

## How to collaborate as Veterinary Professionals to feel better in an ever-changing work environment. Laura Woodward.

Our work environment is changing. The systems we've developed and become used to are less recognisable with every month. Even in large vet hospitals, the boss isn't upstairs in the consult room and available for a chat about a piece of equipment anymore.

Meetings are online instead of in the corridor or the prep room, and every request for a new item has to go up through many layers and tiers of command before being decided upon.



As vets and nurses on the shop floor facing the pet owners and their pets, it's easy to feel forgotten, unappreciated, alienated, and ignored. Frustration is driving good staff out of the professions and making staffing shortages even more painful which is a vicious circular part of the recruitment and retention crisis.

It's so easy to blame corporatisation for all of this. However, pointing the finger of blame rarely fixes issues or reverses problematic changes.

Also, corporatisation isn't the only thing to have changed over this last decade, although it does make the headlines and so appears to be the biggest factor. But maybe it isn't?

More importantly to me as a counsellor to the vet profession, I know that condemning 'the corporates' as the source of our own individual unhappiness is unlikely to help us to feel better.

With effort, trying to see things from the other side, (a component of empathy), bearing in mind the fact that everyone working in a corporate or a large group is an actual human being, can help to slightly defuse the bad feelings the shop floor staff may have towards them.

Being 'faceless' and unknown personally by an employee who is unhappy, can mean that the employees' frustration is directed towards the member of the management team, or towards all of management in general.



I work on the shop floor facing clients every day. I understand the frustrations and my team feel it too.

I've also spoken with members of management from lead nurses and vets to clinical directors, regional managers, CEO's and COO's, and I can verify that every one of them is a fallible human being with human emotions, weaknesses and strengths too.

Bizarrely, we're in this together.

Seeing things from the perspective of a member of management far above me, their work environment is also changing, the systems which used to work them are now obsolete, they can't nip over to the prep room to have a quick word with their employees either.

They feel forgotten, unappreciated, alienated and ignored too. The similarities are shocking.

### **The Nature of Impermanence**

This is the essence of being human. No two moments are the same. While good things are lasting, it can be really pleasant. When sad moments are with us, we may be desperate for things to change and to move on.

"When you're going through hell, for goodness' sake, keep going"

Acceptance of Impermanence helps us to stop clinging to the past which we often see through rose coloured spectacles.

Instead of yearning for things to stop changing, learning to roll with the changes is healthier for our minds. This is true outside of the workplace as well as when at work. Yearning uncontrollably makes us feel an internal, unsatisfied ache and we don't have to feel that way.

### **Changing our habits**

#### **1. We can stop blaming.**

It fans the flame of anger inside us and takes up our valuable headspace which we could instead be using for better activities.

#### **2. Empathy with humans.**

We may never agree with the decisions being made. We may never 'see it from another's perspective', we may never 'walk a mile in their shoes'. However, we can always remind ourselves that the people making decisions and working in all the tiers of management are human too. They won't know that we've changed our attitude towards them. However, we will feel the benefit of defusing the hold which these draining emotions can have on us. Knowing that the faceless names in management and ownership have families, and household bills and



physical ailments and traffic jams just like we do, can be quite calming. Being kind towards random strangers is one of the most powerful feel-good tools we have. If we just start to feel kindness towards them and even wish them well in our heads, despite all the disagreements we may have with them, it can be of enormous benefit for our personal, individual mental wellbeing.

### 3. Nature of impermanence.

Try to let go of the good things which are gone and which you may be clinging to because they are no longer here. With the nature of impermanence, an inevitable part of human existence, we can embrace change with a more open mind. We can dislike the changes, we can even hate the changes, and at the same time, by changing our attitude towards the uncomfortable emotions we're feeling, and making room for them, just noticing that good things and bad things come in waves always, it can relax the resistance we feel towards change. This also can defuse the resistance and pessimism we have about upcoming changes.

So, changing our attitude and rolling with changes which we may dislike can involve:

#### **Collaboration**

For now, this moment, you're focusing on a reason to feel good. We have colleagues, mentors, friends here. If you feel a spark of comfort or optimism or other good feeling, see if you can focus entirely on it and make it as big as possible right now for as long as you can. So often we focus on problem lists and things which need to be 'fixed' because that's human life, and our job of course. Making the effort to learn how to focus with your entire headspace on something which doesn't need fixing, but which instead is wholesome and heartening and feel-good, can have an enormously positive effect on your mental wellbeing

**Empowering ourselves** to look after our own mental wellbeing is instead of blaming others for eroding it and expecting them to do something about it. Once we have mastered the daily habit of taking this responsibility into our own hands, we can then send these methods outwards to our colleagues. Starting small with just one nearby person, using positive language and focusing on something good which doesn't need fixing, then saying it out loud can change the mood in the room.

For example, mentioning in rounds that the case which was likely to do well, did indeed do well, is a start. Taking a few seconds to appreciate a gorgeous pet we're treating is another, and encouraging others to take a moment to take a breath and enjoy the animal is more effective than you would think.

If you enjoy this Purina platform, tell others about it. As well as that, notice that everyone on this platform is a human being too. Noticing that organisations which you agree with also have faceless people on it, and that they are simple human beings too who need to pay the mortgage



and floss, and refuel the car, can make it easier to feel the same towards the management in organisations where you feel less likely to have empathetic and kind thoughts.

**Daily habits** in the workplace to focus on what we can do.

Start small to send ripples of good vibes outwards with your demeanour.

What I do.

On any given day, I can choose to focus on the changes in our profession which make me sad, or I can choose to focus on the individual animal, this procedure or consultation, with this nurse and this anaesthetist, turning away from the 'noise' which I can't change and leaning in towards the things which bring me joy.

Where I put my focus is probably one of the few things I can control.

Once I have that pinpoint focus, I can encourage my immediate team of 3 or 4 people to do the same. By doing this, we are collaborating to feel better, and we will also do a quality job because we are completely mindful and staying in the present moment.

We have checklists for procedures which involve pre induction, pre-cutting in theatre and post procedure. These include the usual confirming of the patient, procedure, equipment, drugs etc., swab count, labelling specimens etc. I include 'take a breath' on these which gets a laugh because when we take a breath at these designated times, we nearly always realise that we've barely taken a breath all day, certainly not a conscious one.

We can all be creative when it comes to daily habits at work and then spreading these habits outwards by saying them out loud.

There is nothing to be lost by collaboration.

Laura Woodward

