

CATALYST Veterinary Professional Coaches
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VETERINARY TEAM FEEDBACK – GET REALLY GOOD AT IT!

For veterinary team members, giving and receiving feedback can be a tough row to hoe. I recently asked a room of veterinarians, managers, and technicians, “By a show of hands, who is good at giving and receiving feedback?” One hand went up right away and one other hand slowly, reluctantly lifted. Two hands in a room of 80! We have a way to go.



Is it any wonder we feel ill prepared to offer and receive feedback? Similar to learning active listening skills, we are not taught how to “do feedback.” Yet, in all work environments, feedback is crucial to individual and team success.

“Giving and receiving feedback is uncomfortable at first. The solution: learn good techniques and do this often so it becomes part of the practice’s culture. In work environments where feedback is continual and appropriate, most people expect and welcome the opportunity to improve,” states Dr. Carin A. Smith in her book, *Team Satisfaction Pays: Organizational Development for Practice Success*.¹

Dance of Giving and Receiving

I feel we have a difficult time giving feedback because of the way we tend to receive it, challenging the way we are doing something. This may stem as far back as childhood, when we were continually being told how to behave, react, learn, excel, and achieve things. Some parents, teachers, or managers may have not been the “poster child” or “shining light” in giving feedback. Regardless of your past, now is the time to make amends, and learn how to give and receive feedback.

In Dr. Jane Shaw’s article, *How Feedback Can Help Performance Anxiety*², she writes, “Filtering out the negative distortion and selecting helpful information takes patience and practice. It is a delicate dance of determining what we heard and what was actually meant.”

A delicate dance, indeed! Keep that in mind if you are spooning out the feedback or being fed the feedback.

Feedback is defined as information about performance of a task that can be used as a basis for improvement. It is simply information; however, it can be distorted.

To help in delivering feedback, follow these 5 tips:

1. Create Safety. In order for people to be able to accept feedback, there needs to be a certain level of trust and comfort. Ideally, teams trust each other, allowing for continual feedback (give and take) in performance and professional development. Opportunities that build confidence and skills is the best. Approaching the “teachable moment” in the spirit of support and improvement is far better than being mean or trying to prove someone right or wrong. Most often, feedback is best given one-on-one, during a time when a sincere conversation can occur.

2. Be Specific. Sugar coating feedback may create confusion. Be clear in the expectation. As an example of sugar coating, “Casey, you do a great job, **but** I wish you would arrive on time.” A better example may be, “Casey, I noticed you showed up late, this morning. Is anything wrong? (pause and listen) It is important you arrive on time, punching in at 8:00 in the morning.” When you ask a question at the beginning, you are allowing for an inquiry to verify the circumstances. Follow up with solutions or suggested behavioral changes.

3. Timely feedback. Waiting to give three month’s-worth of feedback during performance reviews is inappropriate and down-right rude. Your team members will benefit from timely, in-the-moment (when appropriate), corrective feedback.

As an example, a new hire is shown the sterile strip indicator goes on the top of the surgical pack. Upon opening a surgical pack, the new hire put together, the sterile strip indicator is under the instruments. The trainer, in the moment, will point out the discrepancy, reiterate the reasoning for the indicator to be on top, replace the pack (if necessary), and continue to work through the day of surgeries. Later, the trainer can ask if the new hire understood the process and reason. If this feedback is offered three months later, the moment is gone and the new hire is set up for failure, rather than success.

When feedback is offered in the moment, it leaves the performance reviews to focus on career goals and collegial discussion.

4. Feeling unfairly criticized. There will be times when a team member feels s/he has been unfairly criticized. Inaccurate or ungrounded feedback leads to resentment.

“This might not seem to be a big problem for bosses from the old school philosophy of ‘they’ll just have to get over it.’ It is, however, a big problem, because of the human desire for justice and for retribution,” states David Lee in his article titled *Do You Know How to Give Constructive Feedback?*³

If a team member feels unfairly criticized, as a manager, allowing for continued, open dialog is imperative. Team members supported in conflict resolution will continue the conversation, finding common ground and solutions. When team members are not allowed to talk about their frustrations and feelings, the conflict will continue to brew, causing far more conflict.

5. Catch ‘em doing something right. Giving reassuring, encouraging feedback is important. Catch your team members doing things right! For the team members that like positive reinforcement in front of others (some don’t!), acknowledge a job well done with others present. APPRECIATION GOES A LONG WAY!

Be specific. As an example, “Tom, I saw you assist Mrs. Smith with her umbrella this afternoon during the rain. I know how you are committed to client service and I greatly appreciate it!”

Receiving Feedback

Now, to flip the coin, let’s discuss receiving feedback. Ideally, it’s about taking in the information and using it as an opportunity for personal and professional development. Receiving feedback, with an open heart and mind, with patience and understanding, shows grit, leadership, and resolve.

Feedback can be a two-way street between team members, management, and leadership. Actively seeking feedback is a testament to leading by example. You may think you are behaving in one manner, but others perceive it differently (humm, imagine that?!).

When you are the receiver, make sure you understand the message. “What I hear you saying is...” Mirroring the statement will help in clarifying. Remember to keep your emotions in check and consider the opportunity in professional growth. Soliciting feedback as a manager, team lead, veterinarian, or owner shows fortitude. Your team is watching you. Be aware of your actions and reactions to feedback.

I realize feedback can be tough to give and receive. However, with practice, we can get better. Next time I ask a group of veterinary managers and leaders about giving and receiving feedback, maybe we can double the responses and have 4 hands raised in a room of 80!

Yours in Team Feedback,
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References

1. Smith CA. “Team Satisfaction Pays: Organizational Development for Practice Success.” www.amazon.com/Team-Satisfaction-Pays-Organizational-Development/dp/1885780192
2. Shaw JR, Hunter LJ. “How Feedback Can Help Performance Anxiety” www.veterinaryteambrief.com/article/how-feedback-can-help-performance-anxiety
3. Lee D. “Do You Know How to Give Constructive Feedback?” www.amanet.org/training/articles/do-you-know-how-to-give-constructive-feedback.aspx

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