

## YOU CAN'T WIN AT POKER UNLESS YOU PLAY THE HAND

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*"Life consists not in holding good cards but in playing those cards you do hold well."* Josh Billings

After visiting 2000-plus veterinary practices and listening to the reasons that "business is slow", it became apparent that there are a wide range of variables. The approach taken when providing veterinary services to segments of a population is directly related to feelings of self-worth and practice philosophy. It is a lot like playing poker. If you only play when you have a sure win, you lose your ante too often to win for the night. It is also not fun to play in this manner.

### CHOOSE THE PATH

*"We'd be successful if it weren't for the depressed economy." "Let me tell you, I'd be making it if it weren't for the interest rates I'm paying." "I'd be on top of the world today if I could just find the right associate." "You know, I'd really be successful if it weren't for all those new graduates flooding the market." "We would really be expanding if it weren't for those zoning codes."* This abridged list is attributable to externalists. They blame some external source, condition, or other people for their failures. This refusal to accept responsibility for their position in life removes the path to success from their grasp.

The inverse of the externalist is the internalist. They are performance oriented, accept personal accountability for their successes, failures, and actions. They know to look into a mirror for the cause of unhappy results. They do not cry over spilt milk, they just look for another cow to milk. They take the hand life deals and play it to the very best of their ability. They are the ones who are not afraid to say, "I don't know," or as Harry Truman's Oval Office sign said, "THE BUCK STOPS HERE."

Essentially, there are only two paths of action in veterinary practice management, or life for that matter: performance and excuses. Each practice manager must make a decision as to which path he/she will accept as a personal direction of leadership, and apply it equally to his/her practice team. We may predict and calculate the amount of failure any individual or team will experience by a simple formula:

*People fail in direct proportion to their willingness to accept socially acceptable excuses for failure.*

The problem with most veterinary practice management assessments are the traditional dictums, "*Well, my practice is different - your clients are different - my staff is different.*" It ain't so, folks!! The person who makes this statement is kidding himself/herself and his/her team. It is only a reason for failure, never success. This attitude allows failure because the excuse is built into the philosophy of practice that the staff hears every day.

## PHILOSOPHY OF SUCCESS

The philosophy of success lies in the philosophy of management, and we need to define management and practice leadership in terms that allow success to be achieved. For the purpose of veterinary practice, let me share a personal definition that works for me:

*Management is the art of attaining measurable and predetermined goals and objectives with and through the voluntary cooperation, enthusiasm, and effort of other people.*

Many texts of the past decade have assessed the skills of management. Peters and Waterman portrayed the skills of the top companies in their best seller, *In Search of Excellence*, yet in the past five years some of those paragons of excellence have gone astray. Times change and skills change, but the art of management continues. Mike Vance, of Disney fame, said it first: "*Mothering is Managing.*" It is not the art of winning that is a cornerstone in management, but rather clearly communicating and diligently monitoring tasks and goals, then fairly rewarding the people who achieve them because they have made a commitment to them based on the organizational good and personal interest.

Management is not mothering, but mothering is management. No mother waits six months to give her kid a performance appraisal for trying to dry the cat in the clothes dryer. Mothers manage conflict, correct and guide behavior, motivate subordinate and peer social groups, set goals for others, get the dishes washed, diapers changed, garbage taken out, and are still loved.

## THE K-S-A-A APPROACH

One of the foremost leadership and management courses available today rates all performance by only four basic factors: KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS,

ATTITUDE and APTITUDE. This is the KSA-A approach embraced by real leaders, and the elements are critical.

**KNOWLEDGE** is the foundation upon which we build. It allows alternatives to be seen and explored. Enough knowledge can help overcome the bias and bigotry of the "school of hard knocks."

**SKILLS** are simply the ability to share knowledge. The transformation of mental warehousing into action that achieves personal goals and objectives in a timely and effective manner.

**ATTITUDE** is the cornerstone upon which leadership and management rely to make knowledge and skills useful to the practice's organizational behavior. Assessing the candidate's attitude is critical in the hiring process (you can teach skills and knowledge if the attitude is right); it is what builds the team harmony, enhances the practice's culture, and helps the team members select the right path to success.

**APTITUDE** is the individual's ability to assimilate and internalize the mission, vision, and core values of the practice entity, as well as the practice's standards of care (SOC), then embrace the concept of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) in daily activities within their own sphere of operational influence.

These are leadership concepts when shared, management concepts when used personally, and rewarding when used routinely. If we return to our poker hand, we can apply the Knowledge-Skills-Attitude-Aptitude (KSA-A) concept of management excellence. Knowledge of the deck and game rules does not provide the skill to play the game. That skill comes from repetition, mistakes, and disasters; aptitude is the ability to understand the other players at the table. The need to discover success carries with it the demand to experience failures. A skillful player adds knowledge with each failure, in cards or in life. But the real secret to a successful poker game is the attitude of the player. A good player bluffs occasionally, but that is only one of many skills brought to the table. The same rule applies in leadership and management. The tenacity to keep trying, the knowledge that the cards cannot be blamed, or the skill of reading the body language of others comes as a result of the attitude of self-accountability and personal responsibility for all actions or reactions.

## ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT EXERCISE

Most every problem has an opportunity side, and most every solution can be negative or positive. On the left are negative situations, and on the right are the opportunities to excel. Your task, is to complete the list.

SITUATION	OPPORTUNITY
Your house has been robbed, all the valuables are gone.	Call a friend and plan that dream vacation with the excess insurance money from the unneeded "stuff" that was stolen.
Mrs. Jones calls the practice and states that the treatment is not working at all.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
First leash chain dent on the new front door.	Throw a party because you don't have to worry about the first dent anymore
The new animal caretaker is going to quit unless you can make the work more rewarding.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Your stock dividend is delayed.	Tell a friend that your broker is saving your vacation money for you.
The accounts receivable are \$23,000 for the last fiscal year.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
The strawberries in your garden are being attacked by mice and birds.	Be happy, they are exempting the rest of the garden, and if you want to protect the strawberries, a cage is possible.
Your consultant advises you that the Facebook discipline of your staff members appears to be GEN-Y gossip and not offer the needed professional tone.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

In veterinary practice, our education gave us the knowledge and the hours we've spent at the exam room, with clients, or in the surgery suite, have given us the skills. The attitude is what separates the successful practice from the average practice. In the A/R example above, the accounts receivable are less than one percent, which is a real reason to celebrate in most practices. It speaks to excellent client bonding by the staff and practice. But now look back - What was your first response?

The attitude of the veterinarians and the hospital manager sets the tone for the implementation of the philosophy of the practice as well as the team's approach to meeting the goals and objectives. It is this attitude that keeps us in the game, that lets us see where we can make changes, and lets us lead our team to success.