Improve Workplace Health through Effective Followership

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Abstract

Resilience is a challenge in the veterinary profession and discussions are often philosophical in nature, but this presentation gives techniques to be used in the clinical setting to improve resilience of the team and individuals. The key technique centers on demonstrating and developing effective followership. Effective followership is the concept of providing respectful dissent, appropriate initiative and creative thinking in a team setting. And the presenter argues that if used by all members of a team, it will significantly improve resiliency.

Keywords: Followership, resilience, psychological, safety, workplace

Define resilience and name challenges

First, one must understand that resilience is not an avoidance of struggles or stress, but it is about how we response to difficult situations. Resilience is the ability to recover from difficulties quickly. Within a fast-paced and stressful environment, in a veterinary clinic, it is vital that staff can respond quickly and overcome challenges to ensure the best possible communication, patient care and outcome. Additionally, a resilient person sees an opportunity for growth in the face of challenges, which demonstrates a vital growth mindset. Then, a resilient team, as an entity, is able to overcome and recover from challenges.[i] And resilient individuals can build a resilient team, and a resilient team can develop the resilience of its members.

20   The entire veterinary medicine community recognizes that we want and need a more resilient workforce,

21   but there are so many challenges that put resilience at risk. First. There is a lack of trust within the profession that

22   stems from the competitive nature required to enter the profession. Those who become veterinarians, in particular,

23   had to work very hard and often beat competition to reach their goals, so they do not always feel a strong sense of

24   community with other veterinarians.[ii] But, it is crucial that veterinarians know that both other DVMs, as well as

25   technicians, front desk staff and assistants will support them in case of a mistake or challenge. We need to know we

26   are not alone in this. And the lack of trust leads to a lack of psychological safety, or the comfort to share

27   vulnerabilities, be their authentic self, take prudent risk, express contrary opinions without fear of inappropriate

28   punishment.

29   Another major challenge is social media. Social media has become an outlet for consumers to attack

30   veterinary professionals, leading to overwhelming responses. These attacks have major impacts on the professionals

31   involved and the industry as a whole.[iii]

32 Define followership and psychological safety

33   Followership, in its simplest terms it he capacity or willingness to follow. It is vital to adjust the concept of

34   followership from a traditionally negative connotation to a more positive one, by adding the concept of

35   effectiveness. Effective followers have a few key components. First, they accept responsibility where appropriate.

36   Additionally, effective followers can provide respectful dissent, in the right context and at the right time. Lastly,

37   effective followers are part of positive change. When there is an effective follower with a strong leader, it creates an

38   intentional and synergistic relationship. A workplace that has effective followers can then create psychological

39   safety.

40   Dr. Amy Edmondson explains the concept of psychological safety in her book, The Fearless Organization.

41   She explains that a safe workplace allows for "interpersonal risks…constructive feedback, contradictory

42   opinion…"[iv] Once veterinarians have a psychologically safe work environment, they are better able to build

43   resilience in themselves and others. All in all, psychological safety and resilience create a safer and healthier

44   workplace.

45 Example: Error in the making

46   Next, we will utilize a clinical example to demonstrate the types of followers and their effect on workplace health.

47   But, first, we must have a shared understanding of the types of followers, and this presentation will rely on the types

48   defined by Dr. Robert Kelley his publication "In Praise of Followers." He defines five types of followers: sheep,

49   alienated followers, survivors, yes people and effective followers.[v] And this paper will use those types of followers

50   to work through the following example.

51   For our example, Dr. Seal is working a busy day in a small animal clinic and is on her next appointment, a

52   1-year-old female spayed labrador named Poppy. She needs three vaccines: rabies, distemper/parvo and Bordetella.

53   Dr. Seal draws up the three vaccines while the technicians are drawing blood on another patient. Dr. Seal put the

54   vaccine labels on her sleeve and is walking into the exam room when the technician joins her. In our example, our

55   technician will be each type of follower, and we will discuss in the context that Dr. Seal did not take the needle of

56   the Bordetella vaccine, and there is risk of injecting the intranasal vaccine.

57   First, Dr. Seal is accompanied by a sheep-type follower, who tends to operate in the passive, dependent

58   box. So, this technician may think that Dr. Seal is about to inject the intranasal vaccine, but they will not say

59   anything. This technician is unwilling to take the risk of telling Dr. Seal, and this will lead to frustration on Dr.

60   Seal's part, when she realizes what she has done. So, sheep-type followers erode trust, because those around them

61   have to second-guess their motivations. But the sheep will follow the leader wherever they go. In order to help sheep

62   grow into effective followers, their leaders should ask for feedback (and listen to it), pair them with someone with

63   strong initiative and give easy tasks with little instruction.

