponsored by Cattedog Publishing</i>	The Role of Laser in the Treatment of Pain Dr. Janice L. Huntingford <i>Sponsored by Companion Animal Health by LiteCure</i>
9:00-11:45 a.m.	AAHA 2017 Canine Vaccination Guidelines: Updates & Insights <i>Sponsored by Merck Animal Health</i>	Bring the Newly Updated AAHA Canine Vaccination Guidelines to Life in All Areas of Your Practice <i>Sponsored by Merck Animal Health</i>	
9:55-10:45 a.m.	CORPORATE SYMPOSIUM	Understanding Business Tools Used to Eliminate Lawsuits & Increase Tax Savings Dr. Al Snyder <i>Sponsored by Legally Mine</i>	Understanding Business Tools Used to Eliminate Lawsuits & Increase Tax Savings Dr. Al Snyder <i>Sponsored by Legally Mine</i>
10:55-11:45 a.m.	CORPORATE SYMPOSIUM	Spicy Health: Ancient Spices for a Modern Age Dr. Robert Silver <i>Sponsored by Rx Vitamins</i>	How to Take Control of Your Online Reputation Brittany Marino <i>Sponsored by Demandforce</i>
12:00-1:30 p.m.	LUNCH SYMPOSIUM Talking the Talk: Communication That Leads to Real-World Compliance Steve Dale & Julie Legred <i>Sponsored by Merck Animal Health</i>	LUNCH SYMPOSIUM	LUNCH SYMPOSIUM
1:45-2:35 p.m.	Playing the Hand You're Dealt: Building Culture in Established Teams Dr. Andy Roark <i>Sponsored by Petplan Pet Insurance</i>	Of Vaccines and Volumes: What Product Utilization Data Reveals About Real-World Clinical Behaviors Dr. Travis Meredith <i>Sponsored by Vetalytix</i>	CORPORATE SYMPOSIUM <i>Sponsored by Core Imaging</i>
2:45-3:35 p.m.	The Art of Change Management Dr. Andy Roark <i>Sponsored by Petplan Pet Insurance</i>	Explore, Connect, and Grow with AAHA Dr. Michael Cavanaugh	CORPORATE SYMPOSIUM
3:55-4:45 p.m.	How to Be the Toughest Mutha in Veterinary Medicine (& Happy) Dr. Andy Roark <i>Sponsored by Petplan Pet Insurance</i>	Enhancing Client Bonds, Hospital Culture, & Financial Performance with Pet Health Insurance Dr. Wendy Hauser <i>Sponsored by ASPCA</i>	CORPORATE SYMPOSIUM

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Wellness: Not Just for Patients Anymore

Why Integrating Wellness into Your Culture Helps Everyone

by Jen Reeder

Marie Holowaychuk, DVM, DACVECC, CYT, is no stranger to the challenges of the veterinary profession. Inspired by the passion of her parents—both veterinarians—she pursued a successful career as a critical care specialist. But while working as an assistant professor of emergency and critical care, she suffered from compassion fatigue.

“The cases were intensely difficult and the stakes were very high, and it took its toll,” she said. “I did not realize it at the time and mistook my feelings of helplessness and exhaustion as not being cut out for my job.”

Soon after leaving her position to work as a self-employed criticalist, Holowaychuk experienced burnout from trying to make ends meet. Then, in fall of 2014, she was in a severe car accident.

“While the car accident was not my fault, it was a wake-up call for me and a sign that I needed to slow down and make some serious changes in my life,” she said.

Now, Holowaychuk offers wellness retreats in the Canadian Rockies and workshops for veterinary care providers in North America to address topics like mental health, suicide, stress, compassion fatigue (and general fatigue), burnout, depression,



“I believe leaders at all levels of the veterinary profession are morally obligated to prioritize addressing wellness issues.”

—MICHAEL T. CAVANAUGH, DVM, DABVP (EMERITUS)



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self-care, mindfulness, sleep hygiene (tips to fall and stay asleep, such as limiting screen time before bedtime), setting boundaries, and preventing toxic work environments.

"We have lost too many amazing veterinary care providers—technicians and veterinarians—to suicide or other professions, and I'd like to see this trend slow or stop," she said. "Amazingly compassionate people are attracted to veterinary medicine, but we need to do something to ensure that they can stay in this profession and not suffer its consequences. I urge veterinary hospitals to integrate wellness into their culture by openly discussing the difficulties we face in practice."

