

# A TRIBE OF OUR OWN



Thanks to Swedesboro Animal Hospital

When Kate interviewed, she was impressed with Westview Animal Hospital. The team appeared competent and seemed to work in close synchrony—a plus to an eager new grad. After 3 weeks on the job, Kate has a different perspective. The team that appeared from the outside to function like a well-oiled machine has left her feeling just that: outside. When she tries to help out a colleague, she never seems to get it right. Her attempts to take initiative and bring some new ideas into the practice have resulted in nothing but eye rolling and head shaking.

She hates to admit to feeling paranoid, but she's noticed an increase in “hall conversations” among practice leadership, and the covert glances make her feel she's the topic. Kate is discouraged; working here is not what she imagined and she doesn't know how to break into the “inner circle” of her work team.

### “Open” Vs “Closed” Team Cultures

Is yours a “closed” or “open” practice culture when it comes to integrating new employees? A concept taken from family therapy, these terms indicate the level of similarity or “homeostasis” exhibited by team members. An open culture encourages innovation, uniqueness, and a dynamic sense of commu-

nity. A closed culture believes in uniformity and control to keep people on task and together. Closed systems express overt and covert disapproval when members do not “toe the line” within the practice.

Since diagnosis is a consistent objective in veterinary medicine, let's extend the diagnostic lens to an examination of your practice climate.

### Diagnose Your Team

Is your practice cool and business-like or warm and people-centered? Is there flexibility in responsibilities and a premium placed on helping each other out? Is there a hierarchy based on training, position, or seniority, or a more level playing field where individuals' strengths and contributions are valued and recognized? Is negative or toxic behavior on the part of coworkers confronted, encouraged, or passively ignored?

Closed practices are difficult to join and often lose new employees or associates early. Former employees may say that the practice they've left seemed to have many unspoken “rules” and a set hierarchy in which they never found a place.

Sociologists state that human beings are social mammals and therefore



### Team Reflection Exercise

During your next staff meeting, ask each person to think back over his or her “first month” and to share an experience that made it either helpful or difficult to feel a part of the team. Note the difficulties and think through how to lessen them next time around.

form communities or “tribes” whenever they gather for a common purpose. The unconscious “culture” of any group or team results from a mix of individual personalities, beliefs, and behaviors. Attention to the creation of an “open” culture, and the *conscious integration* of new employees into the team will pay great dividends when it comes to employee turnover, retention and attitude. ■



How does your team rate? Download the Team Culture Examination. Go to [myEVT.com](http://myEVT.com) and click on Handouts.

Skillset addressed in this article: relational competencies