

POLITICS IN PRACTICE

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Most people start out in their first job with a naïve and simplistic view of what it means to be a good employee. A high school student kennel caretaker generally assumes that if she comes to work reliably and on time and does what she's told to do, she's doing a good job. It takes a while for her to figure out that we actually would like her to notice things that need to be done and to take care of them on her own – if it was a windy night and there's garbage blown in the bushes, pick it up! They don't have to wait for someone to tell them to do it. We expect them to tell us if the pooper scooper is broken so we can get a new one, we don't want to find out by accident that it's been broken for two months and no one ever said anything.

As we get older and more experienced, we start to take on more responsibility, but when you take our first full time job after veterinary school you may not make the intellectual leap that you are now a lot more politically powerful than you've ever been in a job position before. Uncomfortable with our self-image as a “doctor,” we struggle with the practicing medicine part of the job the first year or two, much less the leadership part. You may have trouble finding your place in the power structure of the practice. New veterinarians often far underestimate their ability to make positive changes in a practice's culture and protocols.

Many veterinarians are perfectionists. Perfection in the way they care for their clients and patients may be very important to them. They may become easily upset by imperfections in these areas. They usually want every client interaction and every element of patient care to be just right. Even though this is not possible it is still the goal. It's this drive that keeps us striving for excellence, but it also has its downside. Our high expectations of ourselves can make us difficult to coach on the job, as well as causing us stress and unhappiness.

Do you think you will judge yourself too harshly when you first begin practicing? What expectations will your employer have for you and how might those be different from your own?

From whom do you think it's appropriate to receive coaching? Just the practice owner? How about other associates? Techs? Receptionists?

Would listening to a receptionist diminish your self esteem? Your power in the eyes of other team members?

How would you react if corrected in front of a client?

What problems could arise if you treated a pet differently than the practice owner would have? Who is liable for any problems that might occur?

As a practice owner, I tend to value more highly employees who are game to take on a new task or develop a new interest, and I don't do as well with people who just want to punch in, do their job and go home. Although the “it's just a job” mentality isn't really wrong, it doesn't fit well with my philosophy of being a learning organization. So I tend to reward those who take on

extra stuff, or seem especially interested or devoted to their job. If you find a position in a progressive, high end practice, your boss will likely have some of these same expectations.

Scary as it is, for much of your day in your job position, you are accountable and responsible. Your boss expects you to bring your brain to work every day, along with your conscience, your passion and your heart. Veterinary medicine is not like a factory job where we can just say “Go screw widget A to widget B.” When the client is standing in front of you, you need to know enough to serve that client and decide how best to do that. You probably will have technicians or assistants working with you and you will be seen as a supervisor, whether you feel like one or not. It will be your job to correct their mistakes, as well as their job to help correct yours. This can feel awkward and uncomfortable. You will be expected to handle yourself professionally and contribute thoughts and ideas. Your performance will be judged on these aspects of the job as much as by your medical production.

List the different ways an associate has control over his or her production. Which ones have to do with leadership ability?

It’s important to develop your technical skills, such as IV injections or taking radiographs, yet it’s also important to delegate and practice efficiently. How do you balance these two goals?

Would you feel comfortable being paid on your production alone?

Do you think that an employer has different expectations of an associate who receives a straight salary vs. production pay? What might be the difference in expectations?

How might production pay affect your relationships with any other recent graduate associates on your team?

Is competition between associates a good or bad thing?

There are many decisions reached in a busy veterinary practice every day. Some are simple – which brand of paper toweling should we buy. Others are complex – what should our medical protocol be for hemorrhagic gastroenteritis, or how much money should we budget each year for marketing.

Some decisions are made on-the-spot by individuals. Others involve a group of people – the receptionist team, the management team, the marketing committee. Major decisions are usually made with input from at least some of the team. Some goals cannot be developed without a group effort.

What sorts of decisions would you like to be involved in when you are working in a practice?

Which will your employer expect you to be involved in?

