

Creating a Healthy Practice Culture

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Objectives

- Define elements of healthy practice culture.
- Understand the connection between personal and professional wellbeing and practice culture.
- Assess current practice: what is working well, what could be better.
- Identify one or two specific actions that can be taken to address gaps between where you are now and where you would like to be.

Introduction

Studies show that workplaces with fully engaged employees are more productive, more profitable, can change and adapt more quickly, and have lower attrition rates. A healthy culture is good for business and enhances employee satisfaction and morale. Veterinary professionals play essential leadership roles in the intentional development of a culture that determines the success of the practice.

- How do you develop the best culture for your practice?
- What are the consequences of just letting a culture evolve on its own?
- What is the connection between personal wellbeing and practice culture?
- What are the foundation-level principles and values, deep questions, and courageous conversations that underpin healthy workplace cultures?
- How does the profession foster the growth of healthy practice cultures?

Culture- Why Now?

Culture is getting a lot of press in the veterinary literature today. You may be asking yourself why this is, are things so different than before? The answer is a bit of both. The demographic of new practitioners is changing as more women are entering the field with about 80% of incoming students being female. The increased debt load students are carrying is having an impact as is the growth in technology and the rise in specialty medicine. In addition, the role that pets play in the family has been shifting, thus the increase in care and services provided for animals.

As we look at the new trends, we need to be prepared to assess needs, address challenges, and determine and implement strategies to meet this changing paradigm.

Definition of Culture:

Culture is the social behavior and norms found in human societies. Culture is considered a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies.

Culture is defined as a collection of behaviors, values, norms, environmental factors. It is important to look at the current culture of your organization before we can look at the ideal culture. Organizational culture encompasses values and behaviors that "contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization."

Cultural Identity contains elements of the following:



Continuum of Engagement

Our experience at work is determined not only by the culture of the organization, but also by what the individuals, including us, bring to the organization. Veterinary wellbeing is currently one of the biggest topics of interest in the profession. To fully understand organizational culture, we must get a sense of the experience of the individuals in that organization.

Six Elements impacting levels of engagement. These impact the individual, the team and the organization:

1. Workload- Job Demands: Sustainable or exceeding human limits
2. Control- Perceived capacity to influence your work, maintain autonomy, and gain access to resources necessary to support the work you do.
3. Reward- Extent to which rewards – monetary, social, and intrinsic – are consistent with expectations and performance.
4. Community- Quality of social interactions at work, including managing conflict, mutual support, closeness, and capacity to work as a team.
5. Fairness- Extent to which decisions at work are perceived as being fair and people are treated with respect.
6. Values-This is the heart of people’s relationship with their work. It consists of personal meaning, ideals, values, and ethics and how they are supported and demonstrated in the workplace. (Leiter 2005)

We tend to see disengagement when there is a mismatch between the workload and the capacity of the individual performing the work. Overwork can lead to exhaustion, an inability to focus and perform at a high level, mistakes, miscommunications, and a general sense that there is no way out. Working harder does not fix the problem. To find a manageable workload, it will take everyone at the workplace having a frank and open conversation about ways to improve it. It is difficult to find relief when part of resilience is performance. In this case ,that resilience can have

a negative consequence. Looking at the facts of the matter, without emotion or justifiers, will be helpful.

Once you have a realistic view of what the workload and expectations are, you can begin to find ways to adjust to meet the needs and capacity of your team. Lack of control is another factor which contributes to burnout. Use the assessment above and take a step further. How much autonomy do team members have? Is there shared leadership? How can you engage the whole team? In addition to issues around control, we sometimes see a breakdown of community. There may be divisiveness, poor communication or alienation. Finding positive ways to address and resolve conflict and keep communication open can help in these instances. Reward and fairness are also elements of burnout. Looking at how team members are rewarded, in big and small ways, as well as how you promote respect for one another can be critical to team morale. Finally, it is important to assess whether the work you are doing is in line with your ethical and moral values. If there is a disconnect here it can lead to moral distress.

Practice Culture

Is yours by Default or Design? Do you have a mission statement, vision, and values? Do all those who work in the practice know the mission statement, vision, and values? Was it created as a group? If you do not Design and define your culture it will happen on its own.

Explicit-Observable behaviors. What is visible to any who enter or interact with the practice? What we say, our signage, how clients are greeted, how colleagues treat one another.

Implicit-Unwritten norms or behaviors. May be underlying values. Not stated but seen and experienced.

Who Drives the Culture-Is it the leadership? Is it a team or an individual?

Are your actions consistent with your mission statement, vision, and values?

List 3-5 characteristics of your practice culture (these do not necessarily have to be positive). Please be honest about where you are today, it is the only way to get an accurate assessment. You cannot move forward if you start from a false place.

Ideal Practice Culture

Define the Ideal Veterinary Practice Culture:

What does your ideal practice look like? What do you do on a daily basis? Who are you working with? Where are you doing your work? Who are your clients and colleagues? List 3-5 characteristics of your ideal practice.

Culture Solutions

Take a look at your actual culture and your ideal culture and identify the gaps.

Work through one aspect of where you want to be compared to where you currently are.

Solutions: Consider how you might take one gap and begin to move it so it is closer to the ideal side of what you would like to see in your practice. Come up with one or two concrete goals and then identify the steps you will need to get there.

Resources and References

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