



Team + Trust + Training = Team Satisfaction, Quality Patient Care, and Profitability

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OVERVIEW

Research in the healthcare setting has established that creating highly functional, highly coordinated healthcare teams results in more efficient medical care, reduced costs of delivery, improved patient outcomes, and increased workplace satisfaction. At the foundation of every successful veterinary practice is a successful veterinary team; at the foundation of every successful veterinary team is an environment built on trust and respect. A trusting, well-trained team is able to manage the day-to-day events of veterinary practice—whatever they may be—in a way that leads to positive outcomes for the veterinary practice, the individual members of that team, and the clients and patients in their care. Achieving a highly functional, highly coordinated veterinary healthcare team provides the formula for achieving team satisfaction, quality patient care, and profitability.

TEAM

Have you ever asked, “What is a team? How does a team function efficiently?” A team is a group of individuals with common goals, vision, and shared outcomes. To truly maximize the efficiency of the veterinary practice, it is worthwhile to examine how the practice functions as a veterinary team. Most teams in veterinary medicine are described as functional working groups², meaning a group of individuals brought together to complete a set of jobs, in which each individual has his or her own tasks and responsibilities. Opportunities exist to move the veterinary practice, along with veterinary medicine as a whole, toward being more team-oriented.

How do you see your team? Better yet, ask your team how they see themselves! Their answer may be “dysfunctional.” That’s okay. At least there is the acknowledgment (an important first step) that there is an opportunity to grow into a more functional and effective team!

You may have heard of the acronym “T.E.A.M.,” which stands for “Together Everyone Achieves More.” This acronym accurately represents a team and its function. A second important concept is the synergy within a team. Synergy can be represented by the

Instead of bringing employees together, many traditional work practices tend to foster and solidify divisions among them.¹



You may create your own acronym for display in your employee lounge or client reception area. Ask the following questions:

- What does your team wish to accomplish (shared goals)?
- What does your team wish to learn about each other (shared knowledge)?
- How does your team wish to behave together (mutual respect)?
- How does your team wish to communicate with each other (effective communication)?

When your team answers these questions, you will begin to see trends. Key words and concepts will begin to dominate the conversation. Your team may create an acronym that looks like this:

CommunicaTe ApprEciate Be AccountAble Motivate



formula $1+1=3$, which expresses the idea that we can achieve more together than we can as individuals. A third concept that is also important to embrace is that no one is as smart or dynamic individually as the entire team together.

Because of the high level of interdependence among employee roles within healthcare settings (also consistently found in veterinary medicine), research has found that high-functioning healthcare teams require **shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect, along with frequent, timely, accurate, and problem-solving communication.**¹ This process, termed “relational coordination,” was first recognized in the airline industry and subsequently applied to healthcare settings. It offers the synergy needed within a veterinary practice to maximize team satisfaction, patient care, and profitability.

The benefits of a high-functioning healthcare team include career satisfaction and fulfillment³, improved efficiency of service delivery¹, improved patient outcomes¹, decreased team burnout³, and reduced overall costs of care delivery.¹

TRUST

Trust defines healthy workplaces. However, of all the concepts to be covered, trust is by far the most intangible; it is more of a perception.

There are four elements of trust:

1. Able: Demonstrating Competency
2. Believable: Acting with Integrity

3. Connected: Demonstrating Care and Concern

4. Dependable: Following Through with Commitments

Historically, trust has not been quantifiable; however, it is now known that trust⁴ *can be* quantified and measured, similar to other key indicators. When trust in the practice decreases, speed and efficiency also decreases, while cost increases. **This is a tax.** When trust rises, speed and efficiency increase, driving a decrease in cost. **This is a dividend.**

It has been said, “*Every interaction, every work project, every initiative, every communication, every strategic or tactical imperative we are trying to accomplish is affected positively or negatively by trust.*” Therefore, the benefits of a trusting team are plentiful. A team that does not trust each other is doomed to fail. “*Nothing is as fast as the speed of trust.*” And, “*Nothing is as profitable as the economics of trust.*”⁴

The first step in quantifying trust is to ask your veterinary team, “How is trust measured?” and to engage in a discussion about trust. Building trust can take a long time and can be destroyed in the blink of an eye. Further, trust is part of a culture that relies upon respect, knowledge, and communication.

