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Building your practice on clients who respect the limitations set on your veterinarians' availability can create a more positive workplace environment in which boundaries are enforced.

Boundaries Round Table Discussion

At the 2022 AAEP Convention, a dynamic round table discussion about boundaries in equine veterinary practice yielded valuable insights.

By Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on EquiManagement.com

Dr. Jamie Pribyl moderated a panel discussion at the conclusion of the Lifestyle & Wellness Session of the 2022 AAEP Annual Convention. Utilizing audience polling, the panelists prioritized topics, with the top three being managing boss/associate expectations, implementing personal boundaries and promoting a healthy workplace culture.

Two scenarios that had been prepared beforehand were introduced to start the panel discussions. The first was: "You are chastised for not answering a client's phone call on your weekend off. Your boss is always available, and you do not want to have to carry your work phone with you if you're

not on call. What is the conversation that needs to be had?"

Panelist Dr. Amy Grice responded that because the boss's habit and business model is to always be available for client communication at all times, they are probably going to be resistant to change. She suggested that the associate voice their dilemma by saying a version of, "When I field calls and texts when I'm not on call, I feel frustrated/stressed/angry. Would you be willing to discuss having some boundaries around communication during times when I am not on duty?" She explained that by asking a question and stating how you feel, you're sharing your perspective and asking for a specific outcome. This is different than coming from a place of anger,

which is important because trying to set boundaries from a place of anger is rarely successful.

Speaking to this scenario, Dr. Justin High discussed how clients sometimes push back when they cannot reach the veterinarian they prefer to speak to because they don't respect the boundaries that have been communicated. He recommended building your practice on the clients who DO respect the limitations that you set on your doctors' availability. Dr. Nick Frank counseled that owners need to create opportunities for constructive dialog. He cautioned that traditional, engrained approaches often drive away new entrants into equine veterinary medicine.

The second scenario for the panel was: "A trainer calls from

the Canadian border on a Saturday afternoon. They forgot to add a horse to the health certificate and need paperwork faxed to them to get to the horse show. No exam was done on the horse, but your boss is calling and requesting you complete the paperwork."

Dr. Berkley Chesen related that as a young associate, she didn't feel that she could say "no." She felt too intimidated by the power dynamic. From her more experienced perspective, she recommended that the associate "put it back on the boss." Grice suggested calling the boss and saying, "I think you're comfortable with this, so I'll email you the information so you can handle it. I'm not comfortable because the horse has not been examined. I'm not willing to put my license on the line." Dr. Stacey Cordivano stated that ethical and moral dilemmas in young veterinarians are strongly correlated with burnout, so she counseled, "Hold your ground." In conclusion, Dr. Kelly Zeytoonian shared that she experienced this scenario as a young graduate, and that she still experiences anxiety just thinking about it years later.

Considering the stress and anxiety that these scenarios create, Pribyl asked the panel for suggestions to manage the inevitable discomfort after saying "no." Cordivano said practicing self-compassion and mindfulness is very helpful in these situations. She also suggested leaning on supportive colleagues in your circle. Grice added, "Ask yourself: What would you say to your best friend if they were in this situation? Then say that to yourself."

The discussion turned to audience questions that sought to balance client needs and expectations with those of veterinarians. Robust discussion, relevant storytelling, and reflective listening created a dynamic close to a powerful session. **EV**

Boundaries for Equine Veterinarians

Keynote Speaker John Townsend outlined ways for equine veterinarians gain strength and clarity in boundaries.

Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on [EquiManagement.com](https://www.equinmanagement.com)



"Boundaries are a property line and a way of owning what's inside your life and your heart," stated Dr. Townsend at the 2022 AAEP Convention.

More than 2 million copies of the book *Boundaries*, written by Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud, have been sold. In this popular book, the authors discuss how to take responsibility for one's life by using boundaries. Having this well-known expert speak to the attendees of the convention was exciting. In our profession, equine veterinarians are often working 24/7/365 with few to no boundaries. While Townsend's presentation would have benefited from some visuals for the audience to engage with, the content was full of insights.

Townsend began with defining passion as "some endeavor that allows you to lose time." In other words, your passion is something in which you become so immersed that you don't notice time is passing. Because equine veterinary medicine requires both great passion and great sacrifice, having self-advocacy that creates space both for you AND your career is essential, he said. "Giving from an empty cup leads to loss of passion," he opined. Because self-care preserves the self, it can help you maintain your passion. It is

NOT selfish, he insisted.

A big part of self-care is maintaining boundaries, Townsend stated. "Boundaries are a property line, and a way of owning what's inside your life and your heart." He asked the audience to a great show of hands, "Have you ever taken responsibility for the happiness of a miserable person?" Continuing, he said, "It can't be done!" Many in the audience nodded in recognition of this truth from personal experience. It is important to protect yourself by learning to say "no," which is something nearly everyone struggles with. There are good reasons for why our work makes saying "no" difficult. Many veterinarians have financial concerns and fear the consequences of disappointing a client or a boss. But without some parity between our resources (energy, time, support, kindness, money) and our responsibilities, the risk of burnout rises sharply.

Having strong boundaries is hard in part because, unfortunately, some horse owners are needy. They inhabit a culture of entitlement where they feel special and believe their needs come first, deserving the best without earning or deserving

it, the speaker continued. In the small world of horses, word of client dissatisfaction can travel fast. Some veterinarians are "people pleasers." They are kind but have a fear of conflict, Townsend said. Some develop high anxiety with catastrophic thinking about finances and the future because they have exerted no control over their lives. However, he continued, "There are solutions, starting with a mindset and moving toward strength and clarity."

The speaker then outlined four tools to gain strength and clarity in boundaries. First, he recommended creating a Task Priorities Page with four categories to help shape your time. The categories are Must Do & Time Fixed (e.g., daughter's ballet recital); Must Do & Time Flexible (e.g., dinner with the family "x" nights/month); Important but Not a Must Do (e.g., Continuing Education); and Would Be Nice (e.g., Netflix binge). Each of your tasks should be assigned to one of these categories.