She's not alone. In fact, since conducting a survey on culture with the University of Denver, AAHA is focusing on cultivating wellness in veterinary practices with the publication of AAHA's *Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*. AAHA will also continue to develop assessment tools and offer assistance with achieving a cultural transformation over the next couple of years.

"I believe leaders at all levels of the veterinary profession are morally obligated to prioritize addressing wellness issues," said AAHA's CEO Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus). "This may not immediately resonate with those of us who graduated from veterinary school in the 60s, 70s, and 80s and were taught to 'pay our dues.' Just because that's the way we were treated doesn't mean that is the way it should be. Many of today's graduates are juggling major education debt



compared to the debt with which we were saddled 'back in the day.' Asking someone to 'pay their dues' while dealing with managing their debt and the rest of their complicated life is not a recipe for success or wellbeing."

He emphasized that individuals must take charge of their own personal and professional wellbeing and satisfaction, and practice owners should encourage that accountability in employees. In his view, talking about such issues should be acceptable rather than taboo. By promoting a wellness culture, practices can attract and retain quality employees, and clients will have more positive experiences.

"We firmly believe that providing a healthy workplace culture can support the mental wellness of our colleagues," Cavanaugh said. "I am very proud that the AAHA Board of Directors has made such a significant commitment to AAHA's Healthy Workplace Culture Initiative."

Cory Friedman, CBC, vice president of benefits consulting for AAHA Preferred Provider GCG Financial,

said his team works with hundreds of animal hospitals around the country to structure employee benefit programs, like health insurance. He sees practices increasingly beginning to offer employee-assistance programs (EAPs) as part of their benefits packages. EAPs typically offer phone support from a licensed clinician or mental health provider as well as face-to-face sessions and online resources.

“We absorb the cost because we think it’s really important,” Friedman said.

Employees who use EAPs can find support for workplace issues, like bullying and compassion fatigue, and for personal issues, like divorce and financial planning. Managers can be coached about issue resolution and dealing with troubled employees as well as be able to offer the phone

number of an approved counselor as a resource if a member of the team wants to discuss a problem. Yet Friedman said utilization rates for EAPs is remarkably low: just 2–3%.

“The practice has to do a really good job creating awareness of the existence of the program,” he advised. “But it’s also changing behavior and getting people to pick up the phone and engage with the program. . . . I think people are starting to recognize the important role that mental health plays in overall physical wellbeing.”

Kimberly Pope-Robinson, DVM, CCFP, author of *The Unspoken Life: Recognize Your Passion, Embrace Imperfection, and Stay Connected*, graduated from the the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine in 2000. She went on to become the medical director of a corporate veterinary company before managing veterinary specialists working for a pharmaceutical company. Many veterinary professionals asked her for help in coping with issues like stress and compassion fatigue.

As a perfectionist, she eventually fell into an “ocean of shame” for a variety of perceived failings: She couldn’t read every veterinary journal cover to cover, convince all clients to trust her judgment more than that of “Dr. Google,” or live off three hours of a sleep per night.

“Before you know it, it’s like, ‘I’m a bad veterinarian. I’m a bad human. I suck. Blah blah blah,’” she said. “You’re at the bottom of that ocean, and you have to make a decision of what you want to do.”



AAHA Practices What It Preaches

AAHA is committed not only to promoting wellness in veterinary practice cultures but in its own office as well (see page 13). To that end, AAHA formed a Culture Committee comprised of staffers to create and maintain a more healthy and vibrant workplace at the Lakewood, Colorado, headquarters, according to AAHA’s CEO Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus).

“The Culture Committee is tasked with monitoring employee engagement and recommending opportunities to increase staff engagement and employee satisfaction,” he explained.

Three subcommittees contribute to this work: the Health and Wellness Committee, which promotes healthy activities, like wellness walks and yoga with Dr. Cavanaugh; the Fun Committee, which hosts networking events; and the Oz Award Committee, which recognizes employees who go above and beyond for AAHA members and coworkers.

“We also have a pet-friendly workplace, and that serves as a great reminder for why we do what we do,” Cavanaugh said. “Having so many AAHA staff involved makes this whole process very gratifying to watch. These efforts are making a palpable difference in our culture here at AAHA headquarters.”



Pope-Robinson urges people to recognize “sinks” that pull us down—such as clients without money, pets without options, euthanasia, or having to fire an employee—and “balloons” that help us rise.

Her initial decision was to commit suicide. She had the pills in her hand. Fortunately, at the critical moment, she thought of her rescued horse, Toby.

