

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW

BY ELAINE KLEMMENSEN, DVM

In May 2019, the World Health Organization included burnout in its International Classification of Disease but later issued an urgent clarification stating, “Burnout is an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition.” According to Christina Maslach, a social psychologist and foremost expert on burnout, this is an important distinction. If we view burnout as a disease, it causes us to see conditions like burnout and compassion fatigue as a problem with the individual rather than a problem with the workplace. Maslach used the following metaphor to illustrate her point using impactful imagery: picture a flock of happy, healthy canaries singing as they fly into a coal mine. “When they come out full of soot and disease, no longer singing, can you imagine us asking why the canaries made themselves sick? No, because the answer would be obvious: the coal mine is making the birds sick.”

Burnout and compassion fatigue are common in the helping professions, and veterinary medicine is no exception. I suspect the canary and the coal mine metaphor hits home with many of us. If we truly want to help people in veterinary medicine flourish, we need to transform the coal mine. Imagine what it would feel like to work in a veterinary hospital with a thriving culture—where inspiring leaders empower employees toward a greater purpose; ideas flow freely; collaboration rather than competition is the norm; everyone feels safe, appreciated, and able to bring their true self to work; and egos, blame, and shame are replaced by authenticity, transparency, and trust. It is time for leaders in the veterinary industry to take note and shift the responsibility for managing burnout from the individual to the organization.

As I write, the world around us is changing rapidly. On March 16, 2020, Prime Minister Trudeau’s address focused our nation on the grim reality of COVID-19. By the time this article goes to print, phrases like “flattening the curve” and “social distancing” will not only inform our decisions and behaviour, they will be part of our collective vocabulary. To put it simply, our leader was asking us to change our individualist, Western mind-set to a mind-set committed to the greater good. To move beyond our individual needs and our personal discomfort and think about safeguarding our health-care system and protecting the vulnerable individuals in our society.

In light of a growing pandemic, few can argue that we do not live in a global community. Humanity is more interconnected than any other period in our shared history. In their book *Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profit from Passion and Purpose*, Rajendra Sisodia, David Wolfe, and Jagdish Sheth described Western society as entering an “age of transcendence,” a time where people are looking for meaning in their lives. They suggest that this shift in our collective consciousness means that “companies are being held accountable for their humanistic as well as economic performance.” I believe this reflects people’s desire to align with organizations that reflect their own deeply held values to find congruence and meaning in a world where we feel increasingly disconnected. The desire and, I would argue, need for leaders and organizations who actually want to do the right thing and not just be seen to do the right thing has never been more relevant than in our current era. It is time to move our mind-set from the individualistic view of Western society to a collective mind-set reflective of the global community we now inhabit.

People today want to have a voice in choosing the values that govern their personal and professional lives. They want to experience equality, accountability, and transparency in their workplace and feel proud of the organization they work for. Increasing employee engagement is not only key to increased employee well-being and improved workplace culture; it drives productivity and profitability. Daniel Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* lists three key factors that influence employee engagement:

1. **Autonomy**, or the freedom to make choices regarding how, when, with whom, and where we work. Companies that give their employees high levels of autonomy report faster growth and lower staff turnover.
2. **Mastery**, or the ability to improve at something that matters to the employee. The desire for intellectual challenge and the ability to master something new and engaging is a driving force behind productivity.
3. **Purpose**, or a cause that is larger than the employee. Intrinsic motivators, such as helping others, learning, or improving, are associated with greater levels of satisfaction and subjective well-being than extrinsic motivators, such as achieving fame or financial success.

If we want to create a flourishing veterinary community, I believe we need to change our “coal mines.” Cultural transformation is a complicated process, in part because culture itself is an intangible concept. Much like an individual’s personality, the culture of an organization is the unconscious set of assumptions, attitudes, and principles that manifest in the decisions, actions, and behaviours of the people that work there. Cultural transformation is a slow process that requires commitment and patience to succeed.

AWARENESS

The first step in transforming culture is understanding what needs changing in your practice. Recognizing a problem in your hospital’s culture can be difficult. Often unhealthy attitudes and behaviours are so deeply entrenched in a team’s way of doing things that the team is unaware that a problem exists. However, if a team has established a high level of trust and psychological safety, leaders can initiate open dialogue to better understand the positive and negative aspects of their practice culture. Open-ended questions, survey tools, and team brainstorming sessions can be methods to facilitate conversations on culture (see the sidebar “It Takes a Team”). Sometimes enlisting outside consultants with an unbiased perspective may be helpful to guide cultural change initiatives. Understanding what is working for your team and what is holding them back provides practice leaders with a road map to guide the process.

