



## Negative Employees Are Hurting Our Practice

Dear Dr. Ruby,

I've learned a lot from EVT since recently becoming a DVM. I could use your advice now...

I work in a clinic with some employees who are angry, bitter, unproductive, and downright rude. I've brought this to the attention of the management and pleaded for the company to hire a professional to help us get to the bottom of this bad behavior. I've been told that these employees are essentially untouchable because of their age. I've also been told that we'd never be able to find replacements because of the low pay of the position.

I've been unsuccessful in trying to talk with these people on my own. Where do I go from here? I know my time is limited at this clinic—I just need some guidance to help me while I look for another job. I want to make sure that the company realizes I made an earnest effort before giving up.

### Dear New Doctor,

First of all, this is a global practice issue, not merely the result of a few employees who have decided it's acceptable to misbehave. Unfortunately, by not addressing this problem, it becomes bigger and more destructive.

Let's examine the bigger dilemma in your situation and then we'll talk about ways you might still intervene.

The culture of the practice, and the resulting environment, *has been left to define itself*. It is important to understand that the law of entropy, or the inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or an organization, applies to veterinary practices.

If leadership does not actively seek to build, nurture, and develop a beneficial practice culture, it will not happen. People, when left in a vacuum, develop

poor work habits, negative attitudes, and destructive behaviors. Without a team consensus of acceptable behaviors, a practice culture deteriorates, and a few negative individuals can *hold the rest of you hostage* to their poor behavior. In the same way health deteriorates if preventive action is not taken, the health of a medical

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team deteriorates through neglect. Sadly, the manager sounds as though she has just thrown up her hands.

### Laissez-Faire Leadership

This style of leadership, called *laissez-faire*, is typified by a leader who lets the

office environment and work team develop as they will, based on the philosophy that people know what to do, and if left alone, will do it well. This can work if a strong positive vision has been embedded into the culture so everyone has a clear sense of how to self-manage and fulfill expectations.

Unfortunately, it often is used by leaders who can't or won't make the effort to build a healthy team. Your manager, by sharing excuses (untouchable because of age; irreplaceable because of low salaries), is taking the "victim" role, saying, "I have no power to manage my employees or to impact the way this practice runs."

Victim mentality pervades the management realm; many managers who don't know how to make things better abdicate responsibility. Unfortunately, this creates a negative cascade of difficulties, such as new associates leaving in frustration, new employees becoming indoctrinated with a negative attitude, and a general disintegration of both the quality of service and the quality of care.

The argument that these employees come "cheaper" and therefore can't be replaced is a poor business model to embrace. How do we gauge the dollars spent hiring and training employees and veterinarians who then flee a toxic work environment? How do we justify the dollars that leave the practice because clients go elsewhere? How do we measure the impact of stress on the staff as this type of behavior is allowed to continue unchecked?

Laissez-faire leadership can cost a practice untold dollars. Managers and leaders owe it to their practice, their colleagues, their clients, and their patients to address, thoughtfully and consistently, poor and destructive behavior in the employee group. Practice health depends on it.

This points out the importance of skilled and proactive leadership, as well as consistent coaching and follow-up of troubled or ineffective employees. *Just as we can't "fix" a long-neglected patient overnight, this type of management culture can't be rectified immediately.*

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## Blueprint for Change

If this manager truly wanted to improve the situation you describe, she would:

- ✓ Call a team meeting to lay out expected behavioral guidelines in your practice, letting people know that these expectations will now become the bar against which performance will be evaluated.
- ✓ Talk to each person individually to develop an initial evaluation.
- ✓ Coach each individual on areas of improvement needed. *Areas of strength should also be discussed and noted.*
- ✓ Work with each person to determine how these areas will be monitored and measured. *The employee must be helped to understand that destructive or negative behaviors must be addressed, and be apprised of the consequences that will occur should the changes not happen.*
- ✓ Set a timeframe for reevaluation (3 to 6 months).
- ✓ Hold brief weekly coaching meetings to review progress and set new goals when needed.
- ✓ Document and initial the process weekly.

