HR & the Human–Animal Bond

Veterinarians, through their training and experience, strive to serve the human–animal bond (HAB) every day. The AVMA officially recognizes the HAB as “a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both.”

However, is the profession doing enough to honor the HAB between our team members and their beloved pets? Are you helping ensure the health and well-being of those animals? Are team members extended the same level of compassion as clients? Make sure your policies and protocols support your team’s HAB.

• **Pet Policy**
  Practice team members typically have at least one, if not many, beloved pets at home. Does your employee pet policy honor the HAB? For example, if pet insurance is a team benefit, the coverage typically is limited to a specific number of pets, possibly forcing the team member to choose which pets need or may need the most healthcare. Instead, why not offer everyone in your practice the same dollar amount or benefit “allowance,” no matter their number of pets. (Note that allowances for pet services, discounts, or benefits must align with IRS requirements.)

• **Pets at the Practice**
  If team members are allowed to have pets at work, does your practice seem to have more of their pets in cages and runs than patients? This can be a problem, but many people work in practices because veterinarians, of all people, understand the HAB. Eliminating the pets-to-work benefit could gravely affect team morale. If lack of space becomes a problem, consider instituting a flexible policy requiring team members to leave their pets at home temporarily.

• **Treating Team Members’ Pets**
  Practices also need a policy for team members’ pets needing medical attention. Consider including the stipulation that time spent treating any team member’s pet must be “off the clock,” whether the animal is treated by the member-owner or another team member. Try to strike a balance between honoring the HAB and maintaining a viable business.

• **Pet Bereavement Leave**
  Team members are typically granted time off, either as paid or nonpaid leave, to mourn the loss of close family members. What happens when they lose a pet? Expecting them to work may be a good business decision, but it does not demonstrate compassion. Implementing a personal pet bereavement leave policy shows that honoring the HAB is one of the practice’s core values for clients and team members. The following statement could set the tone for compassionate care: *Our clinic honors the human–animal bond between its team members and their pets. In the event of the death of a team member’s personal pet, he or she will be allowed to take one unpaid day of leave to grieve.*

Remember that veterinary team members likely were pet owners long before they joined the practice. The HAB initially called them to the profession, and they will feel most satisfied and be most productive if the practice honors that bond.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.