64   The next technician that accompanies Dr. Seal is a yes person, who operates in the active but uncritical

65   thinking box. So, this technician may take action, such as asking "Dr. Seal, are you sure you have the right vaccines

66   and labels?" And if Dr. Seal is open to the question, she may change her plan. But, if Dr. Seal says, in her hurry,

67   "yes," the technician will take no further action. The yes person can build false confidence in those around them, or

68   they may confirm something that they know is wrong. A leader to a yes person should encourage them to seek their

69   own answers to their questions. Additionally, the leader should ask for solutions and pair a yes person with a critical

70   thinking team member.

71   The third iteration of our example is a survivor-type follower. Survivors pose an interesting challenge

72   because they can easily move into any type of followership depending on the experiences they have had with that

73 leader (and possibly other leaders in the past). These staff members will do whatever they need to, to survive the

74 situation at hand. So, if this staff member has had experiences where they have been ignored, belittled or even

75 chastised for giving feedback, then they too will let me inject the intranasal vaccine. In order to shift a survivor to

76 become an effective follower, the leader must give appropriate praise, hold them to the task at hand and push them

77 to provide input. If they do not become an effective follower, the survivor with decrease team cohesion and create a

78 lack of reliability.

79 The fourth follower type has the most potential but is also the most dangerous. Alienated followers have

80 great potential. They are independent and critical thinkers, but they stay passive – meaning they won't take any

81 initiative. They have "suffered" weak or unkind leaders and have become negative and cynical. This staff member

82 may know for a fact that you failed to label the syringe and will watch as you inject the intranasal Bordetella

83 vaccine. And they often think they are justified in doing so, because of past treatment. They will blame the doctor's

84 inattentiveness or poor training. And they can bring others with them. Leaders must prevent alienated followers

85 within their teams by asking them for constructive feedback, giving them a chance to use their skills to benefit the

86 team. And just as important, the leader must listen to these alienated followers and then give them a big task with

87 little/no guidance.

88 Finally, the technician with Dr. Seal is an effective follower. The effective follower is one who thinks

89 independently and critically, so they likely noticed that I kept the needle on my intranasal vaccine. And this person

90 can take the initiative and risk to provide feedback. So, this staff member will quietly stop Dr. Seal before she walks

91 back into the exam room. The technician will tell Dr. Seal that with the needle on the intranasal Bordetella and

92 syringes not labeled, they fear I will inject the intranasal vaccine. As a result, the effective follower builds trust and

93 other team members follow them. When there is an effective follower in a team, leaders must listen to them and take

94 feedback, be vulnerable with them to allow growth and practice self-reflection.

95 # How to develop effective followership in self and others

96 Now that we understand the concept of effective followership and how it affects the workplace, it is vital to dig into

97 the development of effective followership in self and others. It is incredibly important to building effective

98 followership to be able to think critically – one must evaluate each and every situation and be willing to see possible

99   improvements or error prevention. Additionally, to become an effective follower one must think of themselves as equal

100 and unapologetic. To be clear, effective followers are not so arrogant to be unwilling to be subordinate or to

101 apologize, but they see themselves as on a level playing field with those around them and do not apologize for

102 providing dissent, constructive feedback or encouraging change. And a key to dissent and feedback is know when,

103 where and how. One cannot expect to have free reign to provide dissent at any time but instead must know what

104 circumstances are appropriate. Lastly, an effective follower is self-aware; they understand their own thoughts and

105 feelings and understand how they affect those around them.

106   In order to then develop those around them into effective followers, leaders and peers must be willing to

107 listen to feedback, but that does not always mean agreeing with the feedback. Furthermore, one must ensure that

108 peers hear feedback, which can be challenging. If a team member gives your peer feedback, you owe it to your team

109 to ensure the peers are open to and consider the feedback. Also, one must see where they fit in their organization or

110 team, because that means they can support others in their roles. And lastly, if one wants to build followership in

111 others, they must build trust. Lead the followership by example and show that your teammates can trust you.

112 The connection between effective followership, psychological safety and

113 resilience

114 Now that we have a shared understanding of psychological safety, resiliency and effective followership, we can

115 connect them to workplace health. A team of effective followers is able to give and receive feedback, so they trust

116 each other to help them prevent mistakes or respond to them appropriately. The trust this team feels creates a

117 foundation for psychological safety. The safe team environment means that fear of shame is decrease because

118 everyone knows the team will be there for them and the workplace is a safe and healthy place for all those involved.

119 That healthy team can weather some of the challenges to veterinary medicine mentioned above and they can grow

120 from challenges together.

121 Conclusions

122   In order to ensure veterinary medicine is a safe workplace and environment, veterinary professionals must talk about

123   challenges. And effective followership can create the psychological safety and resiliency needed to have those

124   conversations and lead to a safe workplace.

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