In this way, a roadmap for necessary change is defined, set, and monitored. Difficult employees, who may not be aware their behavior is destructive, are brought to the realization that what has been tolerated must change or a job will be lost. This puts the responsibility where it belongs: on the shoulders of the difficult employee.

## Action Plan

As a new associate, it appears you don't have the power to change the culture or instill the impetus for change in these employees. Working with your manager, the person in charge of the office climate and employee retention, is imperative. Since this is THE most important job the manager holds, I would hope that you could enlist your partners in asking for this issue to become her top priority.

**Is it possible to present a suggested action plan to your partners, and to ask for their support in putting this issue forward to your manager?**

As a new associate, it is important for you to remain both positive and proactive. Approaching this issue empathetically and assertively, with helpful ideas in hand, will demonstrate your value as a team member.

If, after all of this attention, the practice leaders appear unwilling to address this issue, you will have to face that the practice is not a good match for you and seek a more compatible work environment.

Good luck bringing these new ideas to your managers!

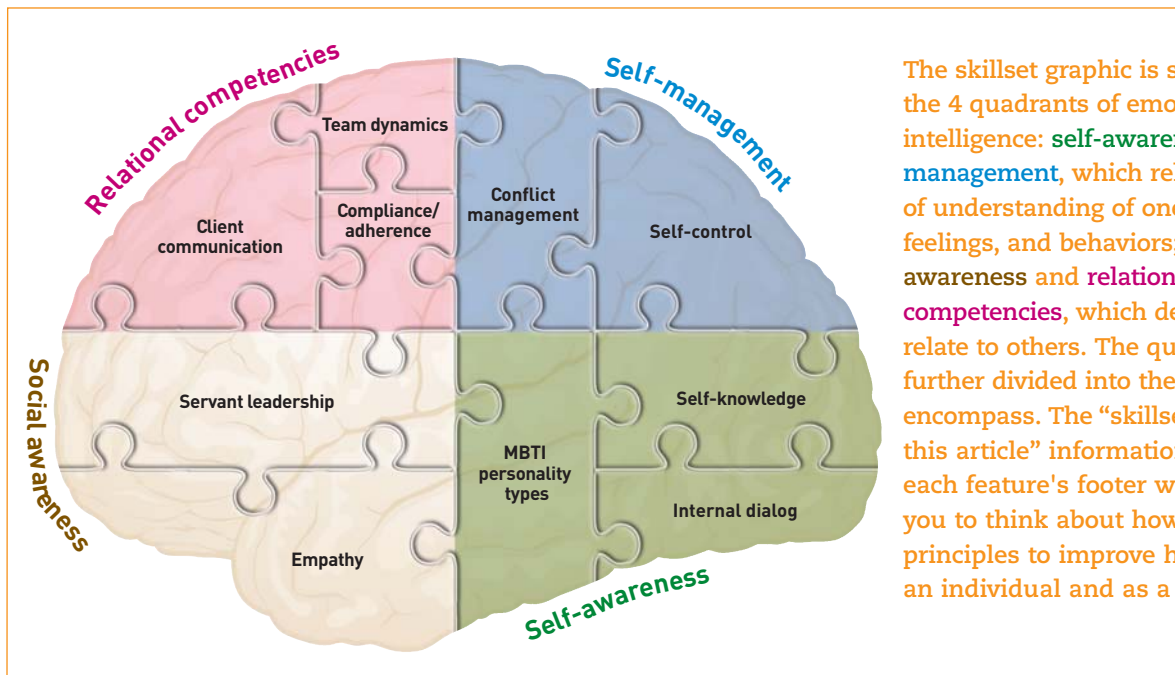
Best regards,  
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Editor in chief

Send your questions to  
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**Skillsets addressed in this article: self-management; social awareness**

When you've finished reading this issue of EVT, please pass it on to the other members of your team.

# 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 relationship 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.

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