



PERSONAL WELLNESS

How to Prevent a Toxic Workplace

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Imagine that each morning, when you arrive at work, you are nervous about whether the front desk staff will be arguing about how to divide their tasks that day. Or if each time you walk into the practice you hear the technician laugh after telling yet another story about the incompetence of the team member who has the day off.

If either of these scenarios makes you cringe as a manager, just imagine how other members of your team feel. As a manager, it's up to you to help create a healthy work environment where people feel safe and valued.

Although each person's daily routine varies, veterinary professionals often spend about one-third of each week in the workplace. When it's a healthy, well-balanced environment, it can contribute to an employee's overall quality of life. But when it's not, it can contribute significantly to a person's stress, and have a negative impact on the workplace, its employees, the clients, and more.

BENEFITS OF A POSITIVE WORKPLACE

When the work environment is positive, employees tend to have more energy and enthusiasm, which translates into a more productive and efficient practice. Employees also tend to have more confidence when

working in this type of environment, which makes it more likely that they'll collaborate, achieve goals, and step up as leaders, as needed. Employees who work in a supportive workplace tend to be happier, and clients can pick up on this positive atmosphere. This can boost their own moods and morale.

WORKPLACE AUDIT

When analyzing your workplace culture, it is important to be objective. You can hire outside professionals to conduct an audit of your practice. Whether you undertake your own audit or hire professionals to conduct one, a number of key questions in 3 areas—communication, workload, and workplace culture—will help determine whether the practice offers a healthy, positive environment. The following are sample questions you can ask staff members via a survey.

Communication. Review how important information and management policies are conveyed at your practice. Are announcements simply made to the staff, or do you have real conversations? How are decisions made? Are they collaborative processes? Is there an established policy for filing and/or handling internal complaints and grievances? Is there an established performance evaluation process? Are clients treated respectfully? How are client complaints and concerns addressed?

Workload. Evaluate how responsibilities and tasks are assigned. Do employees divide up tasks equitably? Are there clear job descriptions? Do employees have the freedom to collaborate and/or experiment with new ways to complete tasks in a more efficient way? How do managers treat employees? Are their contributions valued? If so, how is that demonstrated?

Workplace culture. Take a look at the practice's vision or mission statement. Can employees articulate them? Are there clear examples of benefits that support the vision or mission statement? For example, if your mission statement includes promoting continuing education for staff, have you budgeted appropriately to support employees in their educational quests? Do you allow leave for continuing education?

A successful management audit verifies that the organization's mission statement is consistently reflected throughout the practice. You can create your own checklist or download one and adapt it to your practice. You can find a mission statement auditing checklist to consider at veterinarybusinessadvisors.com/auditing-your-companys-mission-statement.

Developing clear, consistent policies and procedures allows you to onboard new employees and have discussions with all employees about your practice's values.

SET CLEAR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Clarity is crucial for a healthy workplace. Without clarity, employees don't know what's expected of them regarding their behaviors and levels of performance. Plus, managers are not able to consistently respond to situations that arise, which can lead to charges of unfairness and favoritism. Developing clear, consistent policies and procedures allows you to onboard new employees and have discussions with all employees about your practice's values.

MODEL BEHAVIORS YOU WANT TO SEE

The phrase "do as I say, not as I do" does not belong in a healthy workplace—and even if it's not said, if that's the message being sent through behaviors exhibited by managers, then it's important to quickly remedy this. If, for example, you want the practice team to clearly communicate with one another so that the practice can run efficiently and well, then managers need to do the same. If you want to ensure that clients are treated with the highest levels of respect, then refrain from complaining about one after she leaves. If you want your team to be accountable to you and the practice, you'll also need to follow through on what you promise.

ADDRESS TOXIC BEHAVIORS

Team meetings can be used to discuss values, model appropriate behavior, and brainstorm solutions to problems. For example, if you'd like to address workplace gossiping, provide resources to employees about how to discuss interpersonal issues without resorting to gossip.

Although team meetings can be an excellent place to discuss values, behavior, and concerns, you'll need one-on-one meetings with individuals who participate in undesirable behaviors. There, you can address the behaviors you've observed, get feedback from the employee, and set up a customized behavioral modification plan. If successful, the employee can rectify a toxic behavior. There may be situations, however, when you may need to use disciplinary procedures established by your practice.

ENCOURAGE POSITIVE HABITS

One example of a healthy way to manage stress is exercise, and ways in which you could incorporate this into your practice include the following:

- offering to pay for employees' gym memberships
- having an expert on mindfulness provide a workshop during a team meeting
- providing space where employees can stretch and even do yoga poses at work
- encouraging employees to take strategic breaks where they go for a walk

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Healthy food is also an important part of one's overall wellbeing. Make it easy for your employees to have access by including the following:

- offering workshops on how busy employees can prepare healthy meals
- ensuring there is plenty of refrigerator space for lunches
- offering healthy food choices at team meetings and other events
- providing vending machines that offer healthy snacks

WORKPLACE WELL-BEING IS AN ONGOING PROCESS

The needs of the employees at your practice will continue to evolve. For staff to perceive that a workplace is healthy and positive, you must continually assess any new situations, challenges, or issues that may arise. Some employees may retire or find a job elsewhere, new employees will be on-boarded, and the dynamics of your team will change.

One way to help ensure that your practice continues to be a positive workplace environment is to hold an annual meeting where this type of discussion takes place. This is when you should be reviewing, updating, and discussing policies and procedures currently in place. It's a natural time to also discuss how the practice could become even more healthy, happy, well-balanced, and productive. Make it the kind of place that high-performing employees will gravitate to, and one where clients are satisfied with the service they receive. **TVP**

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Kellie serves as the human resource consultant for Veterinary Business Advisors (VBA), which offers a wide range of practical services to veterinarians and their advisors, nationwide, including legal, human resource, and practice management services. Kellie earned her bachelor's degree in political science from Rutgers University and is a certified senior professional in human resources. She has 15 years of combined experience in legal and human resource fields, previously serving as the head of human resources for a large technology company. She actively volunteers for causes she supports, most notably Night to Shine.



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