PLANNING AND PURPOSE

In leadership culture there is an outdated myth involving a charismatic leader who will save the day by the sheer force of their personality and will. In reality, in any organization creating sustainable change requires a group effort. Every team member needs to understand the need for change and see the benefits inherent in that change. Creating a shared vision or mission that brings a sense of excitement and purpose to your team is critical to success. Consider the hopes, desires, and frustrations

your team shared with you previously and enlist their help to co-create a vision based on the strengths identified in your existing practice culture. Dig into your values and those of your team. Does your vision align with these values?

WALKING THE TALK

Team members look to their leaders for both inspiration and direction. There must be alignment between the practice’s values and the words, actions, and behaviours of the practice leader. Inauthentic leadership will destroy any change initiative before it begins. Veterinary practices, like any organization, need leaders with high levels of self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Leaders who are willing to do the difficult work of self-reflection, challenge their assumptions, and change behaviours that negatively impact their practice and team. Investing in leadership development training is essential to create cultural change in our industry (see the sidebar “Leadership Development Resources”).

IMPLEMENTATION

Your hospital’s new mission and values need to be internalized with your team. The process of embedding the new values and behaviours into daily decision making and practice life is perhaps the most challenging part of the process. Look for opportunities to reinforce values in action. Recognize the cultural ambassadors on your team and reward the behaviours that embody the culture you desire. Believe in the power of people to do the right thing and take time to celebrate your team’s success together. Be sure to take time to revisit your hospital’s policies, procedures, and incentives and make sure they reflect the new organization values. Finally, recognize that change is often met with resistance. Focus on the benefits a thriving culture will offer the entire team and be clear, consistent, and fair during the change process. Help your employees see how they fit, offer them support, and be patient.

EVALUATION

Culture is constantly evolving. Rather than a final destination, it is a process that needs continual evaluation and nurturing to stay relevant. Internal forces (changes in the team) as well as external forces (new technology and evolving standards of care) will affect hospital culture. Leaders need to look for ways to measure the effects of change initiatives and evaluate whether it is having the desired effect. A variety of parameters can be employed in the evaluation process. As improvement in culture will improve customer satisfaction, evaluate feedback from clients. Both formal tools like employee surveys and feedback forms and informal observation of team interactions and behaviours can provide insight into the effectiveness of change initiatives. In our industry, an empowering and caring workplace culture attracts attention. The ease with which you attract new employees is another metric to gauge the health of your practice culture.

Changing the culture of a profession is an overwhelming task. In the wake of a global pandemic, most of us long for a return to the status quo, the comfort of certainty over the uncertainty that COVID-19 has thrust upon all of us. While this mind-set is understandable, I challenge you to ask yourself how well the status quo served your team. Is the vision of a flourishing veterinary culture something you have achieved or something you still aspire to? Avoiding problems in the culture of our veterinary practices does not make them go away. Your practice and your people deserve better. Through shared purpose, alignment, and commitment, you can create a healthier coal mine where all of the canaries that enter come out singing. [WCV](#)

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IT TAKES A TEAM

TRUST IS THE GLUE THAT HOLDS TEAMS TOGETHER AND ALLOWS PASSION TO FLOW

Enlist your team to identify the positive and negative aspects of your practice’s culture. Suspend judgement, get curious, and be prepared to hear things that make you uncomfortable. If you don’t want to change, don’t bother asking. Listen so you can make a plan to guide your cultural transformation.

MAKE IT FUN

Creating a culture together is about building relationships. Find creative ways to celebrate your team and recognize what makes your practice special.

SEEK OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE

Remember that the culture of your practice did not develop overnight. Cultural change is a slow and complex process. Be patient, consistent, and committed to authenticity, building trust, and modelling the values of your organization. It is difficult work. Consider working with a leadership coach or consultant to facilitate the process.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

CANADIAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
Emerging Leaders Program:
www.canadianveterinarians.net

VETERINARY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
www.veterinaryleadershipinstitute.org

AMERICAN ANIMAL HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION
Connexity Conference: www.aaha.org/education/in-person-training/connexity-2020
AAHA Culture Initiative: www.aaha.org/practice-resources/healthy-workplace-culture

AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
Veterinary Leadership Conference: www.avma.org/events/veterinary-leadership-conference
Leadership Toolkit for Veterinarians: www.avma.org/career/articles/leadership-toolkit-veterinarians

WOMEN’S VETERINARY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE
www.wvldi.org