“I thought about how he wouldn’t see me again and wouldn’t understand it. Then, in that moment, my cat walked in, and I have that unique bond with him. Then I thought about

my husband, and I thought about my parents, and all these things. I realized there’s another path to go [down].”

In 2015, she founded 1 Life Connected Consulting to help other veterinary professionals find the path to wellness. She wrote her book—which is dedicated to the horse who saved her life—and offers coaching,

workshops, and retreats to spread the word that facing personal and professional challenges is normal.

“It’s not about just putting rosy glasses on and thinking all positive. You can’t do that because you do need to see the risks that are out there,” she said.

Pope-Robinson urges people to recognize “sinks” that pull us down—such as clients without money, pets without options, euthanasia, or having to fire an employee—and “balloons” that help us rise. Balloons are physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, and they are different for everyone. For instance, a spiritual balloon might be attending church or hiking in nature. Physical balloons could include running, yoga, kayaking, walking, or Pilates.

One of Pope-Robinson’s emotional balloons is a candle that smells like the flower lei she wore on her wedding day in Hawaii. After she euthanizes a pet—a potential sinker—she lights the candle and smells it for a few seconds to help stay balanced.

“I don’t tell people what to do. I help them visualize what actually fills their balloons for them and identify their sinks,” she said. “I’m the bridge that gives them the ability to verbalize this so they can say to their team, ‘I just had a major sinker. I need to go fill a balloon,’ and the team goes, ‘You know what? Go take five minutes.’”

Renee Humphries, the hospital administrator at Hillside Veterinary Clinic, a 24-hour emergency clinic based in Dallas, Texas, with six satellite locations, heard Pope-Robinson speak at a conference

and subsequently flew her to Dallas to give 30 presentations to everyone on staff. She made it mandatory for everyone on the team to attend one lecture and compensated employees for their time. She also ordered 30 copies of Pope-Robinson's book and loans them out on a confidential basis. She can't keep them on the shelves.

Now, the team uses terminology learned from Pope-Robinson to communicate. Many were impacted by her story of having a meltdown on a hectic day. For her last appointment that day, she needed to bandage a kitten's leg. All she needed was brown gauze, but the practice was out of brown gauze—and she just lost it.

"If somebody's getting close to losing it, they'll say, 'OK, I'm about to have a brown-gauze moment. And people will literally jump in and say, 'What can I do to help you? What's going on?' So it's really great because it's given us tools of communication to help us keep our balloons filled and keep [us] from having a brown-gauze moment," Humphries explained.

She said that's key with a team of more than 200 employees working around the clock on emergency cases and with the shortage of veterinarians in Texas leading to intense workloads.

She also encourages employees facing wellness issues to seek professional help, if need be. "One thing that I felt was a little overwhelming for me is that I can't be their counselor," she said. "And what I learned is I don't have to be. It's OK to reach out for help—and don't ignore it."

Crosby Roper, VMD, owner of AAHA-accredited Bay Park Veterinary Clinic in San Diego, California, has owned his practice since 1993. He learned not to bury his head in the sand after a two- to three-year period when his staff seemed to hate each other. He eventually let a half-dozen employees go within a two-week span and started being more careful when hiring staff.

Today, he has "really good employees," but he still worries when they start complaining during stressful times. So he asked Pope-Robinson to

meet with his 12 employees in 2017. Based on her suggestion, he hung a whiteboard in the staff lounge so employees can write down good things that happened during the day and thank each other for helping out.

For working hard, he rewards his team financially with bonuses and profitsharing, and he takes them out to lunch from time to time. He strives to keep the lines of communication open and cultivate a positive practice culture that supports wellness—something that benefits his employees as well as himself.

"If they're not happy coming to work, I don't like coming to work," Roper said. "I spend more time with these guys than I do with my wife, so they're sort of like family, really. I want everybody to enjoy work, I want them to have a good time, and I want to create an environment where that's possible." ❀



Awardwinning freelance journalist Jen Reeder is the president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

