

SLIDE 1

So...my office building has an elevator with mirrors on three sides. I'll tell you a secret...sometimes, I take a selfie in there. How many of you have taken an elevator selfie? Be honest! You look good in an elevator. You're dressed up, the lighting's pretty good, it's got one of those "skinny" mirrors. But you only do it when you're alone, right? You wouldn't pull out your phone and take a selfie with 4 other people in the elevator. That would be weird! The presence of other people...and their opinions and attitudes and behaviours...influences your behaviour in ALL KINDS of everyday situations.

SLIDE 2 TITLE

Hello, my name is Dr. Jennifer Sperry, and I am RADICALLY unqualified to give you this talk. When you attend a talk about a medical or scientific topic, the speaker has some hefty CREDENTIALS! They're a specialist, or they have a PhD. They've published something in a peer-reviewed journal, or they've discovered something important...They're never just Dr. Joe, the friendly neighbourhood veterinarian here to tell you about advances in cancer therapy.

But when you attend a talk about business or HR, or hospital management, or if you listen to a podcast...the quality and credentials of the speakers are ALL OVER THE MAP. Their qualifications range from "wrote a book" to "managed a clinic for 20 years," to "professional speaker." You don't know if the information in the book is well supported. You don't know how happy the staff were at the 20-year-old clinic...you just know that the speaker has been given a platform. It's like network news! A lot of opinion, and editorial, and bias, and not always a lot of data.

SLIDE 3 BIO

So, my qualification is: I've spent a lot of time examining modern concepts in psychology, behavioural science, and motivation. And I'm an amateur. There's no diploma on my wall for this, I'm a standard-issue veterinarian, in a corporate role, looking for places where veterinary teams can put this research to use. But I'm examining these scientific findings and comparing them against the advice and strategies that are being proposed in many management talks...and the narratives often do not align...not even close! Much of the advice is commonly repeated, but not always evidence-based. Furthermore, much of the advice has lost relevance in today's post-covid hiring culture. So today, I want to make some connections for you between the world of people management, and the worlds of psychology, behavioural science, and linguistics, in order to come up with some solutions to tackle the problem of negativity and toxic teams in the veterinary workplace. So, thank-you for the platform, and I promise to share my resources.

SLIDE 4 TOXIC WORKPLACES

We've all been in a workplace, on a shift, or in a social environment that has been "toxic." Not chemically toxic, or biologically toxic, but attitudinally toxic. Negativity...pessimism...lack of motivation. Development of competitive, territorial, and adversarial relationships between team members. Complaining, gossiping, scapegoating. All of these behaviours represent a negative and toxic workplace that hampers productivity, increases employee turnover, and jeopardizes the professional reputation of your hospital.

SLIDE 5 SHRM 2019 STUDY

In a 2019 survey of over a thousand American adults, the Society for Human Resource Management discovered that one fifth of employees have left a job in the past five years due to toxic workplace culture, while nearly half of respondents had considered leaving their current job for that same reason (1). The report also estimated that the resulting turnover alone had cost US organizations more than \$223 billion in revenue over the previous 5 years.

Staff in organizations with a negative culture are less happy, less motivated, and less productive (2).

Additionally, when a negative workplace culture is perceived by clients, it may damage the reputation of the business (3), and therefore corrode client confidence in your team's skills and expertise, and your commitment to their pets.

SLIDE 6 CAUSES OF WORKPLACE TOXICITY

Causes

So what causes a toxic workplace?

Many factors have been proposed as the cause, or cultivating elements of a negative or toxic workplace culture. In particular, factors that decrease an employee's sense of connectedness, security, competence, and autonomy can lead to a negative mindset.

Factors that decrease connectedness include poor communication within an organization, employee focus on individual career success rather than team success, and also isolation of teams, functions, or individuals in the workplace (4).

