

How can I stop catfights among staff members?

By Wendy S. Myers



Q. The practice owner recently promoted me to technician supervisor. One technician constantly berates veterinary assistants, sabotages their work and gossips about others. I've never managed people, and I don't know where to begin. How can I stop catfights among staff members and build a team attitude?

A. Like many first-time supervisors, you earned the title, and then the practice owner said, "Now go manage." Ask the owner to clarify your new duties and boundaries. You also need to develop leadership and management skills. Attend management seminars at AAHA and veterinary conferences, read management books and articles, and seek advice from other supervisors at your clinic. Developing a support network and a foundation of management skills will help you become a successful technician supervisor.

As a new manager, you need to win the trust of your team. Dealing with interpersonal problems such as bickering staff members is never easy. But avoidance will only make the situation worse. You'll lose the respect of technicians and veterinary assistants who work with you. "Deal with the situation the moment it happens," urges Pam Knoecklein, operations manager at Boston Road Animal Hospital, a group of six general and specialty practices in Springfield, Massachusetts. "Don't wait until a performance review to tell the technician that he or she needs to work on team attitude." Follow these six steps to stop gossip and reunite your team.

1. Discuss the situation privately and create an action plan with deadlines. Meet with the technician in the practice owner's office or a place where you can talk without interruptions. Citing specific examples, explain the technician's behavior and its effect on patient care and team morale. "Be a coach, not a critic," advises Dr. Nan Boss, owner of Grafton Small Animal Hospital in Grafton, Wisconsin, and author of *Educating Your Clients From A to Z* (AAHA Press, 1999).

Diagnose what's causing the technician's behavior. Is it a personality conflict with another veterinary assistant? Is the technician having problems at home and they're spilling over into work? Is the technician criticizing others because he or she lacks confidence and needs more training?

Once you determine the cause, tell the technician you're prepared to help and spell out the time frame in which change must occur. Work with the technician to develop an action plan, and then schedule follow-up meetings to check progress. If the situation isn't resolved within 90 days, you may need to give the technician a written warning.

2. Share teamwork expectations with your staff. Gather technicians and veterinary assistants for a department meeting. Say, “I’m your new supervisor and I need your help.” Describe your expectations for the team’s performance and ask what they expect from you as the supervisor. “Treat each other professionally and with dignity,” Knoecklein recommends. “Focus on your mission to provide excellent patient care as well as excellent client service.”

Employees at Grafton Small Animal Hospital follow this “Staff Member Bill of Rights”:

We believe every staff member is entitled to:

- Be treated respectfully and courteously by clients, staff members and doctors
- Be listened to
- Be accepted by the group
- Be praised for work done well
- Receive constructive feedback and be given the opportunity to grow and improve
- Have his or her personal life choice respected
- Make mistakes sometimes, be forgiven and allowed to try again

3. Schedule regular department meetings. Technicians and veterinary assistants can meet weekly, biweekly or monthly. During department meetings, review protocols, conduct training and encourage mentoring. “Be sure everyone is exposed to good communication skills and how to handle stressful situations. Send a few people to a seminar,” Knoecklein recommends. “Technicians and veterinary assistants have to communicate to do their jobs well—whether or not they interact with clients.”

Staff members at Grafton Small Animal Hospital also role-play client and patient situations. The hospital closes for four hours each Wednesday for staff training. Dr. Boss poses scenarios such as, “You’re getting ready to perform a dental prophy and you notice the cat’s gums are blue and the pulse oximeter reads 60. What would you do?” Learning as a group fosters teamwork and ensures consistent patient care. “Everyone is always learning new skills, so staff members don’t have an I-know-more-than-you attitude,” Dr. Boss says.

4. Design activities that rebuild relationships. At Carson Valley Veterinary Hospital in Minden, Nevada, a team presents a training program during monthly staff meetings. For example, a receptionist, technician, animal caretaker and veterinarian teach a lesson in dentistry that addresses all areas of the hospital. This builds relationships among departments and keeps everyone focused on the hospital’s mission, says Hospital Administrator Heather Howell, RVT, MBA.

To rebuild relationships and prevent “us vs. them” attitudes between technicians and veterinary assistants, appoint a pair to tackle a special project. For example, a technician and veterinary assistant may work together to update a client handout, present a training program or plan a wet lab. “You only learn how to manage a critical care patient by doing it with supervision,” says Deborah Glottmann, hospital administrator at Onion River Animal Hospital in Montpelier, Vermont.

5. Reward team performance with incentives and fun events. Glottmann hung a t-thank-you board and placed a pad of sticky notes in the staff lounge. Team members jot a note about a helpful co-worker and post it on the board for everyone to see. “The simplicity of thanking each other has built respect and camaraderie among team members,” she says.

Each quarter, Howell surprises the staff at Carson Valley Veterinary Hospital with a fun activity such as a barbecue, pumpkin carving or scavenger hunt. Staff members count off numbers and get paired with different people each time. Howell also uses team activities in management books. Try exercises from *Team-Building Activities for Every Group* (Rec Room Publishing, 1999) and *Building Team Spirit: Activities for Inspiring and Energizing Teams* (McGraw-Hill, 1997). Employees also earn Carson Valley Bucks, which they redeem for days off, uniforms, and other perks.

Staff members at Grafton Small Animal Hospital drop notes in the “Way to Go” certificate box. During staff meetings, Dr. Boss reads aloud comments such as “Thanks for helping me deal with a difficult discharge” and “Thanks for noticing a boarding dog’s diarrhea so we could address it immediately.”

6. Address team attitude in your employee manual and performance reviews. As the technician supervisor, you’ll conduct performance reviews for veterinary assistants and technicians. Meet with each person to develop learning goals. Discuss new responsibilities, continuing-education needs and career goals. Then ask each team member, “How can I help you accomplish these goals?” Dr. Boss meets with staff members three times per year to provide feedback and check progress on goals. “That’s how you build a strong team—stress self-improvement,” she advises.

At Onion River Animal Hospital, Glottmann asks staff members, “If you were the manager, what three things would you do differently to make the practice environment better?” This helps her tap new ideas from front-line staff.

The policy manual at Carson Valley Veterinary Hospital describes expectations for team contributions, a no-gossip policy and what to do if you have a complaint. “If you have a complaint, take it to the person who can solve it,” the manual states. “If someone complains to you and you can’t help, take it to the person who can.”

By following these steps, you can develop a team attitude and become an effective leader. As a first-time supervisor, you also need the support of the practice owner. Meet with the practice owner regularly for mentoring, feedback and advice. “The owner will develop trust in your judgment, and you’ll get guidelines on when you need to consult the owner,” Dr. Boss says. “If things aren’t going well, ask for help.”

About the Author

Wendy S. Myers is the author of *Your High-Performance Practice: Building Stronger Client Relationships Through Superior Pet Care* (Merial, 2002). She owns Communication Solutions in Denver and consults with veterinarians and industry on marketing and client service. She is the former editor of *Veterinary Economics* magazine. You may reach her at (720) 344-2347 or wmyers@mycommunicationsolutions.com.