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The 6 C's of the Practice Family



Caring

Collaboration

Curiosity

Celebration

Comfort

Clowning Around

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In her article “Embracing Change: Is Yours a Female-Friendly Practice?” (*EVT*, September 2009), Micaela Shaughnessy focuses on the concerns surrounding the childbearing years of young female veterinarians. How can these associate veterinarians and their employers develop a healthy and prosperous workplace and still acknowledge the special needs of young mothers? Flexible scheduling, childcare strategies, and maternity leave are among the issues addressed.

Using these important concerns as a beginning, we can broaden our definition of “friendliness” in veterinary practices to include all members of the practice team: men and women, young and old, staff members with and without children, and those new to the profession as well as seasoned veterans. These staff members’ families, our clients, and pets belonging to both make up our extended practice family.

Family Dynamics

In veterinary practice, relationship-centered care for patients and clients is provided as a team. Staff members depend on each other to do their part. According to organizational experts Bellman and Ryan, one indicator of extraordinary groups is the development of strong relationships characterized by trust, mutual respect, and friendship. When practice culture promotes behaviors that support these relationships, the climate of a practice can begin to feel like family. With “family dynamics” in place, a natural conduit is created for the flow of ideas, emotions, and feelings between our professional and personal lives.

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Some would question whether this invitation to bring problems from home into the workplace, and vice versa, is a good idea. Traditionally, we were expected to check our feelings at the door; the reality is that our lives are not that simple. Recognizing the family nature of workplace teams allows us to apply the strengths of a family-type relationship to the delivery of health care. The return on the investment in learning family-friendly behaviors takes the form of dollars flowing to the bottom line, professional gratification, and personal happiness.

“Family” Redefined

Webster defines “family” as a *social group of people with common lineage and/or interests*. The family has a responsibility to socialize its members, supporting and teaching them to become familiar and comfortable with the group’s culture.

Does this sound reminiscent of a practice team? How about each time we welcome a new client into our practice family? And if we believe in the human-animal bond, does “family” include our own pets and those of our clients?

A family feel within a practice can bond team members and clients for the long term and inspire team members toward new heights in performance.

A New Grading System

Traditionally, straight A’s have been associated with superior performance and success. I propose a grading system, one in which we strive for all C’s. If we make the grade, we will be well on our way to a family-friendly approach to practice life.

Caring: When asked what a family-friendly practice culture feels like, one word leaps to mind: *caring*. Sincere comments that affirm and convey concern go a long way in showing someone you care.

- “Thanks so much for picking me up for work today. There was no way I could get my car out of the driveway in this snowstorm!”
- “Is your baby feeling better? I know you’ve been really concerned and losing sleep with her illness.”
- “Why don’t you let me work for you tomorrow? I know how much you’ve been looking forward to watching your son’s school Christmas program.”
- “Thanks for making the coffee. It smells so good on a cold morning, and I can really use the boost!”

Practice owners can show they care by prioritizing health care for employees’ own pets. In this way employers support a caring practice culture and reinforce the importance of the human-animal bond.

Collaboration: Working together to address practice challenges, plan equipment purchases, and decide on service improvements is a way to strengthen relationships at work. When different viewpoints are welcomed and seriously considered, staff members get the sense that their input is meaningful. Follow-up plans can then be made that hold the entire team accountable.

Curiosity: Do you find yourself wishing that someone at work would ask you about how your weekend went, or how that special dinner you planned turned out? Do you in turn wonder about the outcome of a coworker’s surgery? Goleman describes “curiosity” as one of the seven key ingredients contributing to learning readiness.¹ In learning about what is important in our coworkers’ daily lives, interpersonal relationships at work grow and become more family-like. Curiosity is the first step toward empathy, the “awareness of others’ feelings, needs, and concerns.”² Asking a question about something a coworker or client mentioned earlier tells that person you listened and that you are interested in his or her ideas, activities, and well-being.

Celebration: People feel cared about when personal accomplishments and milestones are recognized. Celebrating team members’ birthdays can make each individual feel special, but take care that each person is honored equally and predictably. Group celebration of holidays presents opportunities for employees to get away from the work environment and build stronger personal relationships.

Comfort: With as many hours as we spend at work, it is important that the hospital feels comfortable and accommodating. Places to hang coats, secure valuables, and store snacks contribute to a sense of belonging. The smell of hot coffee or cider on a cold winter day welcomes staff members, and forecasts a bit of comfort amid the busyness of work. Camaraderie results from the recognition of common needs and in knowing that each member has a place.

Clowning Around: Because of the nature of our work, veterinary professionals can tend to take ourselves a bit too seriously. Sometimes we just need to laugh. Finding humor in everyday activities or sharing personal stories as part of regular staff meetings can lighten the load and bond staff members and clients together, feeling more like family.

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See the
6 C’s Checklist
on page 20.

Emotions
drive people
and people drive
performance

Conclusion

As veterinarians and support staff, we are selected and trained to be scientific and businesslike. Our tendency is to categorize people and events in order to make sense of our world. With straight lines, columns, and “black and white” thinking, comes clarity and simplicity, right? There’s only one problem: That does not describe real life. Practices that allow—even encourage—feelings and emotions, including those related to personal family life, to blend into life at work are stronger and more durable. This results in a healthier bottom line, enhanced job performance, and a decrease in employee turnover. Emotions drive people, and people drive performance.

There are no guarantees that a practice team will stay together forever. There is often sadness as we watch coworkers move on, feeling grief at the apparent end of close relationships. Is it better to keep our distance to protect ourselves against the

hurt, or should we fully engage and enjoy the ride while we are together? Many stories of daily emails and reunions tell us that relationships built while in practice together, can endure.

Attaining all C’s is hard work. It starts with the choice to build relationships, and to strive for a whole and balanced life. A family-friendly practice is a great place to work!

