

HOW TO THRIVE IN VETERINARY PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

Veterinary professionals face a complex and evolving landscape of clinical, emotional, and systemic pressures. Burnout, moral distress, and workforce retention challenges continue to be widely reported across veterinary disciplines (1,2). To meet these demands while preserving professional fulfilment and quality of care, veterinary teams must look beyond clinical competence alone. This session introduces four core, evidence-informed strategies - grounded in human factors science, psychology, and systems thinking - that support individuals and teams to thrive sustainably in practice.

1. Apply Human Factors and Systems Thinking

Human Factors is a scientific discipline that examines the relationship between humans, the systems they work within, and the environments that shape behaviour and decision-making (3). It is well established in aviation, nuclear power, and increasingly in healthcare. Applying human factors in veterinary settings means designing work systems that make it easier to do the right thing, reduce error likelihood, and enhance overall performance.

Practical examples include implementing structured communication tools such as SBAR (Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation), using checklists for surgical and procedural safety, and reconfiguring physical spaces to minimise distraction and streamline workflows. Beyond tools, human factors encompass non-technical skills such as situational awareness, cognitive workload management, leadership, and communication - skills vital for managing high-consequence environments.

System thinking encourages teams to see problems as the result of system design rather than individual failings. Rather than blaming the person who makes a medication error, a systems approach asks, "What conditions made this error likely?" This perspective shifts the focus from blame and punishment to prevention and resilience.

2. Listen to Understand

Active, empathetic listening is fundamental to psychological safety - the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (4). In psychologically safe teams, individuals feel able to speak up, offer dissenting opinions, and admit mistakes without fear of humiliation or retaliation. This is not only essential for well-being but also for clinical safety and team learning.

Listening to understand means suspending judgment and staying present. It involves reflective listening ("What I'm hearing is..."), open-ended questions ("Can you tell me more about that?"), and validating others' experiences - even when you don't agree. Civility, empathy, and gratitude are critical behaviours that reinforce trust and strengthen team cohesion (5).

Understanding how we listen is crucial. The three levels of listening offer a helpful framework:

1. **Internal Listening** – Focused on your own thoughts, reactions, and judgments while someone is speaking. This level is self-oriented and often where we operate unconsciously.
2. **Focused Listening** – Full attention is given to the speaker. The listener tunes into tone, emotion, and meaning, without being distracted by internal chatter.
3. **Global Listening** – The deepest level, where the listener is aware of the speaker, themselves, and the surrounding environment. It includes tone, body language, energy, and context - providing a holistic understanding of the communication.

Listening at level 2 or 3 supports more compassionate, effective veterinary teams. It enhances mutual understanding, de-escalates tension, and improves collaborative decision-making.

3. Make Marginal Gains

The concept of marginal gains - popularised in elite sport - emphasises small, consistent improvements that compound over time (6). In veterinary practice, this might include revising a medication labelling system, improving how lab results are triaged, or making team huddles more efficient. Each small change

may seem minor in isolation, but together they can lead to significant enhancements in workflow, efficiency, and team morale.

This approach is especially effective in environments where large-scale change feels overwhelming. Focusing on one small win per week keeps momentum alive and engages the team in continuous improvement. It also builds a culture of experimentation and curiosity. Importantly, marginal gains should be co-designed with those affected by the change to ensure relevance and buy-in.

4. Stop Task Switching

Multitasking is often valorised in veterinary settings, yet research consistently shows that it degrades cognitive performance, increases errors, and contributes to mental fatigue (7). Task switching - rapidly shifting attention between unrelated tasks - creates a "switch cost" that can impair working memory, reduce attention span, and elevate stress levels.

To counter this, practices can adopt strategies that protect focus. These include blocking time for uninterrupted work (e.g., discharge notes or diagnostics), grouping similar tasks (e.g., batch-calling clients), and minimising interruptions through environmental and cultural norms. Even brief periods of focused work (20–30 minutes) can significantly enhance productivity and reduce cognitive overload.

Encouraging a culture that values deep work over hyper-responsiveness requires intentional leadership. It means setting realistic expectations about response times, reinforcing boundaries, and allowing space for recovery. Teams that recognise the limits of cognitive capacity are more likely to work sustainably and make fewer critical errors.

Conclusion

The veterinary profession demands high levels of emotional resilience, technical accuracy, and interpersonal skill. These four strategies - applying human factors, listening to understand, making marginal gains, and stopping task switching - offer an integrated approach to supporting wellbeing and performance. They are low-cost, high-impact interventions that align with the values of veterinary care: compassion, precision, and teamwork.

Crucially, thriving in veterinary practice is not about working harder. It is about working smarter, designing environments where excellence is supported by systems, and creating cultures where people feel seen, heard, and valued. By embedding these strategies into daily routines, veterinary teams can build sustainable, humane, and high-performing workplaces.

References

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