The second tool Townsend recommended was a Visual Monthly Calendar. In this calendar, you can schedule your work hours, self-care, relationship care, parenting,

community service, and recreation in advance. As the speaker said, "If it's not on the calendar, it probably won't happen." Additionally, with your priorities in writing and scheduled, the "no" response becomes "Sorry, I'm not available" or "That doesn't work for me."

Thirdly, the speaker stated that setting Ground Rules for Client Accessibility in writing was critical. These rules would include when you are reachable and when you are not, and what options you will provide when you are not available. Importantly, give yourself personal margins for the times you will make exceptions to your rules. "While your rules will be in writing, you should say them to your client out loud, in a warm direct way, not with a policy paper," he recommended.

The last tool asks you to Strengthen Your Mental State by learning to be warm, professional, and firm, while detaching from the need to be liked by the person to whom you're speaking, said Townsend. It is necessary to budget financially and emotionally for the possibility of losing a client, he added. He suggested asking yourself: "What's my limit? What can I tolerate? Am I indispensable?" Understanding that no one is indispensable, whether veterinarian, staff member or client, is imperative, he said.

By figuring out how far you'll go ("Will you rob a bank? Break the law?") you can begin to realize where you will draw the line, he said. He then recommended removing the toxic employees that you believe are indispensable, and projects that you will say "Why didn't I do that sooner?"

In closing, Townsend urged listeners to have at least three supportive people (they cannot be your employees, he warned) with whom they can be vulnerable, and who will feed their spirit with support, affirmation, and helpful suggestions. He suggested taking action steps within seven days to start on a new path. **EM**



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In order to increase psychological safety, leaders must be approachable and accessible, and they must seek out insights and ideas from their team.

Psychological Safety in Equine Practice

Dr. Stacy Cordivano says that psychological safety within the workplace is one of the most important factors leading to team effectiveness, learning behaviors and employee satisfaction.

Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on EquiManagement.com

Dr. Stacy Cordivano, well-known for her podcast “The Whole Veterinarian,” presented a compelling argument for improving employee satisfaction and retention at the convention. She presented evidence from studies that have shown that psychological safety within the workplace is one of the most important factors leading to team effectiveness, learning behaviors and employee satisfaction.

The definition of psychological safety is “the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking,” she said. Cordivano explained the concept in the following way: “Psychological safety is a condition in which you feel included, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized or punished in some way.” The speaker asked in a survey question on the Facebook site

Equine Vet-2-Vet, “Have you been penalized or punished at work for a mistake or for offering an idea?” Sixty-seven percent of respondents answered “Yes.” Globally, studies have shown that only 47% of all employees feel that their workplaces are psychologically safe, she continued.

Cordivano said that the basis for psychological safety includes a workplace that accepts candor. Practice leaders must forgive mistakes, see questions as a strength rather than a weakness, and allow employees to question the status quo without fear. A culture that has this kind of safety increases engagement, innovation and productivity, she added. A study by Dr. Amy Edmondson, published in the Harvard Business Review, reported that the highest-performing work teams had high psychological safety. So did a multi-year study at Google, the speaker shared.

Building psychological safety in veterinary practices is important,

Cordivano noted. In the 2021 AVMA State of the Profession report, 47% of those considering leaving the profession said that they are doing so because of the practice culture. The benefits of a workplace with psychological safety, the speaker stated, include decreased turnover and increased engagement.

Studies in human healthcare in relation to costs and medical errors have shown that disengaged employees lead to safety risks and staff turnover. Turnover means a higher number of less experienced workers on staff, along with higher recruiting and training costs.

Speaking about Edmondson’s work, the speaker shared that confronting volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (aka VUCA) in a business relates directly to the bottom line. This is because employee observations, questions, ideas and concerns provide vital information about what is going on in

the organization. She stated that the data are clear in demonstrating that teams with high psychological safety have higher performance measures.

A multi-year study of teams at Google, code-named Project Aristotle, looked at all of the attributes that explain team performance. Attributes included clear goals, dependable colleagues, personally meaningful work, and a belief that your work has impact. In that study, a team was never measured to be “high-performing” without the presence of psychological safety. Cordivano explained that these outcomes follow the fact that interpersonal safety within a team allows for increased learning, collaboration, and innovation. Additionally, she noted, within human healthcare, research shows that employees who feel they work in a psychologically safe environment are able to connect with patients more easily, provide better clinical outcomes, and more easily learn from failure.

Change is the responsibility of practice leaders, the speaker concluded. In order to increase psychological safety, leaders must be approachable and accessible. They must seek out insights and ideas from their team. They must also have awareness of the importance of a learning mindset, and admit their fallibility, she added. In addition, it is important to be inclusive in decision-making and to model asking for help and taking interpersonal risk.

Once the leadership team has successfully created this environment, providing ongoing appreciation for the team’s contributions is necessary. If team members are unwilling to contribute to the collective environment of safety, practice leaders must take action, she said. Practice leaders must continually encourage and reinforce the goal of progress, not perfection. By staying open to new ideas and feedback, your practice will benefit from more engaged and productive employees. As a result, they will positively affect the culture and the financial bottom line. **EM**



New veterinarians should shadow experienced doctors on routine and emergency calls when they first join the practice.

Mentoring an Early-Career Equine Veterinarian

Dr. Cara Wright offered a thoughtful approach for mentoring new equine veterinarians in private practice settings.

Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on EquiManagement.com

Dr. Cara Wright presented a thoughtful approach to mentoring new equine veterinarians in private practice settings at the convention. She noted that new graduates can struggle with adjusting to a new environment, creating healthy relationships with staff, and practicing with diagnostic and treatment options that might be limited compared to experiences in veterinary school. Providing a structured mentorship program with realistic expectations is critical in achieving a good outcome, she said.

