



The Key to Successful Teams for the Equine Practice Owner

Fostering a Sense of Safety and Belonging Can Transform Your Team

Have you ever felt like you couldn't ask a question or suggest a new idea? Have you ever been reluctant to ask for help with a case? Do you feel hesitation when sending a case history and radiographs to a specialist? Is there a time when you were afraid to admit that you made a dosage mistake for a patient?

We've all experienced these feelings in veterinary school and in practice. Think back to a time in veterinary school when you asked a question in rounds, only to be humiliated in front of your classmates. Or perhaps more recently you were chastised by your boss for not offering to perform an MRI on a lame horse.

What's holding us back?

The fear of judgment, humiliation, and punishment from our superiors and peers can be paralyzing. These fears hold us back; decreasing our confidence, our willingness to develop new skills, our productivity, and

our satisfaction in the work we do. When fear holds us back from speaking up, it's often due to a lack of psychological safety in our work environment.

What is Psychological Safety?

Creating and leading an effective team is one way to focus on a positive practice culture. According to research, team effectiveness is driven by one major factor in the workplace - psychological safety.

Psychological Safety can be defined as the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.

At the practice level, it's a shared expectation held by members of a team that teammates will not embarrass, reject, or punish them for sharing ideas, taking risks or soliciting feedback.



What it is not.

Psychological safety does not mean that there is a lack of accountability!

It is not about decreasing the standards to which you hold your employees. In fact, once team safety has been established, the opposite is true. Instead of walking lightly around someone's feelings, when there is an atmosphere of established psychological safety, candid discussions can be held more easily.

Why is it key to changing our team dynamics?

A lack of psychological safety within the practice presents risks to the business.

Retention

If employees do not feel a level of safety within their team, you are not going to hear about it. You are going to feel it as they leave to find new positions. Employee turnover takes profit out of your bottom line and significantly detracts from clinic morale.

Status Quo

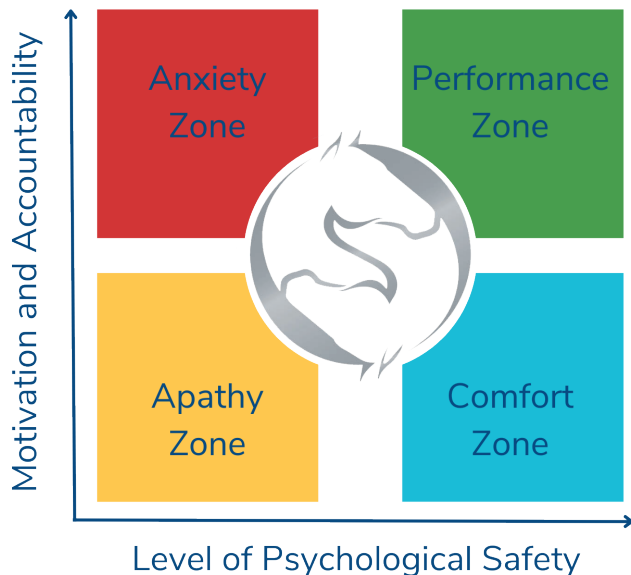
Practices miss out on opportunities to grow and improve when employees are afraid to share what isn't working and to offer new and innovative ideas.

Failures

When people don't feel safe to admit their mistakes it can lead to poor outcomes like patient fatalities or worker injuries, repeated errors or omissions in patient care and poor customer service.

Team Performance

When describing the relationship between psychological safety and accountability, Dr. Amy Edmondson, a leading expert on team leadership and psychological safety, describes four zones.



The Performance Zone combines both high standards and high psychological safety.

A veterinary team that had reached this level has created a work climate where candor is allowed and expected, mistakes are forgiven, asking for help is not seen as a weakness and questioning current norms can occur without fear.

This is where we want our practice team to exist!

**Adapted from research by Dr. Amy Edmondson*

How can practice leaders create psychological safety?

Lead by example.

If you want others to share learnings, untested ideas and mistakes, leaders must be also be vulnerable.

Establish your “why”

Why does the practice exist? What is the value the practice brings to your patients, your clients? Make sure everyone in the practice understands the “why”. Each individual needs to feel that their contribution is vital to the team, the practice, the patients, and the clients. Employees need to feel that they bring value to this mission.

Create space for discussion

Employees need access to you in order to share, brainstorm ideas and ask questions. This time should be carved out separate from staff meetings with packed agendas. Generally, our busy schedules often don't allow time for discussion or reflection so this needs to be intentionally planned into your schedule.

Ask open-ended questions

What's working? What's not working? What am I missing? What don't we know? Don't mistake silence for agreement...ask more questions. Avoid questions that invite expected answers such as: “The new on-call schedule seems good right?”

Encourage healthy feedback

Feedback sessions between practice leaders and employees should occur regularly. Feedback should be viewed by both the leader and the employee as a learning conversation. Recognize that your view as a leader is limited—you don't see the whole picture. Encourage thoughtful input from the employee by being receptive and utilizing what you hear.

Benefits

Once a culture of psychological safety has been established, team members often begin to feel more engaged, innovative, and productive.

You will see increases in:

- Positive patient outcomes
- Client satisfaction
- Team performance goals
- Creative idea suggestions
- Employee well-being

These positive benefits will lead to better employee retention, increased profitability and a new level of team cohesion.

Specific Examples

Here are a few examples of how different types of practice leaders can start to establish a culture of safety within their teams:

Demonstrate engagement

During weekly team meetings, you need to ask follow up questions, offer input and be interactive to demonstrate that you are truly listening to any concerns that are brought up during the meeting.

“How can I support you?”

Show understanding

When a problem is brought to a veterinarian’s attention (owner hears from associate vet or associate vet hears from technician), you need to recap what you’ve just heard and validate that you understand how that issue could be causing negative feelings.

Promote self-awareness of the individuals on the team. Learning how we each prefer to think, communicate, and behave allows for improved communication among team members.

Tools such as DISC and 360 reviews are a great way to understand ourselves and each other better.

“I can see that this is really rubbing you the wrong way. Any thoughts on how to improve it?”

Be inclusive in interpersonal settings

A practice owner must be available and approachable. You can set specific office hours where drop-in visits are encouraged or you can set aside time to meet with employees individually.

A veterinarian could also share information about how to best communicate with them.

“I do great with email but have a hard time processing face-to-face meetings without a little bit of prep.”



Expressing gratitude for the team’s contributions is also crucial during group gatherings. Take this time to be specific and encourage others to share their wins as well.

“You are doing really well in this specific area. I appreciate how you’ve aided the team this week.”

Be inclusive in decision-making

Take the entire team’s opinion into consideration when making decisions that have clinicwide effects. You won’t always be able to please everyone but team members will feel heard and understood if you give them your full attention.

Provide multiple channels for employees to share their thoughts – not everyone is comfortable speaking up in meetings. Try Slack, email or one-on-one sessions.

Make sure to ask this question often - *“What are we missing?”* Be sure to actively pause and wait (*count to 10*) before moving on!

Show confidence and conviction without appearing inflexible

Acknowledge your own mistakes, either medical errors or missteps as a practice leader.

Sharing times when you’ve gotten it wrong will make employees more likely to ask questions, seek help, and report their own mistakes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

