Let’s talk about an “untold truth” about working in animal healthcare: employees often make a habit of voicing continual disapproval of a manager’s style and decisions, and in return managers tend to regard employees as a pack, forgetting they are individuals with hopes and aspirations. Based on my more than 6 years of experience as a supervisor and practice manager, there are several approaches that both managers and employees can consider to help prevent the veterinary healthcare team from unraveling.
Top 5 Managerial Pitfalls—and How to Avoid Them

1. Not knowing team members as individuals
   Managers often regard their team as a homogenous mix of employees, all of whom have the same approach to tasks and learning styles. However, this is a pitfall. A. J. Schuler, author of *How to Be a Better Boss: Business Leadership Tips*, offers the following example: “Some people need hands-on supervision; some people like to learn by watching and then doing. Some people like to jump right in, make mistakes, and then come to you when they have a question.” According to Schuler, because employees interact in different ways, a manager must collect mental data about employees to enable each individual to achieve his or her personal best. A number of formal tools are also available to help managers identify the working styles or strengths of their employees. See Employee Assessment Tools, page 36, for a list of resources.

2. Not doing what you ask of the team
   This pitfall is often misinterpreted; can a nonmedical manager ask a technician to follow up on treatment plans? Of course! Rather, this pitfall refers to general workplace requests, such as staying late, coming in early, and working hard. A manager who regularly sits around, chats, or has leisurely lunches can sink a relationship with the rest of the team. Ideally the manager should work as hard, or harder, than his or her employees. Employees will not respect a manager who is not busy with the matters of the practice. The manager should be working up front and seeing clients, floating to the back to see how the new staff member is settling in, or checking the computer for pending charges.

3. Not falling on your sword often enough
   Managers, take heed! It is acceptable, and recommended in my opinion, to show employees that you are human and have faults. You might come in late one day; you may be out of uniform; you may process a discount incorrectly. These can all be shared with staff as a learning tool to grow the practice. A manager who performs consistently well and is highly competent but makes a mistake every once in a while is seen by employees as someone who can lead the team but also understands that employees are not perfect.
4. Not being open to conversation

Why are employees often reluctant to report an incident, discuss a problem with a coworker, or ask for a raise? Because many managers are inaccessible except during staff meetings or formal appointments. When an employee seeks your counsel, if possible, drop everything to let him or her know you take the comments seriously. Then, listen carefully to the employee’s request. If it requires action you can take, discuss the options. However, if there isn’t anything you can do, advise the employee that while the current situation can’t be changed you value the employee’s feedback and sympathize with her or his feelings. If the manager is attentive to employees only during a crisis, they may avoid [the manager] or conceal information that is needed to manage the team effectively.¹

5. Playing favorites

As a boss, don’t strive to be everyone’s friend. Instead, focus on being fair.¹ Beware of favoring team members who fall into line easily or who attempt to maintain close relationships. Avoid favoritism by setting policies and enforcing them uniformly. If a specific number of shift tardies are acceptable before disciplinary action is taken, make sure the policy is enforced consistently. Employee A cannot have 4 chances because he or she is the best technician on the floor or has been at the hospital for 10 years. However tough it is, being clear about and enforcing the rules avoids accusations of favoritism.

A manager usually is not the only one at fault if a team is struggling. Employees must envision themselves as part of a successful team. Let’s talk about common hazards and how employees can avoid them.

When an employee seeks your counsel, if possible, drop everything to let him or her know you take the comments seriously.
Top 5 Pitfalls for Employees—and How to Avoid Them

1. Not realizing a manager’s job is hard
   Employees should strive to appreciate the work a manager does every day, including dealing with personnel; managing marketing, financial, safety, and administrative duties; serving as a bridge between owner/upper administration and employees; and being ultimately responsible for the success, or failure, of the clinic or hospital. Employees must see themselves as part of the team and less as a singular entity.

2. Expecting a raise without adding value
   Today most practices cannot afford to bestow cost-of-living raises, so employees have to grow themselves or the practice to earn more money. Professional development can help you increase your earning potential and does not have to be in the form of expensive certification. For example, improving your “soft skills,” such as the ability to communicate with irate clients, improves the practice overall. If you have invested time and/or money in professional development and feel your compensation isn’t reflective of your talent, communicate directly and professionally with your manager about it. Don’t expect your wish to be automatically granted, but project confidence during the discussion and explain specific ways in which you add value to the practice.

3. Taking performance reviews personally
   Reviews tend to be stressful for both the manager and employee. Effective reviews should point out positive characteristics of your job performance and actions for which you should be commended, but areas in need of improvement also should be addressed. Remember that reviews are meant to improve the team, not break it. Maybe an employee comes in late too often or made several errors on charts; these are areas of improvement that demonstrate personal growth. (Managers: note that linking raises directly to performance reviews tends to devalue the evaluation; follow up a review with a discussion about salary a few weeks after a performance review.2)
Top 5 Pitfalls for Managers—and How to Avoid Them

1. Not knowing team members as individuals
   - Make it a point to get to know one person on your team every day.
   - Compile a KSA (knowledge, skill, ability) assessment on each team member.
     — Refer to the KSA quarterly to evaluate progress.

2. Not doing what you ask of the team
   - Lead by example.
   - Perform a task or develop a policy, follow it, and expect your team to do the same.

3. Not falling on your sword often enough
   - Have you admitted something you did incorrectly to an employee lately?
   - Have you laughed at yourself in front of an employee lately?

4. Not being open to conversation
   - Do you have an open-door policy?
   - What is your office decor like? Is there room for employees to sit comfortably? Is it open and inviting?
   - Consider a white board and leave messages like, “In but busy...please knock,” or “Out to lunch, be back soon. If it’s urgent call my cell.”

5. Playing favorites
   - Set policy and implement uniformly
   - Dig deep for this one: Do you implement policies unfairly? Can you think of a time you did? Do you enforce adherence to policies with all employees?

4. Gossiping
   Let’s face it, most of us have participated in gossip a time or two...or 30! Yet, let me implore you to stop; gossip does nothing for the practice except sabotage team building and practice efficiency. A practice divided is one with poor customer service and poor patient care. Solve problems through conflict resolution and positive, constructive solutions rather than by complaining. Report identifiable issues to the manager and let it be handled appropriately. And finally, make an attempt to get along with your coworkers...remember, we are all human.

If you have invested time and/or money in professional development and feel your compensation isn't reflective of your talent, communicate directly and professionally with your manager about it.
5. Seeing yourself as “targeted” by the manager

Sometimes an individual may think that he or she is considered the “problem employee.” This is most likely not the case. Each employee needs to look inward and explore why he or she might be truly disruptive or derisive to the team. If an employee feels singled out, the manager should address those concerns. However, to do so, the employee needs to provide objective verification or documentation that specific incidents of targeting have happened so the manager can determine whether the information is hearsay or the employee’s concern is valid.

See Aids & Resources, page 63, for references and suggested reading.