Next, factors that promote insecurity and decrease a sense of competence, include feedback/criticism that only flows in a downstream direction, feedback that focuses on mistakes more than achievements, rapid changes in work environment, lack of direction and resources to perform tasks, and inconsistent or unpredictable rules, policies and procedures. (4, 5)

And finally factors that decrease autonomy can include rigid rules and policies that override common sense or context; oppressive or abusive leadership, and lack of organizational support to collaborate or present innovative ideas. (4, 5)

Although workplace toxicity decreases productivity and team success, it is not just a leadership problem...it is an everyone problem. Staff take their stress and mental health insults home with them, damaging personal relationships and physical health, and contributing to burnout (6). Clients and pets suffer when staff members are distracted or demotivated by toxic clinic environments.

Often employees or managers will consider one or two people as the source of toxicity...but all team members, and the entire organization are susceptible to negativity and responsible for its development. And all employees are responsible for finding and supporting solutions.

SLIDE 7 HOW NEGATIVITY SPREADS

How negativity spreads:

Psychological studies have shown that when people are exposed to even a single incident of low-intensity negative behaviour in others, something like rudeness for example, that exposure activates

cognitive processes in the brain associated with negativity, and it makes them more likely to notice and mirror those behaviours. (7) The researchers referred to this phenomenon as “Rude colored glasses.”

One of my favourite papers about positive and negative emotions was a 2010 study that looked at “contented” and “discontented” feelings as if they were infectious diseases. They used standard epidemiological math to measure how contented and discontented states spread between people. They demonstrated that negative emotions are indeed infectious. And, while positive emotions are also infectious, negative emotions are transmissible at double the rate! The same study demonstrated that people “infected” with negative emotions are more likely to be isolated. But there is good news! An infection with positivity lasted much longer than an infection with negativity (8). So the application here is that...while we may have to work harder and be more intentional to spread positivity, the payoff is greater.

Positivity and resilience

“Resilience” is the ability of a person or a team to withstand challenges and recover from disappointments, while maintaining an ability to function and even thrive. Positive teams are more resilient, and resilient teams are better at maintaining their positivity. Resilience helps to protect against stress and burnout (9, 10). This means that if you invest in cultivating positivity in your team, they will be better equipped to face that bad yelp review, that nail-biting surgery, or that co-worker’s bad day, and remain positive, productive, and engaged.

Before I move on to talk about how to build positivity in your team, I want to talk about some failed strategies.

SLIDE 8 FAILED STRATEGIES

Who among you has pulled an individual team member aside to have a talk about their bullying, gossiping, or pessimism?

-or-

Who has had this staff meeting: “Guys, I know the past few months have been stressful, but we’re getting into that trap of bad moods and negative behaviour again. It’s really affecting our ability to do good work. We need to try harder to be kind to each other, stay positive, and work as a team.

Did it work?

What tools did you give your team to improve?

The seed idea for this talk came to me when I was listening to a management podcast for human hospitals--or as the humans call them...hospitals—and that podcast was discussing how to deal with toxic team members. The problem they were examining was that you can’t simply fire toxic team members to solve your morale problems...at least not in this hiring crisis. It’s become more important to maintain adequate staffing than it is to maintain morale. And I’m not disputing that. Qualified staff are impossible to find. But the solution they proposed was to find “non-dismissal” punishments like demotion, reduced schedule flexibility and withdrawal of other job perks to motivate employees to change.

What I want to propose that you can’t fight negativity with negativity.

Just like aversive dog training strategies do not create a calm, confident, and well-behaved dog; punishments do not cultivate positive, motivated employees. Yes...your co-workers' intellect is a little more complex than that of a pug; however, I think we can all agree that the "fancy" parts of our brains are not always involved when we're pulling out our bad behaviour.

Interestingly traditional *rewards* and incentives are not always enough to successfully change bad behaviour either. Psychological studies have shown that rewards need to be carefully designed, and need to support an employee's perception that they are doing meaningful work, in order to be effective. In some cases, rewards have actually been shown to have a negative effect on the conduct of people who exhibited the desired behaviour all along (11,12).

Additionally, reparative measures like staff yoga, massages, and foosball tables intended to mitigate stress and improve engagement do not have significant impacts on overall morale when they are not offered with other tools to build resilience (13).