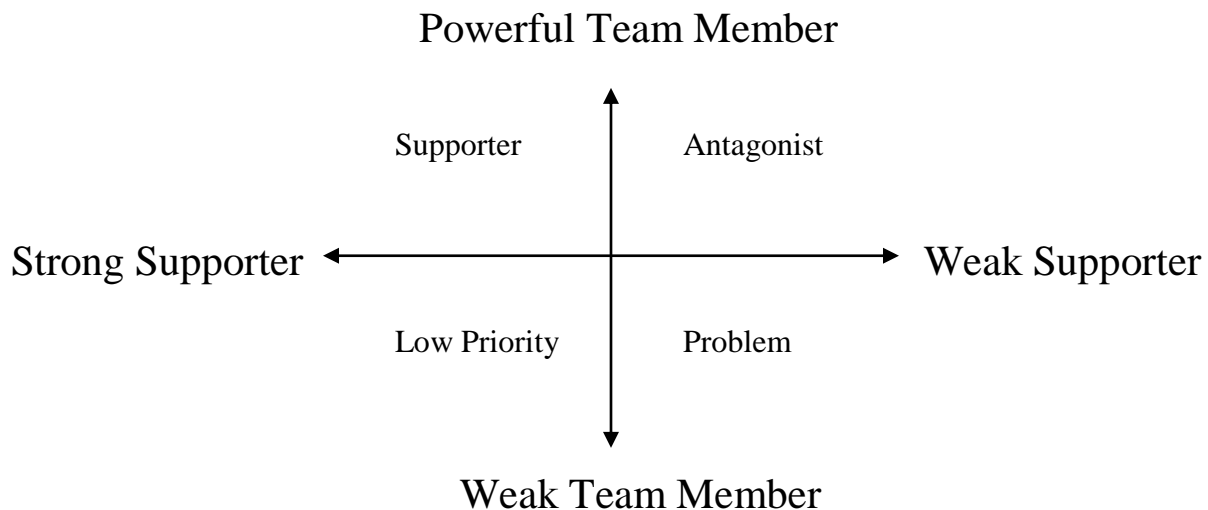
How will you know what your employer’s expectations are? What will you do if your expectations differ?

All organizations have politics – they have weak and strong members as far as power to make decisions or to influence the team. They also have people who have or don't have influence over other people in the practice. Much of our interaction with other team members is based on our ability to understand and work within the power structure.

Although most of us don't think of ourselves as playing games or manipulating others, in fact we human beings do this naturally, and often unconsciously, all the time. We vie for power, or the attention of the higher ranked members of the team. Or maybe we work outside the system or form cliques. Sometimes we may become buddies with people who should really just be coworkers, or we anger the wrong people and lose social standing. Sounds complicated, doesn't it?

Well, it is complicated. However, if you sit back and watch people interact with each other you can often see little power struggles and meaningful exchanges happen right under your nose. Good managers and leaders are able to understand and influence these office politics.

Managers sometimes put people in different categories as to their importance in the practice, and then plan how to address conflicts or disagreements more effectively. One of the tools we use to do that looks like this:



This tool ranks people as strong or weak supporters of the decision, policy or goal in question, as well as by how much power they have in the practice. Each person will fall into one of the four quadrants of Supporter, Antagonist, Problem or Low Priority.

Let's say one of the doctors is against a decision the team made. Doctors are generally powerful people in the practice. If they publicly don't agree with a decision, and are stirring up trouble about it, it then may become the job of the management team to "sell" the decision to that doctor, so that they become a strong supporter and not an antagonist. Depending on the issue, it may be critically important to turn this person around, or it may be an annoyance that is not important enough to argue over.

Managers may work quite hard to reach agreement with someone who is out of synch with the team or the leadership of the team. Eventually, however, if someone is consistently an Antagonist or a Problem, that person will part ways with the practice. It is both uncomfortable and unproductive to have long-term conflict.

Ideally, the practice team has a certain level of respect and trust for each other. In that framework, where the values of the practice center on community, openness, integrity and trust, decisions are made, both by the group and by individuals, to reflect the purpose, principles and vision of the practice. The emphasis for the strategic planning of the group is to align our own personal values and goals with those of the team, to produce a functional unit that makes good decisions - and backs each other up once those decisions have been made.

Leadership in a group is about facilitating inclusion – encouraging input and participation by every team member, while also dealing effectively with disagreement and negotiation. It's important for every team member, and especially the team leaders, to be servants to the organization's mission and vision. If you as an individual do not believe in the philosophy of the practice, if you don't agree with the core values or mission, you will become a "problem" instead of a "supporter." Leadership is about facilitating inclusion within the organization's culture, and encouraging participation and innovation.

