

## WORKING FOR CHANGE

By Nan Boss, DVM  
Copyright© 2015 VetPartners™

Most veterinary hospitals have some strong personalities working in them. University hospitals are certainly no exception! As students, you may feel that you don't have much power over the system or that you are politically weak. As a new graduate veterinarian, you may feel much the same but in a practice or internship situation. You may find, though, that when you work together in a positive fashion to implement sensible, simple changes, you'll be able to accomplish quite a bit, whether it's in a university environment or as a new associate in a private practice.

You'll need to be politically smart about it though. A profession like veterinary medicine, especially one full of high powered specialist "experts," tends to encourage leaders and discourage those who are not very assertive. Meetings can get contentious, key teachers can be intimidating and those resistant to change can be loud and demanding. You may occasionally feel like curling up into the fetal position and hoping it will all go away.

This is not, however, the most effective way to deal with assertive people. On the contrary, they tend to respect those who stand up for themselves. Think of your center, your personal power. In threatening circumstances we can literally see someone's personal power slipping away. There are changes in posture, facial expression, gesture, movements and in the voice. In fact, you can almost see the person curl up and shrink as their emotional or spiritual center takes a hit. Can you picture this happening to someone you know – or yourself?

How do bullies decide to pick on and thieves decide to target? They pick up on those same body language signals. In a business or university setting it is less likely that someone will be bullied but very likely that their opinion will be ignored or devalued, even if they were brave enough to speak up. Those that are timid often feel disenfranchised or ignored. This in turn can lead to work performance problems, low self esteem and frustration.

Real difficulties can be overcome; it is only the imaginary ones that are unconquerable."  
Theodore N. Vail

Do you consider yourself sensitive and peace loving? Do you worry about whether people like you or fret about the next time you'll be called on at a meeting? If you avoid conflict and confrontation, don't speak up in meetings for fear of criticism, or ask someone else to handle a situation you could take on yourself if you were bold enough (like tell someone else to get a clue), you might want to try the following method.

The same shrinking and curling that the body tends to do when intimidated can be reversed by learning how to "Center" yourself. Physiologic states not only reflect our inner emotions but can also create emotion. Just as smiling releases endorphins that lighten your mood, acting and moving in a confident manner can actually improve your confidence. If you find your powerful center and train yourself to be poised and strong around that center, you will both project and feel more confident.

Practice walking, talking and gesturing with confidence. Speak clearly and breathe deeply – don't let your voice squeak or your breathing get rapid. Relax your jaw and your hands. Feel your inner strength. Even if this feels contrived and awkward to you at first, a self-generating feedback loop will begin to occur, and what seems artificial will become the real deal over time.

You can also learn to recognize your triggers and pivot away from the feelings of inadequacy that might follow. Too often our brains go down a thought path out of habit, not because of a conscious decision. Like a gerbil on a wheel, we run and run, using up all our energy without getting anywhere. Learn to head your gerbil away from the wheel before it gets on and starts running!

Do you wish you had more self-esteem? People tend to think that high self-esteem fosters success in academics, healthier relationships, better job performance and so on. We assume that adults with a positive self-image are more likely to succeed in their careers, remain married, stay healthy and be responsible citizens. According to Phillip Chard, who writes a weekly column on psychotherapy in the Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel, we're wrong about all of that.

Reliable research reveals that in fact, high self-esteem can actually create more problems than it prevents or resolves. For example, a study from the University of Iowa involving more than 23,000 students showed that a positive self-image was only weakly correlated with academic success. A correlation is also not a cause and there is no strong evidence that shows that self-esteem creates a better student or a more productive employee.

A cherished maxim of child rearing may also be a myth. Most of us believe that high self-esteem in teenagers reduces the risk of substance abuse and promiscuity. In fact, there is evidence that high self-esteem may amplify the chance of adolescent sexual activity. "Cool" young people may be less inhibited, display more swagger, and feel immune to harm, thus exposing themselves by more risky behavior.

Think low self-esteem increases the risk of criminal or aggressive behavior? Wrong again. Bullies are more self-confident and less anxious than their socially conforming peers. Perhaps if they were more self-critical they might be better citizens. Sometimes self-esteem is self-deluding. Self-image is usually better among those who describe themselves as attractive and happy, but there is scientific evidence to show that these same people have an unrealistic view of their physical beauty and success in life.