The challenges that new graduates face are numerous. In fact, they exist for all veterinarians of any experience level when joining a new work environment, Wright stated. Learning new practice management software, developing rapport with team members, understanding different practice protocols for various tasks, working with more limited inventory or equipment resources, and meeting new clients are all

understandably stressful for any doctor new to the team. For the new graduate, there are additional hurdles to navigate, she said. Notably, graduates need to learn leadership in new interpersonal roles with support staff, clients, and other veterinarians. In addition, efficiency in private practice workflow is much more important and expected than in a university setting, leaving a slower new graduate often feeling inadequate.

Adjusting to the ambiguity of “real life” veterinary practice can also be hard for those new to private practice, Wright continued. When a case cannot be definitively diagnosed, and treatment must be started for the most likely scenario, frustration and anxiety can result. Inability or unwillingness of clients to undertake the very best of available care can cause additional stress, she said, and the slow pace of examinations and decision-making can leave both clients and support staff dissatisfied. Adding to these issues is often a lack of communication and leadership

experience, as well as a busy practice environment that might not have the capacity for mentoring. All these factors can result in an erosion of confidence and lack of progress in skills-building.

The solution to these difficulties lies with carefully planned strategies for mentorship, stated the speaker. New graduates should never be slotted into roles that technicians could perform. “Make sure the mentee is set up for success,” Wright emphasized. Assigning an experienced technician to a new veterinarian can be extraordinarily helpful, as they can provide guidance in practice procedures, setting up and operating equipment, and utilizing practice management software. They also serve as a familiar bridge to clients, and a calm presence during an unexpected clinical situation, she said. A senior doctor should review medical records and invoices to be sure they meet practice standards. They should also help teach the expectations, policies and procedures.

Initially, the graduate should take on appointments for low-complexity issues, allowing for extra time, the speaker noted. These realistic time management expectations are necessary to allow a smooth transition to practice. At first, many new graduates ride with more experienced doctors for a period of time in a phased transition, Wright explained. In Phase 1, the new doctor shadows experienced doctors on both routine and emergency cases. When riding together, the new graduate writes the record and invoice. The senior DVM then modifies and critiques the writeup.

The duration of each phase will differ between practices and doctors, she said. In Phase II, routine calls for wellness or simple complaints begin. These should be low-stress appointments with “easy” clients, she stated. As skills increase, the new clinician can begin emergency duty with available backup.

After about 6 months, Phase III may begin, with increased complexity of cases seen independently, but continued exposure to cases attended by a senior clinician. At these appointments, the newer doctor should be in charge as much as possible, with the senior doctor present for advice and support.

Wright recommended using a Skills Matrix with a timeline for accountability. Clear metrics are important to ensure progress and allow adequate opportunities for proficiency. The Skills Matrix displays the competencies needed, along with the current and desired proficiency level, she explained. At a monthly check-in, both the mentee and the mentor rate each skill. They make action plans to ensure continual progress.

At meetings or in any mentoring conversation, Wright recommended asking if the mentee is open to receiving feedback at that moment, reinforcing the positive, and providing suggestions for improvement, all while maintaining an attitude of curiosity rather than judgment. She said to ask, “What did you learn? What could you have done better?” **EM**



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It is essential for equine practice leaders to demonstrate time management skills that allow for a work-life balance.

Dr. Amy Grice began her presentation at the convention by defining time management as “the process of planning and controlling how much time to spend on specific activities.” Good time management enables you to complete more priorities in a block of time. It also lowers stress, improves your work-life balance and leads to greater contentment, she stated.

Many equine practitioners struggle to have a life outside of work due to the demands of the career. Practice owners and their behaviors have a significant effect on their employees’ work-life balance since leaders model the way. Because of this, it is essential for practice leaders to demonstrate time management skills that allow for a work-life balance. “It is very difficult to achieve balance in a practice with a culture that worships a work-centered life,” she opined.

Over the course of a veterinarian’s career, they will have changing needs for balance. As a new parent, or as a daughter or son tending to an aging parent, or as a parent of a school-age child, your responsibilities will vary. You might need to take more time off from work to tend to these responsibilities. As an older person, you might want more time at work or less. As a seasoned practitioner, you might enjoy teaching the next generation, either at work or with your son’s Little League team. Being attuned to what you need for a happy life is important, she stated.

Grice relayed a story of feeling burned out during a busy breeding season, during which she offered herself a space for a choice. She could drive over the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge and fling her cell phone into the waters of the Hudson River below, and then get on the NYS Thruway and drive away and never come back. This illusion of choice helped her keep slogging

Time Management in Equine Practice

Dr. Amy Grice presented on the importance of time management for equine practitioners and shared strategies for improving time management skills.

Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on EquiManagement.com

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
Important	Patient/Client Emergencies Crises at Home or at Work Tasks with Deadlines Pressing Problems Completing medical records & invoices	Strategic Planning & Scheduling Relationship Building Goal setting Personal/Professional Growth Rest/Recreation
Not Important	Some Interruptions Some Phone calls Some Email/Postal Mail Some Tasks at Home or Work	Time Wasters (Social media, TV) Some Phone Calls Some Email/Postal Mail Some Tasks at Home or Work

Communication Boundaries in a Healthy Workplace Culture

Dr. Nicholas Frank advocated for establishing a policy in your veterinary practice to not send emails on weekends and holidays.

Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on EquiManagement.com

MUST DO & TIME FIXED	MUST DO & TIME FLEXIBLE
Daughter's ballet recital Getting enough sleep Family or Patient Emergency Feeding the horses/dogs/kids	Dinner with Family 12x/month Working out/Exercise Paying Bills Self-care Relationships
IMPORTANT BUT NOT MUST DO	WOULD BE NICE
Office maintenance Upgrading Technology Cleaning the house?	Netflix binge Cleaning the house Spa day or massage

through the day, but it was the death of her mother a year later that brought her up short with the reality of needing a life beyond her work, she said. With that reflection, she began to ride her horse in the morning several days a week before beginning the day's calls. Her story illustrated her realization of her need for balance and time management.

Pivoting to discussing time management, Grice explained about a time when her desk and life at work were so out of control, with teetering piles of papers and tasks she needed to do, that one spring she got up at 2 a.m. and went into the office to get caught up. But managing time and tasks can be done better than that, she insisted.