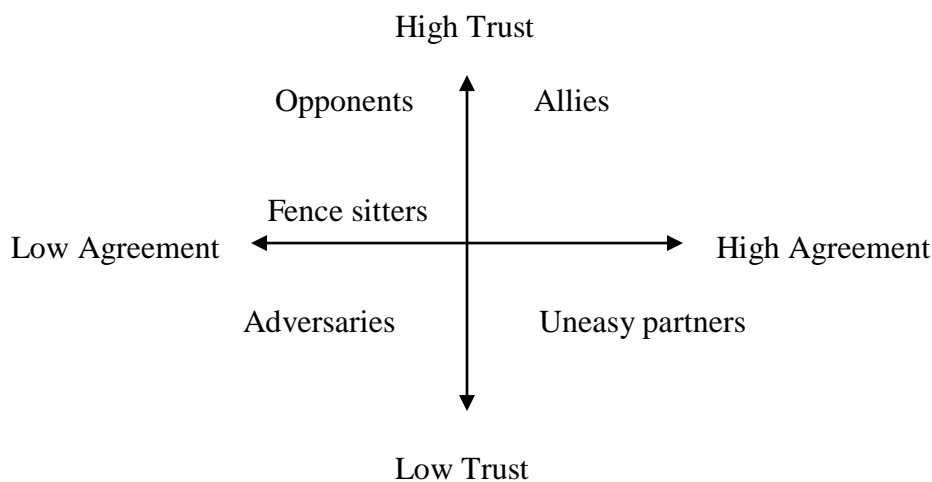
Who are the powerful members of a team you have worked on, at work or school? Where does their power come from – their position? Their leadership qualities? Their integrity?

Who are the weak members? Are they weak because of their position or their behavior?

How does trust or reliability influence personal power in a business? Do mistakes or broken promises make you more or less powerful?

What behaviors do strong supporters show? Does that type of behavior also increase their power?

Here is another matrix that presents this same idea a little bit differently. This one is called the Block Political Partnerships model, developed by Peter Block. For our purposes now, just think about how you fit into this matrix when it comes to your work.



Allies or supporters are people with whom we have high trust and high agreement – we have shared goals and can rely on each other. We may be allied on some issues and not others, or be less trusting of some people than others.

Opponents are not necessarily enemies – in fact, opponents often challenge us to think harder or differently about a problem or solution by questioning our plans or decisions. “Are you sure that’s the best way to handle that? What if we tried it this way instead?”

Weak supporters aren’t usually a problem for managers if they are not powerful people in the practice. For example, it doesn’t matter if a quiet, non-assertive person doesn’t agree with our new boarding policy, because they probably won’t voice their opinion anyway.

Adversaries are a problem, though. Powerful people with strong negative opinions can cause a lot of trouble for the practice if they don’t publicly support its goals. It’s OK to be an opponent and disagree or present your point of view. But once a decision is made it’s not OK to sabotage or publicly bad-mouth that decision. Leaders should be a positive influence on the team.

Can you apply it to a situation you’ve encountered in the past?

How and when could you use this diagram in a work place? At school?

Leadership can arise from anywhere in an organization. We are each a teacher, an example and a role model. Gandhi once said we must “become the change we want in the world.” At work, you must become the person you want to be working next to, the person who is a supporter, not a problem.

William James, the father of modern psychology, said that, “The greatest discovery of the 20th Century is that we have the power to change ourselves.” Thus we also have the power to change how we behave at work and within the team. We have the power to choose our responses to others’ behavior, too. In fact, we have the power to make our workplace better and the power to make it worse.

As a team member, you may be expected to set your own personal goals, as well as to participate in the goal setting of the practice as a whole. Your goal may be to become a management team member, a better doctor – or simply to become a more patient teacher, a more coachable student or a more effective team member.

If you start down the road of progress, deciding that you yourself will change and grow as the business grows, you will be setting a course toward success for both yourself and your hospital. The culture of a business, a nation or a family consists of the collective stories of all the individual members. It reflects the sense of purpose and meaningfulness of our work and our interconnectedness. Unfortunately, sometimes it also reflects confusion, stress, inefficiency and frustration. The role of strategic planning and goal setting is to find effective and healthy ways to deal with these setbacks while continuing to progress toward the vision we have co-created together.

What goals will you have for yourself during veterinary school?

When you graduate from school?

Two years out of school?

