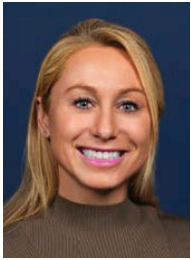


## A strong practice culture demands an ethical foundation

By Lisa Fultz DVM, MS, DACVIM, and Jamie Pribyl, DVM



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We have all heard the saying, “Being a horse doctor is a lifestyle, not a job.” Long days and hard work are unavoidable, and a lot of it is “heart work” not just “hard work.” But when the realities of burnout, complex communication dynamics, appropriate compensation and compassion fatigue go unrecognized, a practice can become more toxic than the most bacteria-ridden culture plate. Building a strong and ethical practice culture is beneficial to everyone in a practice. So, what is practice culture and how can we strive to build and maintain a culture with an ethical foundation?

The AAEP has recognized the importance of culture as part of the Commission on Equine Veterinary Sustainability. And the need is dire: A

2019 survey of 647 veterinarians revealed that 28.4% cited “culture of my practice” as a major contributor to leaving equine practice.

After experiencing a similar trend of decreasing satisfaction in the industry in the first 5 years of practice, our small animal counterparts established American Animal Hospital Association’s Culture Initiative to identify practice culture characteristics that help employees thrive. In the AAHA 2020 study, “actively managed” cultures in small animal practices were 2.5 times more profitable, had a 30% increase in innovation and a 40% increase in employee retention.

But equine medicine has unique aspects that prevent direct application of other industries’ culture initiatives. We have an army of solo practitioners that may not have staff, and ambulatory medicine presents unique situations where the facilities, assistants and hands-on-deck are often changing and out of your control. Most days, just getting the day’s work done before the sun goes down is hard enough, let alone actively managing a practice culture.

With those unique challenges in mind, breaking down practice culture into subsets can help us ask ethical questions that can help us build a healthy and profitable environment.

### Microculture

Microculture involves the day-to-day regulars—the intimate team within a practice. Healthy connections, positive

energy and each person’s individual ethics are key to success at this level.

When the ethics of veterinarians within a practice don’t align, it has negative effects on culture. For example, Associate A refuses to fill an Rx without a valid VCPR, but Associate B readily dispenses Rx medication for horses he hasn’t seen. This mismatch creates friction between the veterinarians and trickles down to staff. Additionally, it damages the relationship with clients because there is an inconsistent message that will eventually result in a disappointed or disgruntled client.

Every member within a practice should take an inventory of their own personal ethics, and practice owners and managers should establish policies to minimize ethical dilemmas. Questions to consider include: Are you asking your associates and team for feedback? What cases does your associate prefer to see, and is there a way you can help grow that caseload? Are you providing adequate equipment and support to all staff members?

### Bridge Culture

This subset involves the group work where different parts of the practice overlap.

Competition between associates or teams within the practice can affect the culture as a whole. A colleague recently shared that there is competition among partners for certain clients within their practice, and it has contributed to a toxic culture within the team.

Ethical dilemmas can arise if some staff members disparage other staff members. By establishing a shared vision of best outcome for the horses and clients, some practices may improve their culture by focusing on a larger “we” vision of a practice where clients consider themselves clients of the practice instead of clients of a particular vet. This could create a supportive environment and foster career growth and professional longevity of newly hired veterinarians within the practice.

The ethics of reporting errors is an important consideration at this level of practice culture. Could an employee be tempted to omit or falsify records rather than be honest with management for fear of retribution?

### Macroculture

Lastly, culture can be viewed as more than a sum of the parts, which encompasses a practice’s purpose of work and values.

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**ETHICAL PRACTICE**  
Every Day-Every Time

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## A strong practice culture, continued

Every practice member should question their ethics if what occurs within the course of the day spills over into personal lives and how our staff, clients and patients interact with the world.

Do you prioritize the safety of your employees and patients over “getting the job done”? This could include using proper biosecurity and proper preparedness for procedures (sedated versus unsedated procedures, use of protective equipment during radiography, etc.) Are contagious diseases appropriately reported? Numerous veterinarians on anonymous veterinary discussion boards mention being ethically challenged when they learn of a colleague knowingly writing a health certificate for a horse with signs of disease. This can put other horses at risk and upset the cultural foundation of a practice.

The social media presence of an organization and its members can also influence the microculture. Establishing rules on appropriate post content (both client-related and personal) facilitates a healthy culture. Maintaining positive outward comments online and in the real world is vital. A healthy culture would refrain from disparaging other veterinarians and practices to current or potential clients.

In conclusion, active management of a practice’s culture requires establishment of ethical guidelines. In the ethics feature published in the April 2023 issue of *EVE*, the authors proposed “promoting a practice culture that encourages open modeling of our humanity.” The essence of such humanity inherently involves ethics as part of our daily lives in equine practice. Although it is not easy or straightforward, practices and the industry are at risk without a strong ethical foundation.