High self-regard may cause trouble in a marriage when one partner feels that "I deserve better." Low self-esteem may, on the other hand, cause us to stay with an abusive or non-affectionate mate because we don't feel we deserve better. A positive image may make someone more persistent during adversity and more gregarious, and thus more successful, but it may also make for poor workplace relationships.

What is the answer to the self-esteem riddle? As with many things, the answer probably lies in the middle. People who have moderate levels of self-esteem balanced by the capacity for measured self-criticism and self-doubt may have the best grasp on reality, and prove the healthiest overall.

Psychiatrists use a phrase called "imposter syndrome" to describe that feeling you have that you are in over your head or you don't think you are good enough. You are in a room full of important people and you feel about an inch tall. Or it's that sinking feeling when you look at your anatomy exam and think "How did I ever get accepted into veterinary school? I'm not smart enough to be here, what was I thinking?" It's chairing a committee and thinking "Who am I to tell these people what to do?" It's thinking "I'm not a leader, I'm just a manager." Have any of you ever felt that way?

Many of us end up in leadership positions, even though we didn't really plan to be there, and sometimes it makes us feel uncomfortable. In school it may be getting elected to be president of a club or marching into the Dean's office to try to change something. Once you graduate, you may have that same feeling when you become a practice owner or partner. As a practice grows,

we feel responsible for more and more people, who are counting on us to know what to do – and many times we don't. In a practice situation, we find ourselves wearing the hats of medical director, goal setter, inventory manager, finance director, marketing director, human resources manager – which may entail being guidance counselor, career counselor, sometimes marriage counselor and all too often garbage can for our team.

Sometimes we are thrust into these roles completely unprepared. We don't have to be famous, powerful or brilliant to fill all these positions, nor to be a leader, but it does take some work to do them well. You're not an imposter. You, too, can be a wise counselor to your veterinary school classmates, your coworkers or perhaps in an organization you volunteer for. Even those of us who have no formal leadership training, which is probably most of us in veterinary medicine, can rise to the occasion. Some of us even are pretty good at it, especially when we choose to work at it.

You have influence on those you work and study with and on the direction both you and your schools, practices and organizations are traveling in. We can choose, and help others choose, whether to be the best, the most innovative, the most reliable or the most world famous. In fact, our success is less about our abilities than it is about the choices we make and the goals we set.

Nobody is born wise. Like many important things, you can nurture and develop wisdom and leadership skills just like you develop any other skills or talents. Wisdom, in my mind, comes from taking the great thoughts and knowledge of others and applying them to your own life, your own work, your own practice culture. When you are a leader it sure helps to accumulate as much wisdom as you can, you're going to need it. In fact, 98% of veterinary continuing education dollars are spent on the medicine aspect of the job and only 2% on management. Yet 95% of the problems we deal with in practice every day are management issues. You might as well start learning how to deal with them now.

I'm a pretty practical person. I like to give nuts and bolts lectures that help people to implement new things in their hospitals. I don't want to expound for hours on what leaders are. I'd rather spend time on what leaders do and give you some tools to work with. So here is a little exercise to get you thinking. Hopefully, these questions will help you to feel more confident when you start to try to implement changes at work or school:

How will the changes you want to make affect your teachers/coworkers/bosses?

What objections do you think they might have?

How will you overcome them?

Will presenting suggestions for changes you want to make, in your curriculum or in practice protocols or in your internship goals, make you nervous or apprehensive? Do you expect to feel stressed or intimidated?

Are people with higher self-esteem more or less likely to make negative comments vs. positive ones at meetings? Why do you think so?

How will you overcome resistance to change amongst others?

How could you compromise or modify what you want to do?

Who do you think will help you make changes?

How could you get others to participate?

What could you achieve on your own? (Be the change you want to see.)

How will you know if what you are doing/introducing is helpful? Will you survey or obtain feedback before or afterwards?

How will you ensure that you don't fizzle out after a few weeks? It takes work to fully incorporate changes and keep them going.

How will you keep energized so you and your cohorts continue to push for changes?