

COACHING:

HYPE OR HOPE FOR VETERINARY MEDICINE?

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On February 25, 2022, CBC's *Marketplace* ran an episode called "Undercover Investigation: Life Coaches Caught on Camera." The title and the episode are great examples of how the media uses sensationalism to get our attention and draw us in. The episode was a one-sided investigation of the coaching profession where the goal, it seemed, was to expose coaching as an unregulated, unethical profession full of charlatans out to make a quick buck off their unsuspecting victims. Does any of this sound familiar? Perhaps you recall the September 2014 episode, "Vet Bills for Dogs and Cats: Are They Too High?" Or the June 2015 episode, "Is Your Dentist Ripping You Off? Hidden Camera Investigation." Sensationalism in the media exists because it works. We are drawn to it and to the promise of something compelling, which activates a specific dopamine pathway in our brains. That hit of dopamine keeps us coming back for more, even when we are aware of being the pawn in a larger game. It also grows an audience and boosts ratings.

The *Marketplace* episode on coaching identified the biggest challenge to building the legitimacy of the coaching profession: anyone can call themselves a coach. Founded in 1995, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) is a non-profit organization dedicated to establishing a professional code of ethics and standards in the coaching industry and providing accreditation for coaching training programs, administering a rigorous credentialing process for aspiring coaches and ensuring members commit to ongoing continuing education requirements and meet core competency standards. ICF-certified coaches hold themselves to the highest standard of professionalism and ethics and as such can be held accountable through the ICF's ethical review process. Unfortunately, regulating coaches who are not ICF-certified is challenging. There is no assurance of a coach's training, qualifications, or competency, and there is no recourse or accountability if you have a complaint. Similar to regulating unauthorized veterinary practice, often the only recourse is increasing awareness and education.

So what exactly is "coaching"? For many of us, the word recalls images of a high school basketball coach shouting from the sidelines, whistle in hand. Sports coaching is a small niche in a diverse and

growing profession that includes business, leadership, life, and health coaches. Regardless of the label, coaching is not only one of the most effective methods of developing leadership and management skills, it is also a promising intervention for improved well-being and reducing burnout symptoms in health care professionals. A 2019 study in the *Journal of American Medical Association Internal Medicine* demonstrated that the proportion of physicians with high emotional exhaustion decreased by 19.5 per cent and the prevalence of burnout symptoms by 17.1 per cent in participants who received professional coaching sessions as compared to those in the control group.

What makes coaching different from other "helping" professions like counselling, consulting, and mentoring is the equal playing field on which the coach-client relationship is built. Rather than being a diagnostician, an expert, or a giver of advice, a coach is a partner and a cheerleader committed to your personal and professional growth. Coaching is a collaborative process grounded in curiosity, where the client or team is seen as fully capable and an expert in their practice and life. Robert Hargrove, a thought leader in the field of talent development and coaching, said, "Masterful coaching is about inspiring, empowering, and enabling people to live deeply in the future, while acting boldly in the present."

Coaching has broad applications in an organizational setting. From strategic planning and goal setting to developing self-awareness of one's own perspectives and limiting beliefs, to building mindfulness and appreciation, the impact of coaching is diverse and far-reaching. Coaching can be focused on the individual during regular one-to-one sessions where the client sets the agenda based on their personal goals. It can also be offered to teams seeking better ways to work and learn together. In the current climate of uncertainty due to workforce shortages, high burnout, and constant change, coaching may be a lifeline the veterinary profession has not fully embraced.

How exactly can the benefits of coaching be leveraged in a veterinary setting? Before engaging a coach, it is important to spend some time in honest self-reflection. Do you want to improve some aspect of your life and performance? Are you willing to get curious, challenge your assumptions, and own your part in any dysfunction? Can you commit the time and energy needed to change existing patterns of behaviour? If the answer is yes, coaching can be a powerful resource for veterinary teams. Consider the following applications of coaching as well as the positive impact these interventions offer.

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1. ONBOARDING NEW EMPLOYEES OR HELPING EMPLOYEES TRANSITION TO A NEW ROLE

A series of coaching sessions can be offered as an onboarding perk to all new employees. Coaching can help new and transitioning team members with assimilation, especially when typical mentoring relationships are overtaxed or nonexistent because of the overwhelm veterinary medicine is currently experiencing. A coach can also help team members identify their strengths and how best to leverage them to find fulfillment and enjoyment in their professional life.

2. PROVIDING WELLNESS SUPPORT

Coaching can take your commitment to wellness programs from talk to tangible action. An experienced and professional coach can support the development of mindfulness, self-care, and other well-being practices customized for individual team members. Coaching carries minimal professional stigma and can be more approachable than traditional mental health programs. While not a substitute for professional counselling and therapy, coaches can act as a facilitator of your team's well-being.

3. EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS AND ELEVATING PERFORMANCE

Coaching can help team members set goals, take ownership of their professional development, and stay accountable to those goals. Coaching is an evidence-based intervention to support goal-based achievement. In a profession where many prefer a goal-oriented approach to professional development, it can be particularly effective. Coaching can also be employed following any training or continuing education program to help accelerate learning and identify the next steps to keep the momentum going.

4. IMPROVING TEAM COMMUNICATION

Coaching offers a safe, confidential space for team members to debrief on interpersonal communication challenges. Coaches can help team members build skills like reflective listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence, ultimately teaching teams how to deconstruct conflict and build a more caring and collaborative workplace.

5. CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

By asking thought-provoking questions, an experienced coach can challenge current thinking and help reframe unproductive mental models to stimulate creative solutions that help teams move forward together.

If I am honest, I came to coaching with my own biases arising from overused jargon and the promise of 30-day programs and quick fixes. It was during the completion of my Values-Based Leadership Certificate that I started to see the potential for coaching to shift the narrative in veterinary medicine. A requirement for graduation from this program was doing a research project on a values-driven organization, and I found a successful technology start-up with a unique leadership model and cohesive culture that agreed to participate. During an interview, the CEO shared that every employee, from the C-suite executives to the building custodian, had access to confidential coaching services as part of their benefits package. Interested in the impact of coaching, I excitedly scheduled an interview with the organization's executive coach. When asked about his role, he succinctly said, "My job is to help every employee live more joyfully." This simple response, delivered with genuine passion, had a big impact on me. What if I could help every employee in veterinary medicine live more joyfully? How might this change the culture of our hospitals and the profession? What positive ripples might extend beyond our hospital doors to our employees' families and even into our communities?

At a time when many choose to see the negatives and the challenges in veterinary medicine, I choose hope. Hope for our clients, our teams, and our leaders to shift the narrative and develop human-centred hospitals. Coaching is a powerful tool to leverage the positive change veterinary medicine needs and lead us toward a bright future . . . together.

To save space, the references for this article are made available on the Chapter's website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine. WCV