A healthy practice environment is not easily maintained, but research shows that open, frequent, honest communication is crucial for creating a toxic-free workplace.

Veterinary teams commonly face challenges in the practice, such as communication breakdowns, ambiguous roles, unrealistic goals, and unsustainable workloads. If any of these factors are not addressed, a toxic work environment can be created, leading to dissatisfied team members, incivility, turnover, fragmented client relations, and poor patient care.
This article reviews research published in 2015 in *Frontiers in Veterinary Medicine*, titled “Exploring the Impact of Toxic Attitudes and a Toxic Environment on the Veterinary Healthcare Team.”¹ The researchers identified practical recommendations to put their findings into practice and optimize team performance.

**Toxic Attitudes**
Toxic team attitudes include disrespect, resistance to change, lack of motivation, conflict-avoidance, chronic negativity, and desire to be the go-to person. Such mindsets negatively impact the team and result in relationship struggles, task conflicts, poor team performance, and decreased satisfaction.¹

**Toxic Environments**
Toxic environments form when toxic attitudes become contagious and “when ‘broken communication and tension between staff members’ occur[s] because of underlying issues, including employees lacking the requisite confidence, skills, or knowledge; employees not feeling appreciated; difficulties coping with turnover; and dealing with conflicting demands.”¹ When team members feel helpless, frustrated, and angry, the workplace becomes more toxic.

**Finding a Remedy**
Toxic attitudes and a toxic environment negatively impact day-to-day team function. Addressing toxic attitudes to detoxify the environment is daunting, but an efficient, successful, satisfied team can be created by:²

- Maintaining effective communication
- Ensuring clear roles
- Setting achievable goals
- Divvying up the workload

**Crucial Communication**
Toxic environments arise from failing to communicate expectations, ignoring incivility, and sending conflicting messages about workplace roles.¹ Clear communication is critical. (See *Open Communication*.)

**Clear Roles**
Resentment among the team builds when team members are unaware of others’ roles and unsure of their own.¹

Prevent resentment from building with these actions:

- Provide explicit roles, tasks, expectations, and a system of accountability to ensure firm guidelines and clarity and reduce conflicting demands on team members.
- Provide a copy of job descriptions and workplace procedures, and explain how each role fits into the team.
- Reinforce details in day-to-day conversations and during team meetings.
- Create a poster that maps out relationships and hang it in the team meeting room so individual team members can appreciate how their work impacts others.
- Review and update job descriptions as responsibilities change.

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**Resources**

Understanding how the team works together enables buy-in and builds a stronger commitment to goals.¹

**Achievable Goals**
Unattainable goals and unreasonable expectations set team members up for failure, disappointment, and bitterness. When overloaded, team members feel like they cannot provide “the level of client and patient service they wanted to, or were expected to.”¹ Having individual goals as well as team goals helps break the workload down to a manageable level.

Set goals during annual performance reviews and check in quarterly with team members to measure their progress. Take time with each team member to recognize accomplishments, redefine challenging goals, identify resources, and provide support.

**Shared Responsibilities**
When team members see the benefits of sharing responsibilities and tasks, the focus shifts positively to the attributes each team member brings to the table. Share the positivity by highlighting examples of the team working well together, reading client comments at team meetings, voting on a team member of the month, offering prizes for nominating a team member who went above and beyond, or sending notes of appreciation.

**From Toxic to Team-Focused**
A veterinary team’s effectiveness is maximized daily through action. The road to a healthy practice environment will be filled with detours, accidents, and flat tires, but maintaining frequent, open team communication, clarifying roles, and emphasizing sharing the workload detoxifies the practice environment and helps create a team that can meet any challenge.

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**Open Communication**
To be effective, provide frequent, timely, accurate communication focused on problem-solving, including in-the-moment check-ins with individual team members.

- **FREQUENT** check-ins open communication channels, engage team members, let them be heard, and provide a quick litmus test to gauge where individuals are in relation to the team.

  *Good morning, Marsha. I wanted to take a minute to check in with you to see how you feel things are going this week.*

  *David, I noticed you appeared upset after that last client. Let’s take a minute to chat about that consultation.*

- **TIMELY** communication means tackling each situation as it occurs or shortly after.

  *Team, I called this meeting because I overheard some grumbling about workload. I hope by addressing this head-on as a team, we can work together to come to a mutual understanding.*

  *David, I am doing my best to follow protocol and procedures. I am confused when I tell the clients one thing and then you tell them something completely different. Can we work together to make this more clear for me so I can make sure our clients and patients receive the best care?*

- **ACCURATE** communication involves putting feelings and emotions that color the conversation aside and providing upfront, honest, mindful, and factual information.

  *I was upset yesterday when I heard you telling Dr. Ames you could not be bothered with veterinary nurse work. I want to understand where you are coming from so we can work through this.*

  *I have heard gossip about the new hiring process, and I want to share the facts with the team, answer any questions, and quell any rumors.*

- **COMMUNICATION** focused on problem-solving capitalizes on the team’s strengths and talents rather than nitpicking, finger pointing, or dwelling on the problem.

  *Team, our main goal is patient care and client satisfaction. How can we achieve these goals when we are arguing over whose job it is to clean up before clocking out? I hope we can discuss this as a team and work out a solution so we can all leave in a timely manner.*


**References**

**TEAM TAKEAWAYS**

Veterinarians: Promote understanding of every team member’s role and how the team works together to ensure buy-in and create a healthy workplace.

Management Team: Make sure team members have both individual and team goals; check in regularly to measure progress, address challenges, and provide support.

Nursing Team: Addressing challenges in a timely manner is important; for example, if a team member is upset, talk to him or her as soon as possible before frustration spreads.

Client Care Team: Understand how sharing positivity benefits the whole team and pass along examples of team members who go above and beyond with clients and patients.