Links for More Information

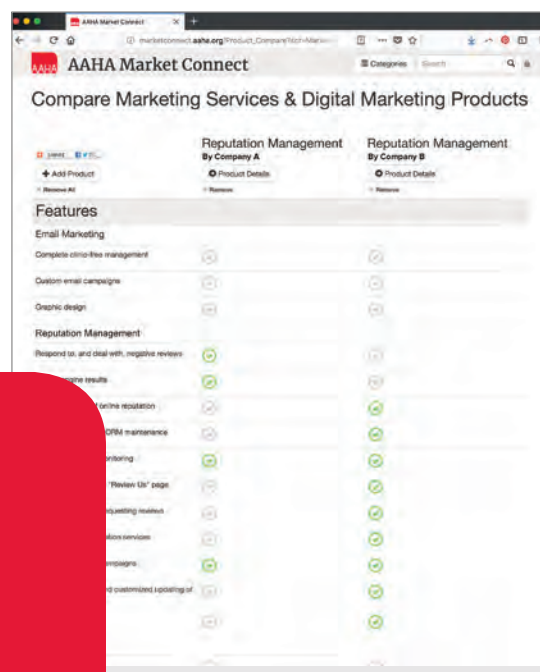
- AAHA's *Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*: aaha.org/culture
- *2016 State of the Industry*, AAHA's study conducted in conjunction with the University of Denver, which evaluated culture in veterinary practices: aaha.org/stateoftheindustry
- Marie Holowaychuk's Critical Care Vet Consulting website: criticalcarevet.ca
- Videos from Marie Holowaychuk's Veterinary Wellness Workshop and Retreat
 - youtu.be/WktAGn0_nBg
 - youtu.be/bUHTz_nHh4o
- GCG Financial website: gcgfinancial.com
- Kimberly Pope-Robinson's 1 Life Connected Consulting website: 1lifecc.com
- Hillside Veterinary Clinic website: hillsidevetclinic.org
- Bay Park Veterinary Clinic website: bayparkpetclinic.com



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in the community

Resources for Building Practice Culture and Team Wellbeing

by Susan Moger

For “In the Community” this month, *Trends* presents information on three outstanding resources for building practice culture and team wellbeing.

1. AAHA's Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing (2017)

In “An Open Letter to the Veterinary Profession” in *AAHA's Guide to Veterinary Practice Team Wellbeing*, Michael T. Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus), CEO of AAHA, describes the guide's origin and purpose: “AAHA is launching a major initiative . . . that utilizes a positive, proactive approach to help prevent or mitigate mental health issues in veterinary practice teams. We intend to do this by encouraging practice team members to embrace the benefits of self-care and to provide practices with the resources to optimize their workplace culture.”

The guide is a versatile, compelling resource. Its seven chapters are grouped as “Defining the Challenge,” “Wellbeing Solutions,” “Culture Solutions,” and “Final Thoughts.” Chapters contain a “Take-Home Message” that summarizes the main point of the chapter; a “How to Get Started” section, usually a checklist, related to the chapter topic; and a resources list.

Cavanaugh concludes, “Please share this [guide] with your colleagues. We hope it serves as a springboard for discussion and leads to action that will make a difference in your personal and professional lives.”

It is available online at aaha.org/culture.

2. Veterinary Social Work

Elizabeth B. Strand, PhD, LCSW, director of veterinary social work at the University of Tennessee, defines veterinary social work as “a subspecialty of social work practices that focuses on the relationship between humans and animals.” She also describes how a veterinary social worker's training addresses common challenges to practice team

wellbeing. “[Among] the areas that [a] veterinary social work[er] has expertise in are compassion fatigue and conflict management and animal-related grief and bereavement.”

Strand predicts that in the future, veterinary social workers will provide close support to practice teams. “The recent attention to the issue of . . . mental wellbeing among those in veterinary medicine will result in more interdisciplinary relationships between social work and veterinary medicine,” she says. “I anticipate that larger practices may find some way to have a veterinary social worker on staff, and smaller practices may establish relationships with veterinary social workers.” See vetsocialwork.utk.edu for more information.

3. Vets4Vets

Vets4Vets, a program of the VIN Foundation, is a free, confidential, peer-to-peer resource for veterinarians at all stages of their careers. This resource should be on the radar of every practice that is concerned about team wellbeing.

Bree Montana, DVM, CCFP, program leader, recently described Vets4Vets to *Trends*. “We started Vets4Vets about three years ago, and have helped over 700 people to date. Our program fees are covered by generous donations. Probably 75% of our clients have one or two phone consults and they are off and rolling on their own. We [also] offer a weekly support group meeting for veterinarians, a support group for veterinarians pursuing sobriety from any form of addiction, [and] a support group for veterinarians who have been diagnosed with cancer. Confidentiality is paramount.”

To contact Vets4Vets, Montana says, “shoot me an email at Vets4Vets@VINfoundation.org, and you'll get a reply very quickly. The process begins with a one-to-one confidential phone conference. . . . There is a deep healing that comes from being heard and from having one of our veterinary peers recognize the truth of our experience.” ※

Susan Moger is a freelance writer and editor living in Maryland.

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