Research suggests that major detractors to trust in the veterinary practice are unresolved conflict, people who safeguard power, or absentee leadership.⁵ Empowering the team to manage conflict proactively is important in building and sustaining an environment of trust and respect.¹ This includes developing systems to address conflict when there are perceived power differentials among team members (e.g., practice owner versus kennel attendant). How a team is rewarded also promotes trust and shared goals¹. Rewarding an individual focuses attention on individual achievement and

goals, whereas rewarding team achievement promotes the value of working together to achieve team goals. Therefore, it is imperative to ask, “How should these goals be measured and rewarded?”

Benefits of a trusting veterinary healthcare team include:

1. A team that is mentally and physically healthy
2. Strong bonds and relationships between team members
3. A collaborative environment
4. Positive outcomes for clients and patients

TRAINING

After declaring who your team is and **how** they function, recognize that training will benefit each and every member of the team at all stages of their careers. Team members arrive in all shapes and sizes with various backgrounds and education levels. Each team member brings past experiences, a lifetime of stories, and trials and tribulations to the table. Some team members will bring formal training, whereas others will bring life experiences or on-the-job training. Both pathways are to be embraced. The key is to establish a team culture from the hiring process out, and to ensure the diversity created enhances the team in a positive way. This often means focusing less on experience or proven technical skills and hiring more for a candidate’s ability to form relationships and work effectively as a member of a group.¹ Without first being an effective team member, any new hire with great experience or technical skills will be limited in the contributions he or she can make toward creating a highly functional, effective veterinary healthcare team with shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication.

Formally trained team members may have graduated from a university with a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine (DVM), an AAS (Associates in Applied Science), BSc (Bachelor of Science), or a certificate as an Approved Veterinary Assistant (AVA). Team members may have an MBA (Masters in Business Administration) or a CVPM (Certification in Veterinary Practice Management). The varying degrees of passion and focus within a veterinary hospital all bring valuable knowledge and expertise to the veterinary team. Now is the time to embrace and respect each individual in the veterinary practice and the unique knowledge and experience they bring. Properly leveraging all team members for their expertise and experience is important in achieving team satisfaction, patient care, and profitability.



TEAM EXERCISE

Trust can be measured and quantified. Ask your team, on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being low, 10 being high):



- How much do you trust your co-workers?
- How well does the veterinary team demonstrate competency?
- How often does the veterinary team act with integrity?
- How well does the veterinary team demonstrate genuine care and concern for:
 - Team members
 - Clients
 - Patients
- How often does the veterinary team complete projects?

In three months, after consciously focusing on improving trust, ask the same questions. Has the needle moved?

Team members who have graduated from an accredited veterinary technology program, completed and passed the Veterinary Technician National Exam (VTNE), maintain their credential in the state they practice in by fulfilling requirements, and pay their credentialing dues, are considered Licensed, Registered, or Certified. These team members are eager to assist their veterinarians and to be leveraged to their highest potential. As a veterinary technician, it is their



TEAM EXERCISE

Encourage team members to create a comprehensive list of ALL the services the veterinary hospital provides.

When compiled, as a team, identify the “Doctor Things”; items that involve diagnosing, prognosing, treatment, and surgery. The other items on the list can be deemed “Team Things,” where members of the veterinary team who are trained to complete the services (e.g., sedation for credentialed veterinary technicians; cleaning kennels for any staff member) are identified. Leadership is often surprised by the comprehensive list that is created, and equally surprised by all the duties that could be delegated to the trained veterinary team.



job to be their veterinarian’s “right hand.” As an empowered, trusted, knowledgeable team member, it is their duty to recognize and anticipate the needs of their veterinarian. There is value in empowering staff (veterinarians, technicians, client service representatives, etc.) to recognize flexibility in their roles. This allows other members of the veterinary team to pitch in and complete tasks that are within their scope of practice, as needed. This does not mean staff should replace veterinarians in diagnosing or providing prognosis. Rather, it means to encourage veterinarians and other members of the veterinary team to accept support in providing a highly coordinated approach to offer the best care possible for the pet and pet owner. By empowering the entire veterinary team to take an active role in completing tasks within their scope of practice, the efficacy of the entire veterinary healthcare team improves and goals are broadened.

