

# How to be a boss

Alexandru M. Pop, DVM  
Appalachian Veterinary Services, Inc.  
Christiansburg, VA, 24073

## Abstract

Today's veterinary practice environment is shifting aggressively toward a workplace where strong leadership and interpersonal skills are critical in maintaining a consistent and effective workforce. Practice ownership for young professionals is also becoming more and more common which brings its own unique challenges. Understanding principles of leadership and building an environment of psychological safety within a practice are two ways today's practice owner can get ahead of the competition and foster healthy practice culture.

**Key words:** psychological safety, leadership, culture, mission, core values, vision, team

## Introduction

I was born in Romania and immigrated to the United States when I was 2 years old. I graduated from NC State University CVM in May of 2019 and bought my first practice in July of 2020, only 13.5 months after walking across the graduation stage. The practice at the time had 4 doctors in addition to myself, all of who were older and more experienced than me. I was denied a loan from 26 banks prior to the purchase, and 3/4 of the staff quit during the first 3 months of my ownership transition. Through all obstacles, nothing is impossible. Learning to be a good leader through all of this had circled around 3 main ideas of leadership, building psychological safety within the workplace and changing practice culture. If for no other reason, honing in on the cost of replacing an employee averaging around 63% of their yearly salary is reason enough to focus on building a low-turnover workplace.<sup>1</sup>

## Leadership

A powerful quote by Lao Tzu reads, "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves." This should be the primary scope of all leaders, to set their team up for success. A common myth regarding leadership is that leaders must be extroverted, high energy individuals. In fact, introverted leaders are just as common and one can lead with their own personality without fear. Qualities of an effective leader are vast, however there are 5 I find to be most important from my personal experience as a growing leader.

## Know when to speak and when to shut up

A leader's job is to direct the conversation and decide who is leading, but a leader should not be the only one speaking or contributing. Without the knowledge to skillfully decide who should be leading when, an organization can only be as creative as its leader and makes no use of the full potential of its team. A leader should be clear about when it is time for their team to face them and listen, and when they are standing shoulder to shoulder facing a problem together. This is especially critical in situations where others may not have clarity of how an organization will operate after a large change takes place.

## Get comfortable with being uncomfortable

A leader is naturally going to be the ultimate problem solver in an organization. Problem solver sounds much more appealing than "problem listener", however, this must happen first. A leader should therefore be comfortable with discomfort as many of these discussions can be intimidating and uncomfortable. The problems may seem constant at first, however this is a problem that warrants a system of its own in solving. A common tactic that many find useful in having these conversations is transparency in communication. Saying things like, "this conversation is not going to be fun" grounds the room, and helps who you're speaking with remember that you are a human and feel the same emotions they do.

## Paint a clear, beautiful vision

Leaders often have clear ideas of where they want the company to go. Often it is so clear in their mind, it never gets put on paper or into words for their team to enjoy. A company's team deserves to know where the company is going so they can imagine how they will fit in the future. Painting a picture of your company vision will help others see potential for progress, career progression, raises and so forth. This is partially why larger corporations do well with employee retention as the view of a career is clearly laid out from a sales associate position, to a sales manager, regional manager, VP of sales and so on. Articulating a vision gives direction and purpose.

## Optimize for the whole, not for you

It is easy for a leader to optimize a system in their favor; however one must realize this pulls resources away from other higher ROI activities that could be taking place. Just like line breeding for 1 single trait can bring along other linked traits, the same can take place if a system is consistently optimized for 1 individual. Leaders are part of the team they're leading; they just hold a unique role. Optimizing for the whole will equally benefit leadership as well as the team, while creating camaraderie and a feeling of fairness which results in a stronger team work ethic and lower amount of resentment.

## Money is a byproduct, not a goal

While most veterinary practices are for-profit businesses, focusing solely on profits shifts the focus away from high value ideals that attract clients. Focusing solely on profits within the veterinary industry removes emotion from the low efficiency, low ROI actions that are strong practice builders. For example, it is not directly profitable to make small talk with clients, however building relationships is crucial. Driving a low efficiency, rusty, unappealing vehicle saves money and is good for profits, however impacts a company's brand and may not attract the type of clientele the brand is marketing to. Focusing on items several steps from the transaction prevents tunnel vision and allows leadership to hone efforts toward client experience, standard of medicine, etc. over finances.

---

## Recommended books

A list of recommended books on leadership and business include *Principles* by Ray Dalio, *Extreme Ownership* by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg, *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene, *Psycho Cybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz, *The E-Myth* by Michael E. Gerber, *The Magnolia Story* by Chip & Joanna Gaines, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins and *The Effective Executive* by Peter Drucker.

## Psychological safety

A Gallup study reports only 3 out of 10 employees in the United States feel strongly that their opinions matter at work.<sup>3</sup> Psychological safety is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed. They know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something. They tend to trust and respect their colleagues.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that a workplace is psychologically unsafe is the first step in improving it.

## Recognize an unsafe workplace

Several key factors can be seen repetitively in workplace behaviors to clue leadership in that the workplace may not be psychologically safe. Silence in the workplace is one clue as staff do not feel comfortable approaching leadership with new ideas or problems out of fear of repercussions outweighing the value of the idea. Often being barraged with an immediate demand for a detailed plan or a focus on the negative risks of new ideas will make staff less likely to share strong ideas in the future. High turnover can also be attributed to low levels of psychological safety. When staff feel comfortable approaching leadership with issues, it gives an opportunity to resolve them rather than allowing them to go unnoticed. The era of silent quitting comes from these low levels of psychological safety as issues are kept hidden until the person decides to leave. Another characteristic of low psychological safety is an environment where people feel like they can't say no out of fear of criticism and "not being a team player" simply from setting reasonable boundaries. Finally, a high level of micromanagement is also a major contributor to low levels of psychological safety as it is not safe or allowed to challenge the status quo while being micromanaged, and creativity, personal contribution and autonomy are taken away from the individual.

## Recognizing psychological safety

Several behaviors are evident within a psychologically safe work environment. Candor is an important characteristic as the team feels safe to be direct and honest with one another without fear of criticism. Questions constantly being exchanged shows that asking for advice and help is not viewed as a weakness, but a way to leverage our team and support one another. Trusting one another to accomplish each task shows confidence and inclusivity while pushing everyone away from micromanagement. Approaching mistakes with kindness allows the team to feel comfortable sharing mistakes and failures and views them as an opportunity to learn and grow rather than a shameful punishment. Transparency from practice leadership also shows staff their vital role as team members and further increases their feelings of inclusion and valuable contribution.

## How to...

Create opportunities for mandatory feedback. This shows the team that there are opportunities set aside where feedback is going to be engaged with and listened to. This can be accomplished by setting up mandatory team meetings where all members of the team connect and problem solve together and all voices are heard and respected equally. Accept mistakes as opportunities for growth. Crucifying a team member for an honest, human mistake will result in two things: 1) The only thing they will learn from the mistake is that their boss really doesn't take kindly to mistakes; 2) The next time they make that mistake, they won't tell you. Utilize mistakes as an opportunity to fix a hole in your system so it is less likely to happen again. Encourage constructive conflict by listening to ideas and differing opinions, and validating them as important, because they are. A company with no internal disagreement doesn't exist, only a company with veiled disagreement. Encourage your team to question you, and listen to their opinions and ideas as creative solutions often will come from outside your own thoughts. Take criticism for what it is, an opportunity to utilize your team to their full potential and broaden your thinking. Approaching conflict this way will also exemplify to your team that conflict is meant to be constructive, and leadership no longer appears inflexible.

Finally, set clear expectations of your team in their individual roles. Sometimes our views are so "big picture", we forget that the devil is in the details. You should be asking your team, "Do you know when you're doing a good job?" and, "Do you feel like your expectations are clearly laid out?" You should follow these questions up by saying, "It's okay if you say no, I'm asking because I want to help make your job easier." Clear expectations are a benchmark to doing a good job, but without those someone may not ever realize how they're doing.

## Culture

Culture is most simply defined as a company's personality. Culture answers the following questions:

- What does the practice tolerate?
- How does the team interact with one another?
- What aspects of work does the company value?
- How do people feel about their work?

A key tool used by practices with strong culture is a 3-step approach to building it. Culture comes from a combination of a practice vision, mission and core values. A practice vision statement will define the future objectives of the organization and should be ambitious and broad. One example is Disney's vision statement, "To be one of the world's leading producers and providers of entertainment and information." A mission statement is a formal summary of the daily aims and values of an organization. This statement outlines what the company will accomplish on a daily basis to fulfill the vision. One example is Tesla, "Accelerating the world's transition to sustainable energy." The final piece to establishing culture is a company's core values. These are the guiding principles that define a company's identity and daily choices. Some examples are honesty, empathy, integrity and imagination. Through daily execution of core values, a company's culture will be self-evident when those core values are held central to their daily actions.

---

## Conclusion

Today's veterinary practice is a demanding, high-stress environment where a capable team is critical to success. Cultivating strong leadership within a practice, and sustaining a collaborative workforce of veterinarians and trained support staff by creating high levels of psychological safety are the foundation. With these foundational pillars, leadership can pour resources into fostering a healthy organizational culture where the team feels both challenged and empowered on a daily basis and the full potential of a team can be utilized.

## References

1. There are significant business costs to replacing employees. Center for American Progress. Last modified November 16, 2012. Accessed December 12, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/CostofTurnover.pdf>
2. Edmondson, A. *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for learning, innovation and growth*. Hoboken, NJ. John Wiley & Sons, Inc 2018.
3. Herway, J. How to create a culture of psychological safety. 2017. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236198/create-culture-psychological-safety.aspx>. Accessed December 19, 2022.

