



Creating the Healthy Workplace

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The truth is, we spend much of our life at work, doing our job. The satisfaction we gain from that job determines in large part our level of satisfaction in life in general. Job satisfaction has many aspects, including the overall environment, the tasks we are required to perform, and the support of the team around us. Patricia Smith of the *Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project* has developed eight “laws” for creating a healthy workplace. Whether you are in management and can effect these changes directly, or are part of the floor staff that can help your team develop a healthy workplace together, these laws are important guiding lights for how we practice veterinary medicine.

Eight Laws Governing A Healthy Workplace

1. Provide a respite for the team.

Every team member needs to be given a break or “respite” from

the work, both in small and large increments. This takes the form of a scheduled and actually *taken* lunch period and periodic short breaks, as well as a day off or extended vacation now and again. No matter the length, this respite needs to provide an actual detachment from the work. During short breaks, this does not mean sitting in the break room only to be called away by the intercom and back to work. Take lunch outside, or take a walk around the block after eating. Listen to music privately, or indulge in a good book. Actually escape from the workplace for at least a short time. For longer time away, release your worries and do not let thoughts of work interrupt or interfere with your escape. You will return much more refreshed!

2. Provide continuing education for team.

We usually focus on continuing education (CE) as a way to educate our team about information they need in able to perform their job, for the benefit of the practice. Yet an employee also gains personal satisfaction from the process of learning something new, and being able to implement positive changes in the practice. Ensure everyone on the team has a CE allotment, including the front office. If cost is an issue, work with the team to develop in-house talks performed by the employee who has an interest in a particular topic. Outside the workplace, be on the lookout for CE opportunities to pass along, both those recommended by management and those that the employee may be interested in personally attending. Especially if the practice offers financial support for CE, ensure that the employee is held accountable for bringing back information and sharing it with the rest of the team.

3. Provide acceptable benefits to aid staff in practicing beneficial self care.

Typically this takes the shape of health insurance benefits, whether or not the practice pays a portion. Health insurance companies can also offer education regarding ergonomics,

smoking cessation, and more. This law can also involve mental health services, including an employee assistance program (EAP). An EAP provides free counseling sessions to eligible employees who may self refer or be encouraged to seek help for a personal issue that is affecting job performance. There are other shapes this law can take, such as partnering with a nearby gym or fitness center for reduced rates or supplemented membership. Of course the old adage is true, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. You can provide these resources, but it's up to the employee to take advantage of them. But at least they have the option, and the practice shows their care and concern for employee well-being.

4. Provide management and team with tools to accomplish their tasks.

This may sound like common sense, but it's not uncommon to expect great results without providing the tools necessary. These tools may be equipment or supplies, which are obvious. Often more important and not as obvious is the allotment of time needed to do the task, or the authority with which the person needs to get it done. Perhaps training is the missing link standing in the way of success. "Tools" can be anything and indeed everything that an employee needs to get a job done, and this can take many shapes. The best plan is to ask the employee what they need to perform the task at hand.

5. Provide direct management to monitor workloads.

Every person on the team is busy, and typically each one handles a large workload. Sometimes there is no one person in management that directly knows the workload of each person. This occurs when management gets more removed from the team, such as when the team size grows, the management tasks multiply, or the employees specialize in certain positions. This is where middle managers are so vital. These supervisors—lead techs, head receptionists, senior assistants, etc.—still maintain

direct contact with the group of employees that perform a specific job, they understand the job itself, and they have a smaller number of people to monitor. Consistent and frequent review of each person's workload is best.

6. Provide positive, team-building activities to promote strong social relationships between colleagues.

Everyone groans when “team building activities” are mentioned at a staff meeting, but they can be fun, challenging, and insightful. When introduced as a “game”, many employees find themselves enjoying the activity despite themselves. Discover those exercises that would appeal most to your employees, and be sure to discuss the results and how they apply to the big picture of working together once the fun has ended. There are many resources online and in management books to offer suggestions as to appropriate team activities and how they should be introduced and performed.

7. Encourage “open door” policies to promote good communication between team members.

“Open door” policies are all the rage right now, and for good reason. Management should not be hiding behind a closed door, but instead maintain an open and responsive presence in the practice. If employees fear going to management with an issue, the issue will only continue to grow and fester. However don't always count on employees making the first move. Periodically check in with each employee, follow up any incidents that need further investigation, and provide a protocol for making suggestions in an open, or anonymous, manner.

8. Have grief processes in place when traumatic events occur onsite.

This is perhaps the most vital piece that is missing in veterinary practice. In other care giving professions, for example human

medicine, employees are debriefed after dealing with an emotional or traumatic scenario such as patient death. In truth, we are the only profession that must go from one room attending to the euthanasia of a dear family friend, to smiling at a new client in the exam room next door. This takes an emotional toll on us, particularly if there is no outlet for discussing how we feel about the situation. It is believed that it is important to debrief with someone who understands the job within the first 72 hours after the event. Waiting until the next staff meeting is not fast enough. Employees keeping it quiet should not be encouraged. Instead we must learn to trust each other with our emotions and share the reality that is our job.

It's easy enough to charge the practice owner and the management or leadership team with the responsibility for creating a healthy workplace. Indeed, some of these suggestions such as offering health insurance is a decision for the "higher" management. However the employees can suggest, initiate, and weigh in on all of these concepts. Express your ideas or feelings to management, and for those in management, take these suggestions seriously and do not shoot them down without further consideration. Only by working together can we truly create practices that are healthy for our patients, and also healthy for the employees inside!

Resources:

Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project at www.compassionfatigue.org, Patricia Smith

Patricia Smith is a certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist with 20 years of training experience. As founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project© (www.compassionfatigue.org), the outreach division of Healthy Caregiving, LLC, she writes, speaks and facilitates workshops nationwide in service of those who care for others. She has authored several books including To Weep for a Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving, which is available at www.healthycaregiving.com or Amazon.com.