

ACTIVATING THE ENTIRE VETERINARY TEAM TO ACHIEVE OPTIMAL VETERINARY OUTCOMES

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

Introduction

To truly maximize the outcomes of veterinary care, the focus of a veterinary practice must extend beyond the one-on-one interaction between veterinary staff and a client to include the role and influence of relationships among all levels of the veterinary healthcare team. Within the human healthcare field, ‘relational coordination’ has been the term used to capture the provision of team healthcare in a manner that involves “frequent, timely, accurate communication, as well as problem-solving, shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect among health care providers”.² Research from human medicine has shown that a higher level of relational coordination within healthcare systems is associated with a number of positive outcomes for patients, healthcare staff and the hospital.^{1,2,3} Therefore, in order to truly maximize the quality and outcome of care for its patients, veterinary medicine needs to consider the role and function of all relationships within a veterinary care system including veterinarian-to-client, support staff-to-client and veterinarian-to-support staff.

Relational Coordination

Relational coordination is “the management of interdependencies between *the people* who perform tasks”.¹ The term ‘relational coordination’ arose from research focused on understanding the departure process for commercial airlines, specifically the system that made Southwest airlines stand ahead of all other commercial airlines as the most profitable and successful airline in the history of aviation.⁴ Functioning within a highly turbulent and often non-profitable industry, Southwest airlines proved to be an anomaly with a consistent record of profitability, high levels of employee satisfaction and low employee turnover rates. Research into the process behind the success of this company identified that the organization’s ability to generate and sustain important relationships that were focused on shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect contributed to their success. It was found that relational coordination was a powerful driver of both quality and efficiency outcomes for Southwest airlines. Since the time of this initial discovery, it has been found that relational coordination can also be a powerful driver of quality and efficiency within other organizations that rely on a high level of interdependence among people, specifically human healthcare.¹ Given that veterinary healthcare is also reliant on a team-based approach for providing successful outcomes of care, relational coordination has important application in the provision of high quality and efficient veterinary care.

Similar to human medicine,¹ providing optimal care for a veterinary patient requires a number of basic coordinated needs including getting information from the client, getting information from previous care providers, sharing acquired information with all assigned to care for the patient, keeping everyone informed of tests, diagnosis, and interventions performed, integrating that information to develop next steps with those involved in the care, and sharing information with the client or the next care provider as needed to continue on with the appropriate care of the veterinary patient. Although this seems intuitive, research in human healthcare has shown that coordinating these efforts among the many healthcare providers involved in caring for a patient can be difficult to achieve.¹

Toxic attitudes and environments within veterinary teams

A recent study conducted at the Ontario Veterinary College, Guelph, Ontario, Canada involving an independent series of four veterinarian focus groups and four registered-

veterinary technician (RVT) focus groups explored the concept of effective veterinary healthcare teams.⁵ One major theme that was common to both the veterinarian and RVT focus groups was the negative impact that a toxic attitude or environment has on the function of a veterinary team. Toxic attitudes were described by participants as individuals that are chronically negative, individuals that are not willing to assist others stating “that’s not my job”, individuals who try to hold power over others by manipulating information, and individuals whose personality is not compatible with the rest of the team. Toxic environments existed where there was a lack of trust within the team, members did not feel appreciated or respected, members did not feel supported in their role by others, and where personnel problems were left unaddressed. Many participants also expressed a belief that a lack of leadership within a veterinary practice set the stage for a toxic environment.

Interestingly, the description of toxic attitudes and environments described by the veterinarian and RVT participants of the focus group study are in direct contrast to the core elements of relational coordination (i.e., shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect). Toxic attitudes and environments within veterinary practice undoubtedly have an effect on outcomes for the practice, the staff, the client and ultimately the patient. Research in human medicine illustrates that successfully functioning teams have an important role in improving staff’s job satisfaction,³ as well as in achieving optimal patient outcomes including reduced post-operative pain, improved post-operative functioning, decreased hospital stay, higher levels of patient-perceived quality of care,² and reduced patient readmission rates.¹ As such, veterinary practices should evaluate the relationships and communications that currently exist within their own team environments while considering how relational coordination may enhance their provision of veterinary healthcare in a way that optimizes the outcomes for their practice, their staff, their clients and ultimately their patients.

Fostering relational coordination to strengthen a veterinary team

Both communication and the quality of the communication occurring during the care of an animal are important to the successful outcome of veterinary care. To achieve coordinated patient care in veterinary medicine the communication between providers of care (e.g., veterinarian-to-client, support staff-to-client or veterinarian-to-support staff) must be frequent, timely and accurate. In addition, the quality of the relationship between providers must also be taken into consideration.¹ Even with communication that is frequent, timely and accurate, if the receiver does not respect the source, have shared knowledge or have shared goals with the source, the communication runs a good chance of being ignored. The key component to achieving relational coordination within a veterinary practice is to focus on all aspects of communication to ensure it fosters relationships with shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect.

