

Bark Less, Wag More: Improving Team Dynamics Through Emotional Intelligence, Cultural Competency and Communications

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Working as part of a team has inherent benefits and challenges. Human dynamics, personality politics, inter-personal conflicts, varying motivations and gaps in communication aptitudes can hinder even the best teams from functioning at optimal levels. How we interact with others is heavily influenced by several factors, including our own level of emotional intelligence, personal experiences, and consciously and unconsciously held beliefs. Communicating effectively with people who are different from us sometimes presents challenges. For individuals of underrepresented groups in veterinary medicine, regularly experiencing insidious bias – even when it is unintended – has real-world implications and takes a mental and physical toll. This dynamic is especially significant because the veterinary profession is largely homogenous, and its demographics do not reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the larger U.S. society. Communicating effectively with individuals from different backgrounds in ways that support their uniqueness is crucial to promoting overall wellbeing for the veterinary healthcare team. This presentation will explore the interdependency between emotional intelligence, cultural competency and communications patterns and the roles they play in improving veterinary healthcare team dynamics.

Emotional Intelligence, Cultural Competency and Team Dynamics

There is a direct correlation between personal and professional satisfaction and high levels of emotional intelligence. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined as *“the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions”*¹ Growing one's EI is a lifelong iterative process that involves introspection, self-management and social awareness; and guides both personal and professional relationships. The high-pressure nature of veterinary medicine often demands that team members possess high EI aptitudes in order to positively impact overall dynamics.

Cultural Competency is sometimes used interchangeably with “inclusion or diversity.” While there are some areas of interdependence between the concepts, they mean different things. “Cultural competency is loosely defined as the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own.”² It requires each of us to have an understanding about other groups – their values and beliefs – that help us nurture positive attitudes. It doesn't require one to master the practices of all cultures, but it does

require a level of introspection that leads us to identify our own biases, and a cultivate a willingness to adapt.

There are common stressors that impact the wellbeing of most individuals working in our field, however members of underrepresented groups experience an added component of cultural factors that affect their wellbeing. Connecting with individuals of different backgrounds in ways that support their uniqueness is a crucial part of promoting overall wellbeing for the veterinary healthcare team overall, and in members of underrepresented groups individually. This presentation is about understanding the fundamentals and impact of emotional intelligence in effective communications and the integration of cultural competencies to improve team dynamics.

Emotional Intelligence: The ability to possess mindfulness and control of one's expression of emotions by engaging in self-assessment, self-management and social awareness. A high EI capacity enables individuals to manage interpersonal relationships and communications levelheadedly and with empathy.

Importance of Emotional Intelligence

- Framework for Human Interactions
- Professional and Personal Satisfaction
- Implications for Wellbeing

Pillars of Emotional Intelligence

1. Self-Awareness

- Deep introspection
- Understanding what “makes you tick”
- Seeking feedback
- Understanding your response to stress
- Judgement-free zone!

Differentiating *Emotions* from *Feelings*

2. Self-Management

- Leveraging awareness of your emotions to actively choose your response
- Creating an emotion vs. reason list
- Controlling your self-talk

3. Social Awareness

- Recognizing the moods and motivations of others through verbal and non-verbal cues
- Social awareness and cultural differences
- Icebergs

4. Relationship Management

- Leveraging Self-Awareness, Self-Management and Social Awareness to navigate and drive interpersonal communications

Emotional Intelligence in communications impacts	Building Your Resilience	Taking Care of You!
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The listener's response• The value they place on what you say• What they will and won't do	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Owning and understanding your self-image• Responding to criticism• Search for the meaning in challenging interactions• Be nimble!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beware your self-talk!• Practice Mindfulness• Connect with your personal communities (family, friends, etc.)

Communications Techniques to Improve Team Dynamics

- Think first
- Clear and Concise
- Authenticity!
- Humility
- Confidence
- Learn to Listen
- Body Language

Challenging Work Relationships:

- Your job is not your life
- Developing a *Mindset Sweet Spot*
- OK to differ, but you own your response

Disagreeing the Right Way

- Identify the Root
- Dissociate your hurt from the person

Feeling Overwhelmed

- Assessing whether I Need to Think About This Right Now?
- Body Scanning
- Give Full Attention to a Difficult Person
- Be mindful of your self-talk

The Importance of Cultural Competency

Cultural Competency is defined as the “ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own.”³ Increasing one’s cultural competence is integral to improving team dynamics and interactions on diverse teams and with diverse clientele.

Cultural competence comprises four components⁴:

- Awareness of one's own cultural worldview
- Attitude towards cultural differences
- Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews
- Cross-cultural skills

Underrepresented in Veterinary Medicine (URVM)⁵

“Populations of individuals whose advancement in the veterinary medical profession has historically been disproportionately impacted by six specific aspects of diversity due to legal, cultural, or social climate impediments.” The demographics of the veterinary profession does not reflect the demographics of the larger society we serve.

The Experience of Underrepresented Individuals in Veterinary Medicine

- Subtle Isolation
- Individual experience vs. Statistical trends
- Invalidation
- Unique stressors for underrepresented individuals:
 - *Heightened imposter syndrome; “Stereotype Threat”*
 - *Nobody here looks like me/ gets my experience / knows what I feel*
 - *Nobody understands my experience – experience of being the only (...)*

Implicit Bias vs. Explicit Bias

IMPLICIT	EXPLICIT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside of conscious awareness • Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions unconsciously • Do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consciously held beliefs about a person or group • Arise mainly as the direct result of a perceived threat • When people feel threatened, they are more likely to draw group boundaries to distinguish themselves from others

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Harvard University Project Implicit: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

¹Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9, 185–211

²American Psychological Association; <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/03/cultural-competence>

Annual Data Report 2016-2017 [Internet]. Washington, DC: Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges; 2017 February p. 1 – 39. http://www.aavmc.org/About-AAVMC/Public-Data.aspx

³DeAngelis, Tori “In search of Cultural Competence” <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/03/cultural-competence>

⁴<https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.naswaz.com/resource/resmgr/imported/CulturalCompetence.pdf>

⁵ *Annual Data Report 2016-2017 [Internet]. Washington, DC: Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges; 2017 February p. 1 – 39. http://www.aavmc.org/About-AAVMC/Public-Data.aspx*