Rewards, punishments, and reparative measures are all forms of *extrinsic* motivation. Studies have shown that *intrinsic* motivation – motivation that emanates from within an individual – is far more effective for creating behaviour change, generating happiness, and improving productivity. Employees chase significance within their organizations more so than they chase rewards (13). So let's talk about building intrinsic motivation through positivity.

SLIDE 9 SELF DETERMINATION THEORY

Self Determination Theory is an argument in psychology that proposes that intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation. It asserts that people are more motivated, happier, and more productive when they are provided with a sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competence (14). Not only do motivated people create a great work environment, but they work harder, and get more done.

SLIDE 10 TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

First, make sure you are giving your team the tools they need to succeed. I'm not talking about sharp dental elevators or "the good vetwrap." What I mean is genuine trust in their competence, bi-directional feedback (up and down the chain), and a safe platform to participate, discuss issues, provide solutions, and share ideas.

I saw an article on a website for a veterinary business consultant. It was called "Does your veterinary team know what they cost?" Not what they're *worth*...what they *cost*. And the gist of the article was that, whenever a team member was problematic, or whenever they asked for more resources, management should educate them on what it costs to employ them...you know, over and above their salary. Things like taxes, benefits, insurance, etc. So you're gonna come to me, your manager, to tell me you need something, and I'm going to respond by telling you what a liability you are. <<cringe>>. That's not a safe platform. Not all information has the same value to all audiences. It's like...going to the beach and knowing *precisely* what the backs of your thighs look like in that moment. Nothing good can come from having that information in that context!! It has no power to motivated or change behaviour in a positive direction.

Here's what does, according to Self Determination Theory:

SLIDE 11 FOSTER A TEAM ATTITUDE

Foster a Team Attitude

Foster a team attitude. Do it during meetings and staff events, but also (and especially) when it's business as usual. Too often, competitive, territorial, or adversarial relationships develop among clinic staff and interfere with their ability to work as a team. True teamwork can't be advised or coerced. You can't tell a seed to grow, and you can't tell a group of people to work as a team. You need to provide the right nourishment. These relationships need to be built with intent, practiced, and maintained.

People have a deep psychological need for connectedness, acceptance and belonging (15). A feeling of belonging is a powerful force for shaping human behaviour (15, 16). Sports teams, gyms, luxury brands, and MLM sales companies all use this psychological tool to attract and motivate both customers and staff. "You belong with us." Say it, and mean it. Let your actions demonstrate it.

You can never eliminate the challenge of personalities that just don't mesh. But fostering a team attitude can build a feeling of belonging that can soften the impact of negative interpersonal relationships. And it can focus your team on common goals.

Teams members need to trust each other in order to communicate effectively, to feel safe providing feedback and presenting ideas, and also to function efficiently every day (17). Team building activities give people the opportunity to bond in a non-work capacity, understand co-worker's perspectives, and build rapport.

So, learn together! Send team members to CE in pairs! Or, get out of the clinic to have a little fun together regularly throughout the year. Once you've had a chance to relax and shake off the residual tension of the workplace, work on connecting on a more personal level.

A great team-bonding activity that I learned of (on a podcast...okay...so not all of my resources are academic) was the Hero, Hardship, Highlight exercise used by Jon Gordon to build trust among team athletes. In this exercise, the team enforces that "what happens in Vegas" rule, and discusses who their heroes are, and why; they tell the story of a hardship they've experienced; and they talk about one of the highlights of their life. The goal of this exercise is to build trust, and to orient team members towards supporting and improving each other to work towards a common goal.

SLIDE 12 FOSTER A TEAM ATTITUDE #2

Back in the clinic, pair different team members together for work. Separate cliques...not all the time-- friends at work are important—but at routine intervals. Recognize when people are being "outsiders" and pull them into group projects or special initiatives. Solve problems and make decisions as a group. For example, when creating clinic protocols, include all team members so that everyone feels a sense of control and ownership in the decisions.