The speaker then explained a Matrix developed by Stephen Covey that he divided into four quadrants, each representing how your work time can be divided based on significance and urgency.

The matrix squares symbolize your time, she said. The four quadrants can be considered Do (Urgent & Important), Plan (Not Urgent But Important), Delegate (Urgent but Not Important) and Eliminate (Not Urgent & Not Important). The main goal is to spend as much time as possible in Planning while spending less time in the others. According to Covey, this is the fundamental reality underlying time manage-

ment, she noted.

Grice stated that "Perfectionism is the enemy. 'Good enough' IS good enough for most tasks." Another better way to think about time management relates back to John Townsend's ideas, she added. By thinking in terms of the time flexibility and importance of the task, you can place it in one of the following quadrants: Must Do & Time Fixed, Must Do & Time Flexible, Important but not Must Do, and Would Be Nice, she stated. Considering the return on an activity in terms of your productivity and well-being can help you decide where to spend your time.

A Daily/Weekly/Monthly Task List will help you remember all your pending tasks, the speaker recommended. Writing down all due dates or deadlines, and prioritizing importance, helps you to put your duties into perspective. It gives you a clear picture of which activities you should perform first and those which can be later. Having a plan to sort your tasks will help you feel more control over your time as you delegate and discard, and then get to work on the critical things, she opined.

In summary, Grice stated: "Deciding how to spend your time is very important, because time is finite. Determining your priorities and living your life in a balanced way is up to you." **EM**

At the convention, Dr. Nicholas Frank, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, presented his experiences in introducing new workplace communication boundaries for the faculty and residents of the Department of Clinical Sciences. In response to the perceived need for more "downtime" from email communication, he recommended a policy of not emailing each other on weekends and holidays.

Ahead of implementing the change, Frank collected feedback from all the affected doctors. Those in favor of the proposal called attention to the perceived pressure of responding to a message sent from those higher in the power hierarchy. They also emphasized the need for time away from responding to work messages, especially when spending non-work time with families. Those against the policy relayed that it was more convenient to send emails during off-time and that they didn't expect people to respond. Some felt that such a directive would limit their freedom, and others felt there was a lack of understanding of how busy they were during working hours. Some commented that a flood of

Veterinarians who receive emails and text messages from colleagues on the weekends often feel pressured to respond. Implementing a no-email policy on weekends and holidays can improve well-being and work-life balance.



emails on Monday would be difficult to manage.

Still, the department believed that the policy would increase well-being and work-life balance. They encouraged faculty members working on weekends to write emails and store them in a Drafts folder. They could finish sending the emails on Monday. Or, they could use a delivery scheduling feature to arrange delivery after the weekend. Over time, those who did not speak up in meetings expressed support or appreciation for the new policy by email or through one-on-one conversations. Frank used this example to highlight the difficulty in establishing communication boundaries within organizations due to the variation in stakeholders' preferences.

Frank then discussed the need to extend the parameters of boundaries to include texting, vacation management, meeting times and inclusivity. Inclusive organizational principles require allocating time to develop them. Members of the organization must lead through example with words and actions. They must redefine expectations for an "excellent veterinarian."

Change management is challenging, he said. To implement change effectively, he advocated for starting with individual meetings with all stakeholders to gather input. Next, he suggested holding group meetings to identify values and principles and to set expectations. The organization can then focus on holistic goals that do not ignore different perspectives, but rather concentrate on the fact that every member of the practice contributes in different ways.

In closing, the speaker counseled that deliberate planning of the implementation of a new process is essential. Incremental progress is to be expected, he said, and strong, engaged leadership must be present for success. **EM**

Are We Honest About Our Communication Boundaries?

Dr. Stacey Cordivano emphasized the importance of setting healthy boundaries in equine veterinary medicine and highlighted the negative impact of porous boundaries.

Amy L. Grice, VMD, MBA, on EquiManagement.com



By clearly communicating boundaries with clients, equine veterinarians can achieve a better work-life balance.

During the Lifestyle and Wellness Session at the convention, Dr. Stacey Cordivano spoke about the importance of understanding your unspoken boundaries and learning to communicate them. She quoted Brené Brown, saying, "When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated. This is why we sometimes attack who they are, which is far more hurtful than addressing a behavior or a choice."

Cordivano went on to define boundaries as a way to communicate our needs to others via words or actions. She said boundaries are unhealthy when they are either porous or rigid. When people lack boundaries, she continued, they often experience burnout, resentment, frustration, anger, anxiety or depression. Sometimes, this results in negative actions of gossip, avoidance and isolation. None of these are conducive to a healthy life.

Many people have trouble setting boundaries, she said. Some are fearful of being seen as rude or uncaring, or they are afraid of being ostracized in the future. Others are people-pleasers who believe their value in the world comes only from helping others. People-pleasers might even believe that some types of relationships shouldn't have any boundaries. Setting limits is hard because it requires self-reflection, time and energy. It's no wonder so people struggle with boundaries.

By defining the problem or issue first and then determining the solution that best fits your values, you can determine what type of boundary makes the most sense for you, Cordivano said. To communicate your limits, keep it short and clear by directly stating your need or request. Or, simply say "no." This requires becoming more comfortable with being uncomfortable. Sometimes, being uncomfortable prevents people from doing what they know is right

for them. With practice, it becomes less uncomfortable to advocate for yourself.

Cordivano gave several examples of communication boundary challenges that are common in equine veterinary medicine. With clients, she talked about the late-night text asking for a prepurchase exam the following morning, or a client asking for your cell phone number to keep you updated on her horse's manure output overnight. For co-workers, she described the boss that asked you to unexpectedly cover emergency duty on a Sunday when you've already made plans, and a colleague who returned a shared ultrasound covered with gel and shavings.

In more personal examples, she noted that you might have trouble stopping yourself from checking your work email on your phone during dinner with your spouse. Or, you might say you're too busy to visit a mental health professional, even though you feel you could use the help.