Within the relational coordination literature specific to healthcare, 12 work-place practices have been identified for fostering relational coordination among high-performing healthcare teams.¹ Utilizing the findings from the focus group research on veterinary teams discussed above, the current proceedings will discuss three of the work-place practices that have been shown to foster relational coordination. In addition to these three, readers are encouraged to investigate the other work-place practices that have been found to foster relational coordination within high-performing healthcare teams.¹ Achieving relational coordination has been shown to be dependent upon the number of work-place practices employed, the intensity with which they are followed and the number of employee groups within the healthcare team included.

Selecting for teamwork

By selecting for teamwork when hiring, a practice has the potential to affect the relational coordination of their team in two ways,¹ first it has the direct effect of selecting someone who works well as part of a team and secondly it delivers a message to the new hire and the rest of the staff that the veterinary practice places high value on teamwork. The relational

coordination of a practice can also be enhanced by involving members of the current team, from different employee groups, to be a part of the hiring process which allows current staff to have input into the selection process, allows the leadership in the practice to observe how the candidates interact with different members of the current team, and allows the practice to further communicate the team-oriented culture of the veterinary practice. To focus hiring on technical skills over relationship skills can provide an interesting conundrum, as failure to establish successful work relationships with colleagues can in itself become a barrier to maximizing the value of one's technical skill.¹

Resolve conflicts proactively

As in all healthcare settings, the often intense and interdependent task-driven environment of veterinary practice provides a breeding ground for interpersonal conflict. Conflict is not all bad; rather most change and progress arise out of conflict when it is managed effectively. However, unresolved interpersonal conflict can damage relationships within the veterinary healthcare team leading to a toxic environment which impacts upon overall team effectiveness and productivity. As considerable differences exist between people and their ability to manage conflict, it behooves veterinary practices to take a level of responsibility upon themselves to provide a mechanism to assist staff in managing interpersonal conflicts. Although the mechanism for managing conflict can take a variety of forms, it is important to create a culture and process by which staff have the opportunity to understand and address their personal differences.¹ Based on the focus group research discussed above, this opportunity is particularly important for staff with different roles in a veterinary practice to gain a better understanding and appreciation for the work of others. One specific consideration when developing a process to proactively resolve conflicts in a veterinary practice is to develop an explicit mechanism to address perceived power-differentials that may exist within the veterinary practice team (e.g., clinic owner-to-high school student). In these cases a process such as assigning a specific staff liaison (e.g., liaison with the clinic-owner) can be important to ensure conflict management occurs and relational coordination is not undermined.

Make job boundaries flexible

Boundaries for acceptable workplace behavior are often governed by work rules that exist in the form of informal or formal policies or procedures.¹ The work rules most likely to impact upon relational coordination within a veterinary practice are the rules that identify which tasks belong to which role or individual in the practice. Traditionally, it has been thought that assigning very specific tasks to workers improved performance by increasing focus and role clarity.¹ Despite this benefit the approach also introduces rigidity to work flow, generating a culture of "it is not my job", which can actually impede upon work efficiency within a highly interdependent task-oriented profession such as veterinary medicine. Rather, job flexibility allows for staff to share knowledge about different areas of a veterinary hospital, build mutual trust, and reduce traditional status boundaries.¹ Investing in cross-training staff within and across roles at a veterinary practice is one process that can be used to make job boundaries more flexible. However, before embarking on cross-training be aware that overlapping job boundaries can be threatening to some staff's sense of security. It can also threaten the traditional hierarchy that may exist within a veterinary practice which may cause some members to be uncomfortable as they may perceive a reduction in their own status in the practice. Successfully creating flexible boundaries also involves achieving job flexibility within a practice while still preserving distinct areas of professional expertise.¹ For example, the kennel attendant would not be permitted to perform an ovariohysterectomy; however, there is no reason a veterinarian could not pitch in and help the kennel attendant by cleaning an animal's cage as needed.

Achieving successful veterinary teams is important for veterinarians, veterinary staff, veterinary clients and veterinary patients. Many of the work practices which support the development of relational coordination within a veterinary team may go against the deeply

engrained patterns of behaviors and relationships that can exist within veterinary practice today. Practices should be encouraged to embrace relational coordination one step at a time. The three work practices focused on above should provide a starting point for any veterinary practice looking to further activate their veterinary team in achieving optimal veterinary outcomes.

References

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