

Cultivating a culture of wellness in your clinic

Colleen Best, DVM PhD

Introduction

Culture can be pervasive. In a way, it is like the wind, you can feel it, see its effects, it's obviously powerful, yet you can't see it, or contain it. Similarly, it can be easier to identify the failings in a workplace, what makes it toxic or unpleasant to work in, than to know what fosters and maintains a positive culture. Despite these uncertainties, it's important to recognize that it is possible to influence and improve the culture of a workplace. The benefits of investing in wellness are plentiful – improved morale, decreased staff turnover, improved client experience, higher productivity, and decreased conflict (AVMA). When looking at how to shift workplace culture to one of wellness, team communication, emotional intelligence, and mental health literacy are crucial components to address.

Communication

Communication is an integral piece of any workplace, this is because work is coordinated via communication. Further, communication is the avenue through which relationships are built and strengthened. Given the central role in communication in our lives, it is something that deserves dedicated attention and effort. When considering how to improve communication in a team, the concept of relational coordination can be helpful. It defines the type of communication necessary to support high performance teams, the communication needs to be timely, frequent, problem-solving and accurate.¹ It also describes how communication and relationships work together, and states that shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect are essential relationship qualities.¹ Relational coordination can be improved through staff meetings, incorporating standard operating procedures surrounding team tasks, and ensuring there are adequate opportunities for the team to communicate about their work.¹

The ability to have problem-solving, clear and kind communication around conflict is a crucial piece of wellness culture. For many, it is natural to want to avoid conflict. However, unmanaged conflict can become insidious and undermine team effectiveness, and create feelings of fear and suspicion amongst team members. Radical candor is a communication framework that has been proposed to help support courageous conversations. Its premise is that when there is trust and caring in a relationship, it is possible to be direct and honest; and that doing so promotes job performance, transparency, and a positive workplace culture.² The underpinning of care and concern is crucial, because without it, the directness of the feedback can be damaging. However, when clear and direct information is shared by someone that is clearly looking out for your best interests, the effects can be amazing. This framework allows for information about an individual's blind spots to be shared so that they can address them.

Grow Your Team's Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a multifaceted construct that includes: motivation, social skills, self-regulation, self-awareness, and empathy. High levels of emotional intelligence have been associated with decreased perceived stress and increased life satisfaction and happiness,³ as well as job performance.⁴ The majority of veterinary medicine involves working with others, often in situations that can evoke strong emotions. This amplifies the importance of growing the emotional intelligence of ourselves and our team members. The more we can recognize our emotions and those of the people around us, the less likely they are to negatively impact our

work, patient, clients, colleagues and ourselves. Completing assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or the Dominance, influence, steadiness, compliance (DISC) can be helpful because they support your team member's self-awareness, as well as awareness of the personality traits and strengths of those around them. These assessments also allow for shared language around team-oriented behaviours, and can help support team-effectiveness.

Mental Health Literacy and First Aid

A fundamental piece of a wellness culture is being aware of and sensitive to wellness and mental health related concerns. Knowledge of common mental health concerns is necessary to be able to recognize and respond appropriately should they be experienced by a team member or ourselves. This knowledge also helps to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illness. Mental health first aid courses, such as those offered by the Canadian Mental Health Agency or the American Veterinary Medical Association's QPR Training, provide basic information about mental health and teach how to support individuals experiencing distress or mental illness.

When considering how to have a conversation regarding a concern for a colleague's wellness, I suggest using a framework modified from that taught in Mental Health First Aid training⁵ – Ask, Listen, Empathize, Seek Support.

Ask

The first step is to ask them how they are doing or invite them to share their experiences.⁶ This is best done using an open-ended question, one which cannot be answered with a yes or a no. The origin of this inquiry needs to be genuine concern and a desire to provide support – if there is mixed intent (such as out of concern, but also a reprisal or reprimand for inappropriate behaviour), it will likely be detrimental to the person you are seeking to help. The simple act of inquiring about how they are doing will demonstrate that you care and are willing to talk about it when they are ready.

Listen

After you ask the question, stop and focus on listening. From the outset of the conversation, it's important to set any judgment or assessment aside. This can be difficult, because many of us are fixers and want to help solve the problem. In this situation, your presence and allowing them to share their experiences are the most meaningful things you can provide.

Empathy

Once you've heard about their experience, you can respond with empathy. This doesn't necessitate having been in that situation or having experienced similar problems or emotions. It does entail putting yourself in their shoes, and communicating back your understanding of their experience. Simply witnessing the other's experience will diminish feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are common and pervasive experiences with mental illness.

Seek Support

Lastly, encourage the person to seek appropriate professional help. This is a crucial step. There is significant benefit to someone who is struggling to listen to them, to stand with them in a difficult time. However, if they are experiencing mental illness, they need professional help, just as a person with a physical ailment would. Supports can include a family physician, support groups, psychiatrist, psychologist, and so on. By encouraging them to seek help from someone trained to provide it, you are free to continue to be a supportive friend or colleague.

Team Code

A simple and meaningful activity for any team to engage in is to create a team code. A team code is a social contract comprised of thoughts, ideas, intentions or promises that outline how the group agrees to behave and interact towards each other. It is important that everyone on the

team participate in its creation, and that discussion occur around the words and images chosen. Communication is critical because there are many words that people use when stating ideal team qualities – respect, patience, communication – however, their definitions may not be common to everyone on the team. Taking the time to dig deep and ensure everyone is on the same page and agrees to abide by the team code will markedly increase the usefulness of this tool. In the same vein, ensuring that your clinic has a common purpose with common goals will provide a point for everyone to return to and for their actions to be measured against.

Little Things that Make a Big Difference

When it comes to the culture of a workplace, big things, such as team trainings and mental health literacy are important, but so are the small things that happen day in and day out. To this end, it is important that practice leadership model wellness and good self-care. This can be difficult, particularly because it can mean a change in habits. However, it can be hard for staff members to leave on time, or prioritize having lunch, when their bosses or supervisors do not. When we model good self-care and wellness, we give everyone permission to do the same and meet their own needs. This can be challenging, as often veterinary clinics are long and work and short on those to do it. Remembering that there are tangible impacts for productivity, patient care, and overall success when wellness is prioritized can serve as additional motivation for the whole team to engage in good self-care and wellness.

Ensuring that wellness is visible in the clinic is also important. Set up a wellness corner or a wall where resource information is posted. Encourage your team to post materials that they find. Make it a comfortable space where they like to go. You can also include a “shout out” board where they can express gratitude towards each other. Lastly, at staff meetings, have people share a “rose-bud-thorn-root” from their week. A rose is a moment that went well. A bud moment is something they are looking forward to, a thorn is something that went wrong or not as planned. And lastly, a root, a moment or experience that grounded them or represented the values of themselves or the practice.

Conclusion

Most importantly when looking to create a culture of wellness is to make it personal. Each clinic is unique, as is each team. The best way to shift the culture, is to engage your team and have them help determine the changes they would like to see. Approach your team with a few ideas and engage them in refining them, adding to them, and creating the final products. Engagement will increase when they have participated in the process. Throughout the process, keep in mind, that having a culture of wellness is a reward into and of itself. It is a gift to each team member to work in a place that prioritizes wellness and self-care, and where they are free to be their best selves.

References

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