References

1. *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman D. Bantam, 1995, pp 193-194.
2. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman D. Bantam, 1998, p 27.

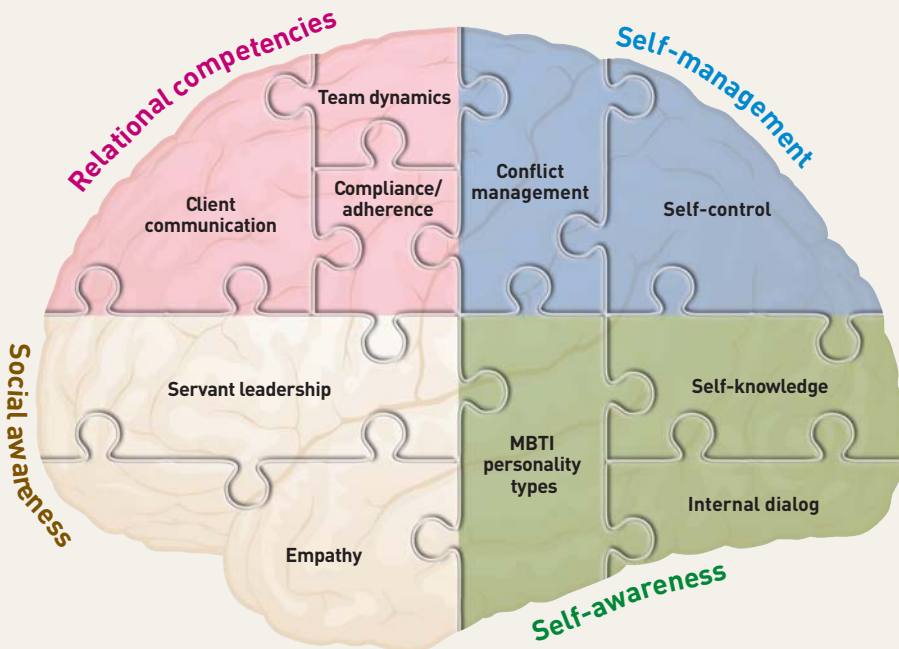
Suggested Reading

- At the Heart of Leadership*. Freedman J. Six Seconds, 2007.
- Extraordinary Groups*. Gellman G, Ryan K. Jossey-Bass, 2009.
- Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy and Commitment*. Thomas KW. Berret-Koehler, 2002.
- The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey SR. Simon and Schuster, 1989.
- The Congruent Life*. Thompson, CM. Jossey-Bass, 2000.

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Skillsets addressed in this article: relational competencies; social awareness

EVT Skillsets Guide



The skillset graphic is separated into the 4 quadrants of emotional intelligence: **self-awareness** and **self-management**, which relate to the level of understanding of one’s own traits, feelings, and behaviors; and **social awareness** and **relational competencies**, which deal with how we relate to others. The quadrants are further divided into the elements they encompass. The “skillsets addressed in this article” information included in each feature’s footer will help remind you to think about how to integrate the principles to improve how you work as an individual and as a team.

6 C's of the Practice Family Checklist

One indicator of extraordinary groups is the development of strong relationships characterized by trust, mutual respect, and friendship. Recognizing the family nature of workplace teams allows us to apply the strengths of a family-type relationship to the delivery of health care. The return on the investment in learning family-friendly behaviors takes the form of dollars flowing to the bottom line, professional gratification, and personal happiness.

Caring

- Can you count on a “yes,” at least in spirit, when you ask a coworker to cover one of your shifts so you can care for a sick child?
- Does the benefits package offered in your practice include options for coverage of medical and child care expenses? And how about paid time off for sick, maternity, and paternity leave?
- Are staff members supported when their own pets are euthanized in the form of sympathy cards signed by coworkers and/or discounted cremation services?
- Do we express genuine concern about each other's families, their celebrations (birthdays, graduations, weddings, and births), and challenges (loss of elderly parents, divorce, and illnesses), without compromising the focus on patient and client care?
- Do staff members refrain from making judgmental comments, and instead compliment coworkers behind their backs?
- Do staff members help each other in the event of transportation difficulties, such as snowstorms and flat tires?

Collaboration

- Do we work together to plan vacations in consideration of school holidays?
- Do staff meetings support dialogue and shared responsibility?
- Are diverse viewpoints encouraged?
- Do we work together to troubleshoot equipment failures?

Curiosity

- Do staff members, including the boss, ask questions about each other's well-being? (“How did your test go?” “Is the baby feeling better today?” “How is your mom doing?”)
- Do we ask about the client's other pets during one pet's visit?
- During an office call, do we ask the client's children about their day or activities?
- Do we ask to see pictures of family members? Pets?



Celebration

- Are special occasions celebrated (staff birthdays, graduations, births, and weddings)?
- Are these milestones celebrated equally and predictably so that no one feels left out or devalued?
- Are there opportunities for staff members to participate in community activities and charitable events that draw the focus away from “self” toward something bigger?
- Are patients' birthdays recognized?
- Are “perfect” pet wellness exams honored with an award?

Comfort

- Does the practice “lounge” area have the capacity for hot coffee, tea, and hot chocolate on a cold winter day? How about a place to sit and enjoy that nice warm beverage while on a break or during lunch?
- Is there a place to hang coats and safely store purses and other personal belongings?
- Do employees have a work “space” where they are comfortable?

Clowning Around

- Do staff members bring treats to work, for no particular reason other than to contribute good eats, fun, and a part of themselves?
- Are ideas solicited in planning practice holiday celebrations?
- Do staff members feel free to laugh and find humor in daily work activities?
- Do employees join in laughter with clients?

Download this checklist at myEVT.com/handouts