In closing, the speaker quoted Henry Cloud, co-author of the book *Boundaries*, saying "Setting boundaries inevitably involves taking responsibility for your choices. You are the one who makes them. You are the one who must live with their consequences. And you are the one who may be keeping yourself from making the choices you could be happy with." **EM**



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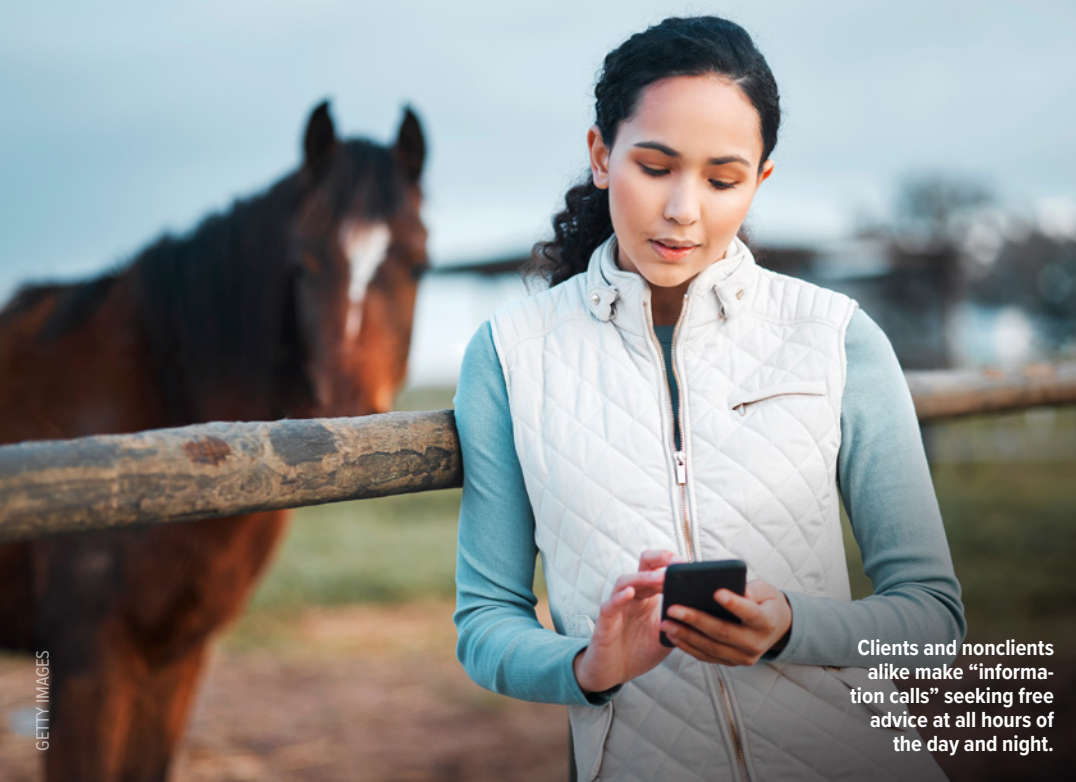
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Clients and nonclients alike make “information calls” seeking free advice at all hours of the day and night.

How To Reduce Telephone Time in Equine Practice

More efficient client communication can improve veterinarians' well-being and value.

By Jennifer Selvig, DVM, on TheHorse.com

Dr. Mary Beth Whitcomb, professor emerita at the University of California (UC), Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine, is well-known for her extensive expertise in equine ultrasonography and previously served as the clinical director at the UC Davis vet school. During the convention, she shared her findings related to excessive client communication and its toll on practitioners. She also discussed what can be done to make client communication more efficient and less taxing.

Whitcomb explained that excessive unbilled phone time contributes to reduced well-being, reduced salaries, and possibly increased attrition from equine practice. She noted that this was especially true for residents, as communication at all hours interfered with personal

time, including eating and sleeping. Phone calls lasting 30 to 60 minutes were not unusual, and practitioners would often feel the need to make duplicate phone calls regarding the same patient.

Based on her experience at private practices while traveling to do ultrasonography education, Whitcomb noted that private practitioners suffer from the same issues. Clients and nonclients alike make “information calls” seeking free advice at all hours of the day and night.

Whitcomb emphasized that she doesn't want to diminish the importance of necessary client communications. “We need to be more efficient at communication, not worse at it,” she said. She observed that in equine practice, time on the road can play into inefficiencies. Talking to clients for long periods while driving teaches them they have unlimited

time to ask questions. Accessibility via smartphones, social media, private messaging, texting, and email has led to the expectation of immediate responses.

Recognizing that phone time has opportunity costs is key. That cost can be anything from missing appointment opportunities to catching up on records to having personal downtime. “When we give away our time, it devalues our expertise,” said Whitcomb.

In comparison, small animal practice has better established client boundaries; often, the sheer number of patients per day precludes prolonged conversations. Clients also have reduced accessibility to the veterinarians in that it is unusual for them to know or use a doctor's private contact information. “We can retrain our clients” in this model, Whitcomb said.

It's important to recognize the emotional drivers of excessive communication for veterinarians. Is it a desire to be liked by the client? A belief that answering every question will earn client respect and loyalty? A desire to please the practice owner? A desire to retain the client at all costs? Changing communication requires a change in behavior from veterinarians and clients alike. “Reducing the quantity of communications does not reduce their quality,” stressed Whitcomb.

To start, set time goals for calls. Look at the clock before dialing the phone, and plan an exit. Learn to frame the call: “I'm in between appointments and have just a few minutes to give you an update.” Learn from doctors who are naturally good at efficient conversations—listen to the words they use. Practice before dialing a difficult client.

Whitcomb recommends having a communications policy for the practice that applies not only to doctors but to everyone answering phones. “It can be a one-page, simple document,” she said, which establishes clear expectations. It should include preferred and allowed method(s) of communication, a personal cell phone policy, emergency communication procedures, appropriate hours of communication, and behavioral expectations of clients. It can also cover things like frequency of communications from clients and from the veterinary clinic; more than one or two calls per day is probably too much, depending on the case. Prolonged phone calls should be transitioned into appointments.