After a team member has been hired, in-hospital training normally occurs at the time of hire and then should continue throughout the career of a veterinary team member. During the first few weeks of employment, a team member may go through a detailed phase training program (involving time with veterinarians, technicians, assistants, receptionists, and managers). Phase training also may consist of cross training (increasing one’s knowledge and empathy for all the positions and duties of the veterinary team). Work rules that specify that a certain job or task belongs to a specific individual or group fosters a practice environment that is often focused on the individual goals of the staff member or group rather than the broader team goals of the practice.¹ Cross training can reduce a culture of “that’s not my job.”

Many team members have not been raised to work in teams, but rather to compete with others for recognition and promotions.² Developing a training plan for staff that embraces a team culture where shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication are important is a key ingredient to creating a highly functional, highly effective veterinary team.

Additionally, ongoing in-hospital training for the entire team is important in offering opportunities for collaboration and career advancement. Team training, presenting, and public speaking all levy opportunities for personal and professional development. As an example, a veterinarian and assistant may team up to present a training session on a recent “interesting case.” They may review patient records, diagnostic tests, surgery, recovery, and outcome. They may discuss invoice charges and home care. Through this collaborative “training program” approach, shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication will inevitably emerge.

Benefits of training the veterinary healthcare team:

- Contributes to team building itself
- Clarifies and expands job opportunities
- Eliminates the “that’s not my job” culture
- Rewards team members with personal growth and development
- Creates career satisfaction and fulfillment



A beneficial team exercise helps create shared values, vision, and mission statements. Your veterinary hospital may already have a mission statement in place. Ask yourself if the mission statement is still relevant and whether your team has bought into it. Do they live and breathe this mission each day? The answer should be evident in every client and patient interaction.

If the practice does not have shared values, vision, or mission statement, it is time to create them. As you begin the creative exercise, allow your thoughts and suggestions to flow without boundaries. Allow real brainstorming to occur; when we express ourselves authentically, we can create a dynamic veterinary team that serves the community in a purposeful way. Be BOLD, BRIGHT, and COURAGEOUS in writing your thoughts.

First, consider **values**. What do you believe about being a team member and serving pets and pet owners? An example may be, you believe in “*providing TLC to every pet that walks in the door.*” Or, perhaps “*I believe each day it is my responsibility to give it my best. I believe in trustworthiness.*”

Have your team answer these questions when developing the values statement.

1. With regard to serving pets, I believe:
2. With regard to serving pet parents, I believe:
3. With regard to my work day, I believe:

Proceeding the vision statement, have your team answer the following questions as though there are no boundaries on what is possible:

1. With regard to serving pets, how would you see yourself serving pets in the future?
2. With regard to serving pet parents, how do you see yourself offering extraordinary care in one year? Three years? Five years?

Finishing with the mission statement, have the team answer the following questions:

1. How do you offer the best care possible to the pets you serve?
2. What is the best part of your day?
3. What brings you greatest joy while at work?
4. How do you offer the best care possible to pet parents bringing in their beloved pets?

The newly created or updated values, vision and mission statement must be integrated into every action or task within the practice.

“A mission or purpose illustrates an organization’s values, or guiding principles. Established values that define what a medical entity stands for provide a clear roadmap for employees as they attempt to define their fit within the organization. Management research indicates the companies that outperform their competitors in the long run do so because they are strongly oriented toward a set of guiding values.”

—Ruby & DeBowes, The Veterinary Health Care Team, Going from Good to Great

TEAM SATISFACTION

Veterinary medicine has morphed through the years, especially since the 1960s during the introduction of trained Animal Health Technicians. Today, veterinarians are better positioned to embrace a team-based approach to delivering veterinary care than ever before. As such, a leveraged team offers the opportunity within a veterinary practice for staff to pursue even higher potentials in career development, engagement, and job satisfaction than in the past.

As described earlier, many team members have spent years attending various programs to acquire appropriate skills and aptitudes to enhance their contribution to a veterinary team. Dedicated, committed, and knowledgeable individuals will experience greater reward in their careers when ALL of their skills are utilized. A recent study of veterinary teams found a positive association between individual engagement (i.e., feeling recognized, appreciated, capable of performing as an integral team member and encouraged to further develop their skills and knowledge) and veterinary staff job satisfaction.⁴ Further, in a focus group study involving credentialed veterinary technicians, participants expressed frustration at times when their education, knowledge, and skills were not utilized. Being delegated responsibilities within their scope of practice left them feeling empowered as contributing members of the team.⁵ Therefore, it seems reasonable within a highly coordinated, highly functional veterinary team that when veterinarians focus on the duties they are trained to perform (diagnose, prescribe, treat, and initiate surgery), other tasks should be delegated to the appropriate team member with the appropriate level of education and skill. This coordinated care within a veterinary team with shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication will allow the veterinary practice to flourish and thrive on team satisfaction, quality patient care, and overall practice profitability.