Be cautious with staff meetings. They sometimes devolve into "airing of the grievances" instead of focusing on encouragement and problem-solving. As we discussed earlier, negative feedback like complaints, criticism or penalties have a negative impact on motivation (18). Also, careless criticism can decrease a person's feeling of belonging. If you must address problems with a team member, do so privately. Schedule one-on-one meetings between team members and management *regularly*, and not just when there are performance or interpersonal concerns, so that you can discuss ideas, solutions, and other positive input....

Teamwork does not mean that team members can never share criticism or point out problems. An effective team holds members accountable for their work. But when criticisms are made, they should be done in a positive and encouraging way. “How can I help you master this?” A complaint should not be expressed without the support of education or the proposal of a solution. Criticism should be received with the gratitude of a “make me better” mindset, rather than with offense. All team members should pledge to this at the outset of any project or team-building exercise.

When recruiting and hiring new team members, consider hiring the best person for the team, rather than the best person for the job. A highly skilled or talented candidate may not improve your hospital’s productivity or reputation if they bring a negative attitude that disrupts your team.

SLIDE 13 PARTICIPATION, OWNERSHIP, AUTONOMY

Participation, Ownership and Autonomy

On Facebook...the happiest place on earth...I follow this group called “As a Vet Tech I am Horrified.” As the name suggests, it is not all about spreading positivity. Techs go on there to vent, and what they’re often expressing is that they don’t feel valued and respected in their roles. Techs who are happy in their jobs will often refer to the team they work with as a “Unicorn Clinic.” Imagine...feeling valued and respected as a tech is so *rare* and mythical that we compare it to a unicorn.

Recognize the strengths and aptitudes of each team member. If you need input, consider getting other staff members to list the top three strengths of each of their co-workers. Encourage each person to participate where they’re most valuable. This will demonstrate how much you value team members and respect their talents and input! Participation creates a sense of ownership in clinic success. When a person participates in solving problems, developing protocols, and creating culture, they feel a sense of autonomy...they feel in control of their own destiny, and in turn, they will experience more intrinsic motivation, exert more effort, and they will be happier at work.

Participation, ownership, and autonomy are nourished by communication, trust, training, and internal growth and advancement opportunities (13).

SLIDE 14 POWER OF POSITIVITY

Power of Positivity (Recognizing accomplishments)

In my area, during the pandemic, we had very strict capacity limits for public spaces. As a result, my local grocery store designated one of their inventory guys to be the “grocery store bouncer.” He was posted outside, and he managed the line and kept track of the store occupancy. As you can imagine, standing in a 6-foot spaced line outside of the grocery store in Canada in November was not a pleasant experience for most people. And probably not for him either. But this guy had such an innate ability to harness the power of positivity, that he kept everyone smiling. He is one of those magical people. He greeted everyone vibrantly. He found a unique and specific compliment for each patron. He engaged with even the crankiest people, and lead a remarkably light-hearted conversation under tense circumstances. I joked that Food Basics had become “Guelph’s Hottest Club” during the pandemic, and honestly, because of this person, grocery shopping was one of the highlights of my quarantine weeks.

As part of building your team and promoting participation and autonomy, you have already sussed out the strengths and aptitudes of all of your team members. Now you need to celebrate that. It has been

shown that unexpected positive feedback has a very beneficial impact on motivation (19), so in the course of a busy day, compliment team members on their achievements, and encourage every employee to do the same. This is contagious behaviour, but like anything, it requires practice before it starts to feel natural. If on-the-fly compliments feel forced, or syrupy at first, start by introducing a “shout-out” agenda item in staff meetings. During this segment, any staff member can draw attention to the contributions of a co-worker. Not only does this foster a feeling of belonging, but it also reinforces each team member’s confidence in their skills and value, combating things like self-doubt, and supporting buy-in to the clinic’s culture, objectives, and policies.

Vocally preach the value of your nursing staff and the care they provide. Your clients will begin to see the expertise in the behind-the-scenes work technicians do. This will expose these team members to the positive client feedback that often just gets directed at the veterinarians. Calling out your technicians’ skills will improve client understanding and acceptance of nursing-related fees while also boosting the confidence and professional satisfaction of these indispensable colleagues.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of recognizing skills and accomplishments and building up staff members at every level. Self-doubt is a very loud voice that leads to hesitation, inefficiency, weak communication, and negative behaviours. It takes a consistent and positive external reassurance to overcome this. Sometimes, you have to compliment the staff you do have, in order to uncover the collaborative superstars you’ve always dreamed of.