Whitcomb concluded that equine practitioners should remind clients, and themselves, that excessive communication interferes with our ability to care for all our patients. And while client communications are essential, quality and quantity are not necessarily related. Placing a focus on communication efficiency can improve a veterinarian's well-being and value to clients and colleagues. 🐾



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Common pain points among equine practitioners include the nature of client access and time not being respected, patient care disconnect between doctors and horse owners, and being asked to stay late and see “just one more appointment.”

Developing Thoughtful Client Communication Boundaries

Setting boundaries can help veterinarians protect their personal time and have clearer communication with their clients.

By Jennifer Selvig, DVM, on TheHorse.com

Dr. Kelly Zeytoonian, is an equine veterinary consultant and owner of the seven-doctor, two-location practice Starwood Equine, in Woodside, California. At the convention, she spoke about setting boundaries effectively with both clients and team members. She emphasized that boundaries are important to her, because she is a mom to human and fur babies, participates in several sports, and wants to develop practice life that is sustainable for all her employees.

Zeytoonian explained why veterinarians might often feel resentment or guilt, even while being away at a conference like the AAEP’s—these feelings stem from a lack of well-defined boundaries that aren’t clearly communicated.

Then she identified common pain points among equine practitioners: emergencies, the nature of client access and time not being respected, paying themselves appropriately, the ability to fully unplug, patient care disconnect between doctors and horse owners, and being asked to stay

late in order to see “just one more appointment.”

Zeytoonian explained how she sets boundaries to deal with these pain points. For example, her practice will only guarantee emergency service to clients who use them for basic wellness services: vaccines, dentistry, annual checkups, fecal egg counts, and Coggins testing. Otherwise, it is the veterinarian’s decision whether he or she can see the emergency.

Zeytoonian considers this an opportunity to drive business back to equine practices and reduce the

likelihood of clients using lay teeth floaters and administering their own vaccines.

Regarding client communication, she stressed that if you’re feeling resentful about someone trying to contact you in a particular way, you must communicate with them the acceptable ways to contact you. Zeytoonian recommends using automated responses on texts and email indicating the client must call the office for the best service and response time. For team communication, she prefers to use the messaging app Slack, because she can turn off notifications when needed. Within her team, if a veterinarian is going to be out of the office, he or she ensures all medical records are complete and cases turned over to another doctor prior to leaving. Then the office follows a strict rule of not bothering people when they are out.

“We have much less burnout among our team members because they’ve been actively involved in the process,” Zeytoonian said.

For payment, she requires all clients to pay at the time of service, have a credit card on file, or be on a 30-day billing program, with no exceptions. She recommends getting written agreements from clients, with signatures via DocuSign. All new clients are required to complete the paperwork and have a credit card on file prior to scheduling an appointment.

“It self-selects for clients that are in line with those expectations and respectful of them,” she said. “There are fewer misunderstandings and fewer angry client calls.”

Why are boundaries important? “The thing that I have found with all the protocols we’ve put in place is that the team doesn’t need me,” Zeytoonian said.

And while that can be scary, she can then focus on other things in her life that are important, while knowing that her “first baby”—her practice—will be OK when she’s not available. 🐾

The Veterinarian's Guilt Factor of Never Enough

Dr. Jamie Pribyl explains how busy equine veterinarians 'can do it all, but not all at once.'

By Jennifer Selvig, DVM, on TheHorse.com

Dr. Jamie Pribyl, a professional services veterinarian for Boehringer Ingelheim, spoke about resisting the guilt that comes with juggling life as a veterinarian, parent, and farm owner during a presentation at the convention. Pribyl is a former general equine practitioner and practice owner who transitioned to an industry position in 2020. She and her husband have a 10-year-old daughter and run a small Quarter Horse breeding operation on their farm in Minnesota.

She began by asking and answering a few questions: Am I doing enough? "I never feel like it." Am I keeping everyone happy? "Impossible." Do I feel guilty? "All

the time!" And, alluding to the demands of an equine vet with a family and personal life: Is this how normal people live? "Probably not."

"Action bias" is the feeling of never doing enough, Pribyl explained. It's a piece of what some people call "toxic productivity" or the need to constantly be doing something "productive." Action bias might exist because of the veterinary profession's culture, she said. The often-celebrated "hustle lifestyle" of equine practice is evident when they ask one another, "How are you? Are you busy?" and inevitably praise each other's overbooked schedules.

Alongside the hustle is "competitive culture"—comparing oneself to colleagues and friends—often

rooted in social media, which Pribyl reminded the veterinary audience doesn't always reflect real life. She quoted President Theodore Roosevelt: "Comparison is the thief of joy," adding, "Remember to focus on what you bring to the table."

Pribyl explained that guilt can be healthy when it's motivated by an individual wanting to do their fair share and live by their values. It becomes unhealthy when it brings feelings of never being enough or being an emotional burden.

So how can busy veterinarians manage guilt when there's so much to do? She recommended they embrace discernment, asking themselves if immediacy is required. For instance, "Does it have to be me? What's the worst that can hap-

pen?" Pribyl gave the example of a common client request: "emergency hock injections." No, immediacy isn't required, and the appointment can be booked for a later date, she said. It's not a life-saving treatment, and the horse is in no danger. Perhaps another veterinarian in the practice is available to do the procedure.

Not every issue that pops up in practice needs an immediate decision, Pribyl added. She recommended thinking over decisions for 24 hours, if possible, which allows time for clearer thinking and reduces the odds of saying "yes" to everything.

Pribyl finished by reiterating, "You can do it all, but not all at once." She emphasized setting boundaries and scheduling time-outs from "doing."

"There's power in writing it down," she said, explaining that individuals are more likely to follow through with things like exercising, hobbies, and even playing with the kids if they schedule it into their days. "Feelings of 'not enoughness' are just feelings," she said. "Let go of the guilt, and embrace the process." 🐾

Can Equine Practitioners Also Be Elite Athletes?

Dr. Justin High of Weatherford, Texas, explains how he successfully balances being a veterinarian, a family man, and an Ironman athlete.

