



# How to Leverage IO Psychology to Build a Thriving Veterinary Practice

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**H**ave you ever wondered why some practices seem to effortlessly attract and retain top talent, while others constantly struggle with staffing, retention, and burnout? Practices that build strong teams, support them well, and create conditions for those teams to do their best work have a clear advantage. However, many practices rely heavily on intuition or anecdotal advice when managing workplaces and staff. While experience is valuable, it can sometimes lead to subjective, suboptimal decisions and actions.

Many practices today face mounting pressure to attract and retain talent, prevent burnout, improve team communication, adopt new technologies, and sustain performance in an increasingly competitive market. Together, these challenges are often discussed as staffing, leadership, culture, or burnout problems. However, the truth in plain sight is that underneath many of these “problems” may be something broader: a people system under strain. By people system, I mean the workplace conditions that shape how people perform and behave. Fortunately, the field of industrial

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and organizational (IO) psychology offers a valuable and underused lens to help navigate these complex times and create a more sustainable and successful future for veterinary practices.

This article explores how IO psychology can help veterinary practices move beyond quick fixes and toward building better people systems that support healthier teams, foster strong communication, and enable sustainable performance. By the end of this article, you will have a simple IO psychology-informed framework that provides a structured lens for understanding workplace behavior, chronic people challenges, and choosing evidence-informed interventions.

## What Is IO Psychology?

IO psychology is the psychological science of how people think, feel, and behave within the workplace.<sup>1</sup> At the core, it is a practical, applied field. The goal of IO psychology is to improve how people experience and perform at work. It differs from traditional human resources (HR) practice by using data and research to understand how people, teams, and workplace systems interact.

Think of it this way: When a patient presents with vague symptoms, a veterinarian does not stop at only what is visible. IO psychology brings this same kind of diagnostic lens to the workplace. It helps leaders look beyond the surface-level symptoms. Instead of “our team has poor communication,” “people keep leaving,” “morale is low,” or “no one is ever held accountable,” IO psychology asks what is happening underneath. This perspective shift can help practices stop treating reoccurring people challenges as isolated issues and start examining what may be contributing to them.

## Clearing Up Common Misconceptions

### IO Psychology Is Not HR

Before looking at how IO psychology can be leveraged as a competitive advantage in veterinary medicine, it is helpful to look at how IO psychology compares to another similar but different field: HR. While many people associate IO psychology solely with HR, these fields are not the same. They differ in their focus,

scope, and application. Think of IO psychology as the “why” behind behavior at work. The key difference is that IO psychology brings a scientific lens and an evidence-based approach to the understanding of how people, teams, systems, and business outcomes interact.

Let’s look at a common example of where this difference might show up. A practice may consider adding a profit-sharing bonus, productivity bonus, or other financial incentive program as a way to improve employee performance and motivation. However, an IO psychology lens would go a step further and ask, “How would this incentive interact with the kind of work being done, the people doing it, and the culture of the practice?” If a financial incentive is designed poorly, it can unintentionally create demotivation by shifting the focus away from the appeal of the work. Instead of feeling reenergized by their purposeful work, staff may feel that their work has been reduced to production, which in turn can fuel demotivation (the opposite of the intended effect). This example is an illustration of how incorporating an IO psychology lens can help practices pause before implementing a solution, ask better questions, and avoid unintended consequences that cost time, money, energy, and trust.

## IO Psychology Is Not Personality Tests and Surveys

Your next thought may be something like, *Oh, psychology ... so they are just going to use personality tests ... or, worse, surveys!* That reaction is understandable. Many people have had poor experiences with workplace assessments, especially when these tools are used without enough context, explanation, or follow through. Myers-Briggs, DISC, Enneagram, CliftonStrengths, and more are all common tools in the IO psychology toolbox, but they are just that, tools.

In IO psychology practice, assessments and surveys are most useful when they are part of a larger, evidence-based process. Here is an example of what this application might look like in practice. Say you are hiring for a veterinary nurse/technician role in your hospital. Research suggests that conscientiousness—a personality trait characterized by organization, goal-setting, and reliability—is a strong predictor of job performance across various occupations.<sup>2</sup> However, an

IO psychology–informed hiring process would not stop with a personality assessment alone. Instead, it might combine a validated personality assessment to look at the level of conscientiousness with other tools, such as a situational judgment exercise, a structured interview, a realistic job preview, and a shared understanding of what success looks like in the role. The goal would not be to label the individual with a personality type and then write them off or in. The goal would be to create a comprehensive picture of a candidate’s suitability for the role, team, and demands of the practice.

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The Power of an IO Psychology Lens

IO psychology may be unfamiliar to many in veterinary medicine but it is not a revolutionary, lofty, or pie-in-the-sky new approach. In fact, it has formally existed as a psychological science for more than 100 years. What is new, however, is veterinary medicine’s growing need and readiness to apply IO psychology.

