

What Can't Be Taught

Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

More than just a doctor: Working with your team

Stephanie Surveyer

During veterinary school, I had the good fortune to work summers and weekends at a local small animal practice as both receptionist and technician. At the time, I already had plenty of customer service experience under my belt from various part-time jobs in different fields; toss that in with my early vet school knowledge and a dash of youthful naivety, and I thought the gig would be relatively easy. Oh boy, was I wrong. My clients were often stressed, worried about their furry family members, trying to understand complex and sometimes downright scary medical conditions and procedures. Despite having fantastic bosses and a great team, the job was *hard*.

Since then, I've worked several years as a small animal veterinarian at that same practice, and even became co-owner of that and 4 other veterinary establishments with a team of 4 wonderful partners. In both my roles of doctor and manager, I strive every day to show appreciation and to give empowerment opportunities to the members of my support staff. These are the people who get our clients and patients through the front door, who both reassure them and provide them with detailed explanations, who field less urgent calls and clients in order to allow us to tackle other issues, and who ensure the comfort and care of hospitalized patients. Even the term "support" staff is somewhat of a misnomer: as a veterinarian, part of your job is also to support your team in their roles and in their career fulfillment and development. In doing so, you make a sometimes difficult job easier and more pleasant for everyone, including yourself.

Give praise and show appreciation

So easy to do, yet so often neglected. Say "thank you" and "good job" for both the smaller and more daunting tasks. Be specific with your praise, as more general statements can be underwhelming. Did an assistant clean up a little mess you made without even realizing it? Did the technician nail the IV catheter on an older, dehydrated cat with kidney disease? Did the receptionist book the dental you spent 10 minutes explaining by

reassuring the worried owner about general anesthesia? These are all wins from attentive and dedicated health professionals, and they deserve recognition. Don't hesitate to thank and valorize staff members in front of clients or other team members, as the immediate and public recognition can hold more weight than a quiet word a few hours later. Being open with praise nurtures a culture of appreciation and positivity within your team, and motivates everyone to put their best foot forward, which can only help improve the care you provide your patients.

Teach and promote development

If someone is working at a veterinary practice, they usually have an interest in science and medicine as well as in animals in general. Explain to your team members what you're doing and why you're doing it. Sometimes it can almost seem like monologuing, but it's amazing what curious minds will pick up and apply to their own roles. If someone is having a hard time with a task or concept, take the time to stop and explain it to them, and give them ample opportunities to practice. Talk to your practice manager about having a continuing education budget for non-veterinary staff if you don't already have one. Encourage them to enroll in these opportunities, then delegate tasks that allow them to develop what they've learned. This will not only take some pressure off the doctors but will also allow the other members of your team to feel autonomous and fulfilled in their given roles. Enhancing professional growth empowers employees and creates job satisfaction, especially important in a field that tends to have a high turnover rate in certain positions.

Lend a hand

Forget about the old-school notions of hierarchy and strict delegation of tasks. Your team members are a cluster of interconnected dots, not a straight-line affair. Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty, both literally and figuratively, to help an overburdened team member. Pick up that rogue poop that magically appears on the treatment room floor, answer the phone if it rings more than twice and your hands are free, assist in the clean-up after a particularly messy dental procedure, tidy up after yourself. If a task that normally gets done quickly is dragging along, check if the person responsible is drowning in other duties and lend a hand if you can, or ask someone else to help if you can't.

Don't play the blame game

Mistakes happen, big and small, despite our best efforts. Remember that we tend to judge others by their actions, and

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ourselves by our intentions. As the veterinarian on duty at a given time, you are ultimately responsible for everything that goes down and need to look at mistakes as learning opportunities for yourself and for your team. That doesn't mean that you cannot speak to someone directly to discuss an error, but do so privately and when you are in the correct emotional state. Approach the subject with humility: is there something that you or your practice can change to avoid the mistake in the future? And never negatively call out a team member to a pet-owner, as this can make you appear petty and will affect future interactions between that employee and client.

As veterinarians, our job is sometimes a roller-coaster of highs and lows. Our non-veterinarian team members also live those same struggles, and it's important to recognize their efforts and encourage them to be the best version of themselves on a day-to-day basis by leading by example. Changing your mindset can be difficult and should happen gradually. I try to set 2 team-related objectives for myself each month that I work towards bit by bit. Be a great doctor, but also be a great leader for your team. Believe me, it's worth it.

Book Review

Compte rendu de livre

Small Animal Dental, Oral & Maxillofacial Disease: A Color Handbook

Niemiec BA. CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida, USA. 2012. 272 pp. ISBN: 9781-8407-6172-6.

Small Animal Dental, Oral & Maxillofacial Disease: A Color Handbook is a well-written addition to the bookshelves of general practitioners. The book is laid out in a logical and easy-to-read format with the first 3 chapters discussing Anatomy and Physiology, the Oral Exam, and Dental Radiology. The initial chapters provide a good foundation in the understanding of anatomy and terminology which ensures proper communication between veterinary professionals to avoid confusion of location of pathology. The Oral Exam chapter details on how to do a proper oral examination during every stage of dental treatment (awake and anesthetized exams) and covers step-by-step what practitioners need to look for during every oral exam to identify even the subtlest pathology. The section discussing how to properly classify periodontal disease pathology (furcation and mobility) is good and provides guidelines to follow for more consistent charting.

There is a chapter focused on Pathology in the Pediatric Patient; the remaining chapters are categorized by anatomi-

cal location: Hard Tissue, Gingiva, Oral Mucosa, Muscles, Bones and Joints, and the Salivary System. In these chapters, each condition is broken down into Definition, Etiology and Pathogenesis, Clinical Features, Differential Diagnosis, Diagnostic Tests, Management and Key Points. There is good flow in the discussion of each condition and there are several pictures (and radiographs when applicable) to go with every condition. Multiple high-quality images are helpful as pathology can look slightly different among patients with the same condition.

The index is thorough and includes layman's terms which help for searching a condition that you may not know the scientific term for. For example: CUPS, Kissing Lesions, and Stomatitis all refer to the same pages in this text.

The book is focused on canine and feline dentistry but there is a brief review on rodent and lagomorph dentition in the first chapter.

Overall this book would be a great addition for the general practitioner and veterinary technologist and would be frequently used in practices that do dentistry. It is a compact book that has a lot of information to help you identify pathology and direct your treatment plan in a timely manner.

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