By Jennifer Selvig, DVM, on TheHorse.com

Dr. Justin High, owner of Reata Equine Hospital, in Weatherford, Texas, is not only a husband and a father, but also an Ironman athlete. Training for elite triathlons, while mentally and physically demanding, is also time-consuming. High used his experience as a tri-

athlete to show equine veterinarians how they can achieve their athletic goals in any sport. In his words, "I'm basically teaching you how to suffer and like it!"

High stressed that his goal was to show that physical training can enhance emotional and physical well-being. "If your cardio ability

increases, your life gets better," he said. Of course, not everyone needs to do Ironman races, and he often gets asked why he does it: "Because you can," and likened it to becoming a veterinarian. Why go through veterinary school? Because you can. He noted the similarities between veterinarians and elite athletes in

that they are both "goal-oriented, task-driven overachievers."

To make time for athletic endeavors, High stressed that training must be "as convenient as you can make it, and as hard as you can take it." For a triathlete, that means finding time to drive to a swimming facility, as well as having access to indoor bikes and treadmills when there isn't time to train outdoors. He emphasized the importance of nutrition, too: "You can't out-train a bad diet."

High shared a quote from cyclist and Olympian Greg Henderson: "Training is like fighting with a gorilla. You don't stop when you're tired, you stop when the gorilla is tired." He likened this to long days of equine appointments—veterinarians don't always get to stop when



Dr. Justin High, pictured here with his wife, Amber, after crossing the finish line at Ironman Texas, makes time for athletic endeavors.

they want to, and it's the discipline to keep pushing through that will make them successful.

"Motivation will come and go, and that's when self-discipline gets you the rest of the way," High said. He often gets up at 4:30 a.m. to fit his training in, so he can be available for his family and his job.

Another key is to enjoy the process, not just the competition. "There is a lot more process than there are race days," High said. "Race day is fun if you train right!" He pointed out the importance of veterinarians having experienced help in their chosen sport. "We send horses to trainers." Hire a coach for yourself, or talk to someone who can guide you and give you advice. "Sometimes somebody telling you what to do is the most relaxing part of your day," a respite from the constant problem-solving and question-answering veterinarians do; it can be refreshing to zone out and follow someone else's directions, he said.

High's final message was that veterinarians need to "treat the most important thing like it's the most important thing." That means healthy self-discipline and boundaries with clients so they can have the family life they want and the ability to perform at the level to which they endeavor in their chosen sport. 🐾

Keeping Clients, Patients, and Kids Happy in Equine Practice

One veterinarian and single mom describes how she effectively manages her practice, her children, and her self-care.

By Jennifer Selvig, DVM, on *TheHorse.com*

Is it possible to "have it all"? The answer is an emphatic "yes" from Dr. Berkley Chesen, a solo ambulatory practitioner in Santa Fe, New Mexico, focusing on sports medicine as well as general and emergency care, and a single mother of two children. To keep everyone happy, she explained, you "must start with yourself," and it won't happen every day or all at once. She gave an overview of how she manages her practice, her children, and her self-care while presenting at the convention.

Addressing her audience of veterinarians, she said you should first identify your "kids"—be they two-legged human children, aging parents, or other aspects of your life that require prioritization over everything else.

After that, time-management is key. Chesen said she schedules herself for 0- to 14-hour days, depending on her kids' schedules, and includes several two- to four-hour buffer blocks each week. She frequently relies on telemedicine, mostly for triage purposes so she

can plan for emergencies and urgent cases between regular appointments.

Chesen said her children accompany her to many appointments. She assigns them jobs, explains what she's doing using proper terms, and doesn't sugar-coat anything.

She explained that this approach has given her kids real-time experience with life and death, responsibility, and compassion, and has made them more resilient. While this approach might not be a fit for every parent, it can work in some setups.

Other strategies for time management include hiring out jobs you don't want to do or have time for, such as housecleaning and grocery shopping. Using day care or a nanny-share arrangement can be a lifesaver, said Chesen.

For her self-care, which is horseback riding, Chesen emphasized that you must respect your own time, because "nobody else will do it for you." Making sure you have time for the things that fill your own cup will allow you

to have better relationships with your kids, your clients, and yourself.

Setting boundaries with clients is essential, said Chesen. Your job is to be available to them when you're on call or scheduled, train them, say no when you need to, and set limits. Your job is not to put up with unreasonable requests, be available 24/7, and, most of all, control everyone else's reactions. Control your own actions and reactions.

Chesen warned that "people-pleasers" are prone to developing codependent tendencies that can lead to being angry, stressed, and depressed. If you don't manage these over time, your happiness suffers.

Chesen closed with a reminder that if you aren't available to your clients tomorrow, they will be fine. But your kids need you, and while "the days can be very long, the years are very short," she said. It's worth being proactive with boundaries and time management to keep yourself, your kids, and your clients happy. 🐾



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Mindfulness: A Powerful Tool for Sustainable Equine Practice

Dr. Tovah Caldwell studied how vets are using mindfulness to support their careers.

By Jennifer Selvig, DVM, on *TheHorse.com*

Dr. Tovah Caldwell, an equine veterinarian at the University of Calgary, shared the findings of her study on mindfulness in equine practice during the convention. She explained that mindfulness is a practical and accessible tool that promotes sustainability in veterinary medicine by improving awareness of personal needs. It also promotes integration of wellness through self-discovery. “Mindfulness offers a practical tool for the ‘how’ of wellness,” she said.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, describes mindfulness as paying attention, on purpose, to present moment thoughts, sensations, and surroundings without judgment. The opposite of mindfulness is a state of being on “autopilot,” where we miss what’s right in front of us. This state can cause excess feelings of stress, Caldwell explained.

Mindfulness is a skill we must learn to fully realize the benefits, and meditation is the most common tool used to learn this skill. With repeated practice, mindfulness leads to transformative self-awareness, Caldwell said. She stressed that mindfulness is often incorrectly associated with the image of a Buddha, an empty mind, or the absence of thought, but in fact it’s just

learning to pay attention to what’s going on within and around us and accepting what is without judgment.

In Caldwell’s research project, which she completed through the University of Guelph, she aimed to determine how practitioners are using mindfulness to support their careers. She interviewed 14 practicing equine veterinarians and discovered that mindfulness has been key to the sustainability of their health and careers.

Caldwell found that mindfulness appears to support the development of a “mindful toolbox” that promotes sustainable practice, which she divided into five components:

- Developing a professional identity
- Perspective taking
- Drawing and honoring boundaries
- Life and career resilience
- Improved personal and professional well-being

A professional identity is the practitioner’s values, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. When professional identity was ill-defined, practitioners tended to seek external validation through their career success, self-blame when things went wrong, experience feelings of imposter syndrome, develop unrealistic expectations, feel a need to work all the time, worry about what others think, and engage in people-pleasing. But by practicing nonjudgmental awareness of self and self-compassion—skills learned through mindfulness—practi-

tioners could respond to failures with kindness and accept mistakes without spiraling into self-blame. The result was transformative self-knowledge and internal validation, which reduced stress and allowed participants to find joy in their careers again.

Perspective taking was associated with improved patient care and improved well-being and is a positive protective factor against burnout. Mindfulness supports perspective-taking by teaching individuals to see the world non-judgmentally. Removing judgment leaves room to see other points of view and helps bridge the gap between clinical expectations and reality. Caldwell explained that we judge people, especially clients, when they prevent us from getting the answer we want, prevent us from doing the job we want to do, or challenge our ego. Clients’ financial constraints, for example, can prevent veterinarians from achieving the clinical outcomes they desire, and feelings of compassion fatigue and burnout can result.

When practitioners can let go of judgments and expectations for outcomes, they can improve their ability to have empathy and compassion, improve listening skills and decision-making, have fewer emotional reactions, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. Finding “an” answer versus “the” answer allows vets to find more success in their days regardless of the

outcome, she said.

Boundary setting is acknowledging and prioritizing one’s needs, a skill learned through the transformative self-knowledge gained through mindfulness. Practitioners in Caldwell’s study benefited from having control over how they spent their time—limiting interactions with bad clients by learning to say no when necessary and feeling less guilt or fear over the consequences. This approach allowed for respectful and mutually beneficial client relationships. Furthermore, boundaries allowed for better work-life integration even when work and life were not fully balanced, as participants could be in the moment and maximize both aspects of their lives.

Study participants defined life and career resilience as believing the future to be good, despite in-the-moment circumstances, and having a renewed passion for life and practice. Mindfulness supports this by reminding us that difficult circumstances are temporary. She said four out of the 14 interviewees in her study reported having suicidal ideation, and all participants reported difficult times where they didn’t know how to move forward. Research has shown that mindfulness can curb suicidal ideation, and the study participants unanimously agreed that mindfulness allowed them to work through difficult times and remain in practice, finding a sustainable way forward.

Finally, Caldwell defined improved personal and professional well-being as “finding a better way to do life.” Mindfulness allowed practitioners the opportunity to relate to feelings of sadness, shame, depression, and anger in new ways, as well as gain understanding into what they needed to be personally successful and find joy in both work and life. All participants also reported at least one physical health benefit, such as reduced blood pressure, improved physicality, and the ability to ward off or heal injury. 🐾



A healthy team-based culture means better retention, improved efficiency, and engaged employees who produce loyal customers, all of which results in increased profitability for the practice.

Building a Team-Based Culture

A positive, team-first workplace culture is crucial for employee retention.

By Haylie Kerstetter, on TheHorse.com

In the great resignation of 2021, 48 million workers quit their jobs, and in August of 2022 alone, 4.2 million resigned. The cost of replacing an employee is 50-150% of their salary, including the cost of recruiting, training, and onboarding, which is why Dr. Miranda Gosselin, of Millbrook Equine, in Millbrook, New York, stressed the importance of developing a positive workplace culture for employee retention.

Gosselin said the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines culture as “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals,

and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.” In her practice, she experienced positive workplace culture with a family environment and work-life balance but also observed toxicity, hazing of new employees, poor communication, and resistance to change before realizing her own practice needed culture changes.

“Team-based culture is unique, because the team is the first priority,” said Gosselin. “Everyone on the team brings value and has purpose and a voice.” To develop this culture, she recommended leadership first

develop:

- A vision statement including five- and 10-year goals.
- A mission statement.
- A set of core values.

“Leadership must use these as guidelines for decision-making, update them regularly, lead by example, and, most importantly, share them openly with employees,” said Gosselin.

Do not be afraid to hire and fire to improve culture, she added. Firing individuals who add to a toxic workplace culture will help improve employee retention. “Hire

carefully,” noted Gosselin. “Hire for personality and culture fit, not just skill, and avoid hiring clones of current employees. You may also consider moving people within the organization but, ultimately, do not be afraid to fire the people who are not a good fit.”

Gosselin stressed that above all, communication is key. Holding regular leadership and staff meetings and improving intra-office communication can lead to a team-based culture. “Proactive communication is not micromanagement,” she added. “Delegate tasks and encourage ideas from others.”

Candid feedback is crucial to successfully building a team-based culture. In her practice, Gosselin implemented employee engagement surveys and holds regular 360-degree reviews, which provide the opportunity for leadership to discuss positives and negatives about the employees, where they can respond in a comfortable way. When employees give feedback, it is important to respond quickly by either implementing the idea or explaining your concerns, she added.

“Compensation matters,” said Gosselin. Competitive wages are extremely important for retention, and Gosselin has seen in her own practice that salaries make employees more collaborative than payment based on production.

“Ask employees and new hires what they actually want for benefits,” she added. Some want flexible scheduling, others cooperative child care, but disability, paid time off, health insurance, and retirement contributions are staples of competitive benefits packages.

“A healthy culture means more retention,” said Gosselin. “Supported employees are more likely to be engaged, which produces loyal customers who build goodwill and bring in more customers. Team-based culture promotes efficiency and creativity within the workplace. Ultimately, each of these lead to increased profitability for the practice.”