Teamwork: How to Make it Work
Nicola Ackerman BSc(Hons) RVN CertSAN CertECC A1 V1 C-SQP HonsMBVNA

The RCVS leaflet on careers in veterinary nursing asks Do You Enjoy Teamwork? A prime example of why making teamwork work should be at the top of all veterinary professionals list when wanting to make a productive working environment.

The name of the title of this lecture can easily be renamed, Communication – It is everything. The role that communication plays in the veterinary practice is vital, without it mistakes happen, and is a vital element in making teamwork work. Without communication teamwork can't happen. Communication is either verbal or written; written communication can occur in several forms, e.g.: e-mail, hospitalisation sheets, and clinical records.

When a ‘team’ is set up for a specific task, for example setting up of a surgical team to increase the efficiency of the running of the surgical aspects of the practice. The team's development may be viewed in four distinct phases:

- First is the ‘forming’ phase when the team is in reality still a collection of individuals dealing with procedural issues and the atmosphere is often artificially polite. Enthusiasm for and commitment to the new team is high but competence is low.

- Second is the 'storming' phase when the team members begin to experiment and flex their ‘muscles’. Relationships become stormier both between members and between the team and other groups, and members question outside influences such as set procedures. As the team struggles to find the best way to work together, members may experience a temporary lapse in commitment. In many cases this phase can be bypassed as it is dependent on the individuals in the team and relationships between the individuals.

- Third is the 'norming' phase where the team is beginning to achieve its potential. It has developed its own way of working that is producing results.

- Fourth is the 'performing' phase where the team is fully mature and effective. It deals with change in an open and flexible way, constantly challenges itself but avoids damaging conflicts. Development of team members is a high priority.

Teams are unlikely to develop their potential without a struggle. They can get stuck in the early stages if members are too polite and not prepared to challenge the status quo. Teams may also become complacent after they reach an acceptable level of performance. If teams stagnate or encounter problems which they cannot overcome from their own resources, they will need help from management. This may include clarifying objectives, providing additional resources, training and team building exercises. Bringing in of new ideas and new members is recommended as this can
prevent stagnation of the nursing team, but as in any situation when bringing new members to a team, it will change the working dynamics.

Leadership of a team, whether this is as a head nurse leading a team of nurses, or a ward nurse in charge of student nurses working with you, is vital. Team leaders have specific tasks as leaders. These include:

- providing a vision and communicating it
- encouraging the free flow of ideas and initiative
- training and developing employees to take increased responsibility
- overseeing teams and ensuring they meet objectives.

When instigating new ideas into the working practice it can be very difficult to get things up and running without good communication between staff members. For a new project to be successful it needs the backing of all staff members, and staff members need to fully understand how the new project will work. Staff meetings are an ideal opportunity to convey new ideas and to reinforce the idea of teamwork (several people working towards a common goal).

Within any group of people you will get a good mixture of different personalities and methods of working. Some people prefer to work independently, some within a very structured format. Those individuals that prefer to work more independently can still work well within a team. Having a good mix of different working styles will give a better working group. Different elements of the work can be fulfilled by different people.

Some people will be happier with the planning of new ideas, organising people, some with instigating the new ideas - teamwork is important but works best when you have different types of people within the team.

The quality of teamwork may be measured by analysing the effectiveness of the collaboration in the following ways

1. communication
2. coordination
3. balance of contributions
4. mutual support
5. effort
6. cohesion

Accounting techniques may be used to provide financial measures of the benefits of teamwork, but patient care cannot be easily quantified by financial measures.

References: