Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative in a Team

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“Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right,” attributed to Henry Ford, illustrates how mind-set and mood can impact workplace achievement. A growing bank of evidence now supports the thinking that a team that feels negatively about a project is less likely to be successful.
Researchers recently have been paying attention to the role in teamwork played by affect, a term that from a psychological perspective encompasses mood (ie, general, lower intensity background feelings) and discrete emotions (ie, feelings that last a shorter length of time and are more intense).

The term positive affect describes a team member or team experiencing emotions such as enthusiasm, engagement, and interest. Negative affect describes those displaying disengagement, pessimism, anger, or anxiety (ie, people who are referred to as negative).

A high positive affect within a team has benefits such as increased information-sharing between team members and a heightened commitment to team goals and is generally advantageous to group performance. However, high positive affect can hinder team performance in specific situations; for example, if a team experiences a high mood, team members may start to see a problem or project from almost identical viewpoints, which puts the team at risk of developing group think (ie, the team reaches a consensus quickly but the product is unchallenged and a poor decision is made).

It is vital, therefore, that a team leader be aware of affect and its impact on team performance. In a veterinary practice, intervention will frequently be needed to tip the balance in favor of team positivity. The following tools can help cultivate a positive affect within the team in a veterinary practice.

**Set Up the Team for Success**
A positive team begins with its formation—it is important to thoughtfully select team members and ensure they have access to the necessary resources. Teams that start positively and work effectively most often have been given a clear set of goals and the resources to achieve those goals.

**Invest in a Positive Climate**
Setting the tone for a positive team climate is also important. Leaders can encourage and model behaviors and attributes that lead to positive affect between team members such as trust-building and open and honest communication. An effective leader can modulate a team’s mood by recognizing and channeling its members’

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**Accentuate the Positive**

**Positive behaviors:**
- Demonstrating optimism
- Sharing team successes
- Displaying engagement
- Using good-tempered humor
- Taking responsibility.

**Negative behaviors:**
- Demonstrating pessimism
- Gossiping
- Appearing disengaged
- Using sarcasm
- Avoiding tasks.

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**Strategies for Negative Behaviors**

1. Do not agree with, or reinforce, negative behavior that arises during team discussions.
2. Attempt to divert negativity to a more positive path; for example, say, I can see your point—you have identified an important problem, so let us look at the benefits of our plan. How many advantages can we come up with?
3. Privately give feedback to a team member who consistently behaves negatively, allowing him or her to talk and feel heard but not to rant.
4. Remain vigilant for team members succumbing to a negative point of view.
5. Remind the team that problems and setbacks are inevitable but can be overcome.
6. Suggest leaders and team members consider triggers or patterns (eg, times of day, specific situations) to help overcome negativity.
individual strengths. (See Accentuate the Positive.)

It is good practice for a leader to promote team positivity during a project by identifying key points and celebrating quick wins; for example, it is not necessary to wait until the end of a dental month promotion to give positive feedback. If client service representatives or clients indicate the first week has gone well, that should be communicated to the team and rewarded appropriately.

Positivity can be boosted in simple, inexpensive ways that help team members enjoy a lighter side of the practice, such as potluck meals, picnics, and fitness challenges.

**Negative Behavior**

The bad apple theory—that one negative team member can negatively affect a whole project—is well-recognized and supported academically. Tackling negative behavior rather than negative people in the veterinary practice setting is generally more helpful.

Team leaders can use a variety of strategies for working with team members’ negative behaviors, which include criticism, pessimism, gossip, finding flaws, and using putdowns. (See Strategies for Negative Behaviors.)

It is important for leaders to recognize they may also sometimes experience a negative frame of mind because a team leader displaying negativity can significantly impact team morale and performance. During challenging times, leaders should remain calm and encouraging but stay grounded in realism. A leader who acts inappropriately by being highly positive during a difficult time may be viewed as inauthentic or out-of-touch.

**Conclusion**

Teams, like individuals, tend to operate more effectively when they are optimistic and positive about a task or project. Leaders therefore should prepare teams for success, invest in a climate of positivity, and ensure that the process is not sidetracked by negative behaviors.

**References**


**TEAM TAKEAWAYS:**

Veterinarians: Try to stay in tune with the team’s general emotion; adjust your behavior accordingly to show you are a caring member of the team.

Management Team: Set the tone for a balanced, positive climate within the practice; even if you feel stressed or particularly negative, remember that your actions have a direct effect on the rest of the team.

Nursing Team: Help prevent a false positive climate by encouraging every team member to be honest with themselves and their emotions.

Client Care Team: Start making a collection (eg, folder, box, list) of “wins” you see and hear from clients to share with the rest of the team when members need morale boosts.