For example, I recently attended a conference workshop focused on applied workplace wellbeing. The workshop facilitators shared a case study from a manufacturing company where the work depended heavily on highly skilled craftsmen to produce their product. The surface issues that the company was experiencing looked a lot like employee disengagement and burnout. However, when they viewed their staff challenges through an IO psychology lens, the deeper issues emerged: an aging workforce, loss of expertise, threatened autonomy, weak feedback loops, and employees feeling like change was being done to them

instead of with them. With the help of IO psychology expertise, the company integrated a new wellbeing solution they called an embedded engagement campaign. The overall result was a substantial improvement in engagement and, even more impressive, employee production nearly doubled.<sup>3</sup>

Now, imagine applying this kind of thinking to veterinary medicine. What if you could protect the quality of your patient care while increasing your production and creating a system that allows you and your staff to sustainably thrive?

Applying an IO Psychology–Informed Lens in Your Practice

Please do not misunderstand me; IO psychology is not a quick fix or a magic trick, and applying anything to the workplace takes time. But when we shift the lens, we often get a clearer picture and can respond sooner and make better decisions about where to go next. IO psychology does not remove the complexity of managing people or businesses, but it does help leaders see the people system more clearly.

Your organization might not be ready for a full-fledged engagement campaign or a top-to-bottom culture renovation, but if you are interested in leveraging IO psychology in your own practice, start small. Use the framework below as an IO psychology–informed lens to examine the workplace conditions behind a single recurring people challenge at a time.

- 1. Treat behavior as a data point.** Start by treating behavior as information rather than a conclusion. Desired (or undesired) workplace behavior can reflect individual factors, how someone is experiencing work, or the conditions within the larger system in which they are operating. If employees stop sharing ideas, that is a data point. If veterinary nurses/technicians are short with one another, that is a data point. If managers avoid difficult conversations, that is a data point. This reorienting leads us to ask, “What could the behavior be telling us about the person, the work, or the larger system?” Be curious!
- 2. Identify the level.** The next step is to locate the level or levels where the problem behavior may live. Do not automatically assume that the person is the problem. Instead: Is it isolated to 1 person? Is the pattern occurring across a team? Does it appear

around a particular manager? Examine the person, the work, and the larger system before deciding where an intervention belongs. If the wrong level is diagnosed, this usually leads to the wrong solution.

- 3. Check and challenge the assumptions.** It is human nature to assume. Our brains naturally rely on shortcuts and are very good at turning incomplete information into very convincing stories. However, assumptions, like diagnosing the wrong level, can lead us to respond to the wrong problem. Before arriving at a conclusion, ask, “What assumptions am I making here?” or “What else could be true?”
- 4. Examine the working conditions around the behavior.** Work does not happen in a vacuum. People behave inside systems, and those systems often shape what behavior is easy, hard, rewarded, ignored, or punished. Look at the conditions around a behavior. Consider role, workload, training, communication, feedback, recognition, leadership support, autonomy, client pressure, recovery time, and workflow design. The key question in this step is to determine “What conditions are making this behavior easier or more likely?”
- 5. Look for evidence before you act.** This step is about looking for evidence-informed ways to address the problem and the conditions surrounding it. You do not have to conduct an entire research study, but you can look for credible evidence about approaches that have been used to address similar problems before choosing an intervention. Consider the context (e.g., industry, limitations) and then ask whether this intervention or solution fits your context.
- 6. Choose 1 targeted intervention.** The goal is not to fix everything at once but instead to address 1 misaligned piece at a time. It can be helpful to ask, “What would make the desired behavior easier, clearer, better supported, and more sustainable?” Then choose a single practical change that directly addresses that need and aligns with what you uncovered in the earlier steps.
- 7. Measure what changes.** Like a recheck appointment after a diagnosis and treatment, this step is important and does not have to be complicated. If you do not measure what happens, it is hard to know whether the intervention helped or simply felt like it did. First choose 1 or 2 indicators tied to the issue you are trying to improve. Then establish a simple baseline. After you test an intervention, compare what happened to those indicators to determine whether the change helped.

Summary

Altogether, these steps offer a practical approach to begin applying IO psychology in veterinary medicine: notice the behavior, place it, question it, understand it, check the science, change 1 thing, and measure the change. The magic of IO psychology is that it gives us a better way to understand what is really going on before deciding what to do about it. It helps leaders determine what kind of problem they are dealing with instead of automatically reaching for the next flavor-of-the-month management intervention. In turn, this process enables leaders to move from reaction to diagnosis, from assumption to evidence, and from isolated fixes to better-functioning people systems. The practices that thrive will not be the ones without people problems. They will be the ones who are better equipped to understand what is driving them, respond intentionally with curiosity and evidence, and building systems where people can do their best work. **TVP**

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