SLIDE 15 – LINGUISTICS AND POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Linguistics and Positive Self-Talk

The words that we use have a significant impact on both the message we send, and the way we feel when we send it (20, 21).

Imagine you’re on an airplane, and the flight attendant makes this announcement:

“We are pleased to welcome the talented Captain Baker on board for her first flight as a member of the ABC airlines team!”

Now imagine the flight attendant simply drops this:

“The pilot is a new hire.”

The core bit of information is the same, but the message received by passengers is very different. The words we choose can not only affect the message our clients receive, but it can influence *our own perception* of the subject matter.

Be on the lookout for negative language habits in your clinic and client communications. In particular, look for language habits that decrease the value of team members or services. “I’m *just* the receptionist.” “You’ll *only* be seeing the technician today.” “Dr. Gold is a new grad.” “It’s a *simple* spay procedure.”

Work as a team to choose more powerful alternatives that endorse the value of your staff and their skills. Recognize people as they adopt the linguistic changes. This can reinforce both staff and client perception of the value of the work, making it feel more meaningful, and reinforcing staff members’

feeling of significance within the team. This is subtle positive feedback that gives people the sense of knowledgeability, connectedness, and value that they need to stay positive.

In a similar vein, introduce team members to the concept of positive self-talk. Not only should they compliment others, but they should train themselves to see their own strengths and achievements.

For example:

If a client opts to euthanize their diabetic cat because they can't physically manage daily injections, it's easy for veterinarians to tell themselves they've failed. With that, they become demotivated, and they lose confidence, not only in their clients, but in their own ability to communicate value and get the job done.

But if veterinarians tell themselves that they did a great job meeting a client where they were; they did a great job crafting a compassionate plan with both the pet and the client's welfare in mind; they will build their own confidence and celebrate their own skills. Whenever they recommend a service, they educate the client about the power, value, and cost of veterinary science. If a service is declined, it represents a valuable option offered. Any steps taken after a service is declined represents the veterinary team's flexibility and innovation and ability to heal patients with limited resources.

Client behaviour and patient outcomes can be difficult to control. But with practice, the way we, as veterinarians, react emotionally to external stimuli can be trained to change. When we are working within a positive team, and have a positive mindset, we can be more resilient to negative experiences served up by outside influences like client behaviour, co-worker behaviour, patient outcomes, and other inherent job stresses.

SLIDE 16 PRACTICE MAINTENANCE AND REINFORCEMENT

Practice, Maintenance, and Reinforcement

Now...I know what happens after conferences. People get all gung-ho about some new concept, and it's all they can talk about for 3 weeks. It's going to be the next big thing. But gradually and inevitably, the enthusiasm wanes. Challenges are encountered, and people get discouraged.

Building and maintaining healthy, positive teams is hard, and it takes time. It requires a lot of effort up front. It requires intentional exercise and practice. Monitoring, check-ins and maintenance. Before you even plan that first Team-Bonding event, you need to outline a plan for how you're going to keep the momentum going. Write. It. Down.

Designate a leader in your clinic for culture and teamwork, and dedicate a weekly number of hours for that person to spend on these initiatives. Identify the daily, weekly, and monthly activities and objectives for your cultural overhaul. Decide how you're going to monitor your progress. Schedule time for regular team events, staff education, and follow-ups.

Design daily two-minute positivity exercises that each team member should perform such as reflecting on a personal strength, acknowledging another team member's work, providing positive feedback, teaching a co-worker something new, or participating in a clinic initiative. And set aside a static part of all of your staff meetings and one-on-one's for positive feedback and team participation.

SLIDE 17 CONCLUSION

Colleagues, thank-you for you for giving me your time and attention today. You all do amazing work every day to change the lives of pets and their owners. I encourage you to adapt the information from this presentation to change the daily work lives of yourself, and your talented colleagues.