Benefits of a satisfied team:

- An enjoyable work environment (i.e., FUN!)
- A team that is mentally and physically healthy
- Reduced absenteeism
- High staff retention
- Positive outcomes for clients and patients

QUALITY PATIENT CARE

As we consider patient care and the delivery of veterinary medicine by a trained team with shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication, the patient and client experience will be enhanced. **Bonded teams have bonded clients.** Clients and patients that are tended to by a team that is focused on a common goal in “quality and best possible care” will receive compassionate, consistent, and tender service. In human healthcare-team research, it has been found that in organizations with a high level of relational coordination, human patients experienced reduced lengths of hospital stay, better clinical outcomes, and overall higher patient-rated quality of care.^{1,6} Therefore, having a highly functional, highly effective team in veterinary medicine is important to achieving the patient and client outcomes we all strive to deliver.

Benefits of quality patient care:

- Patient health and well-being
- Client satisfaction and well-being
- Team satisfaction and well-being
- Career satisfaction and fulfillment



PROFITABILITY

The greatest asset veterinarians can control is how they use their time. In any given eight-hour day, when a veterinarian can solely focus on patient care, client service, and the tasks he or she is trained to do, greater productivity and profitability follow. The same results are found in human healthcare.^{1,7} Therefore, developing teams in veterinary medicine around shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication is important to the productivity and, in turn, the profitability of a veterinary practice. The American Veterinary Medical Association states, "The veterinary profession is enhanced through efficient utilization of each member of the veterinary health care team by appropriate delegation of tasks and responsibilities to support staff" (AVMA policy on veterinary technology). Therefore, when veterinarians leverage their teams, they will see more patients and serve more clients, directly impacting productivity and profitability.⁸ In support of the profitability that a veterinary practice can achieve by leveraging members of a veterinary practice, a survey conducted in 2008 found that for every credentialed veterinary technician a practice employed, the practice generated \$161,493 more in gross revenue. The study attributed the increase in revenue to the freeing up of the veterinarian's time by allowing qualified technicians to complete tasks veterinarians traditionally oversaw.⁹

Benefits of profitability:

- Practice viability and security
- Ability to offer advanced patient care
- Career satisfaction and fulfillment

TEAM EXERCISE

The Chip Game is a simple and fun way to help veterinarians focus on "Doctor Things" and it encourages the team to take ownership of "Team Things."



The rules are simple and all you need is a tray of poker chips. After identifying all of the services the team provides, outlining the "Doctor Things" and "Team Things" (achieving total agreement amongst all participants), each morning veterinarians are handed 10 chips they place in their coat pockets. Each time a veterinarian inadvertently steps in to complete a "Team Thing" that could be completed by another team member at that specific time, the team member receives a poker chip. At the end of the week, the team member with the most chips (hopefully a veterinarian wins one week) receives a predetermined "prize." Consider running the Chip Game for 21 days (the time it takes to create a new habit).¹⁰

CONCLUSION

As the landscape in which we practice veterinary medicine continues to evolve, veterinary practices today more than ever need to adapt to societal changes. Sustaining practice profitability, providing quality patient care, and achieving veterinary team satisfaction and fulfillment is important to the future health and success of the veterinary profession. Although an environment for establishing effective veterinary teams has existed for some time, the resources and opportunities to become a team-oriented veterinary practice have never been better than they are today. Continuing to develop your veterinary practice into a highly coordinated, highly effective veterinary team with shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and effective communication will advance your practice, your team members, and, ultimately, the clients and patients in your care.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Rebecca graduated from Colorado Mountain College in 1987 with a degree in veterinary technology. She worked as a veterinary technician at a mixed animal practice in rural Colorado and was the first paid administrator to the Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians. Over the years, she managed two AAHA accredited veterinary practices and offered relief veterinary technician services throughout Colorado. Rebecca has sat on industry councils and facilitates programs at local, state, national, and international conferences. She is known for her lively, engaging and inspiring presentations. She has also authored several peer reviewed articles, chapters, and books for the veterinary profession.

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