PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mentoring and Coaching New Graduates

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All professions evolve. The contemporary veterinary workforce represents a mix of generations, backgrounds, and values, serving an increasingly diverse animal-owning client population. The spectrum of possible clinical care options has never been greater, and students are taught increasingly high-tech clinical practices. For the new graduate and those supporting them, this means a transition into a complex world of greater decision making, financial considerations, and social and cultural sensitivity than they have ever faced before.

Historically, veterinary schools and their accreditors focused on the medicine and surgery of "day 1" clinical practice. However, the complexities of practice mean that additional noncognitive skills are vital for a veterinarian's professional success and satisfaction. These include the empathy and humanism required to communicate and contextualize care for a diverse client population, and the emotional intelligence and self-regulation required to manage the moral dissonance that occurs when one's clinical decisions deviate from their personal beliefs and preferences.

The capacity to remain open to learning and to regulate one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors is important when experiencing professional stretch, and yet most educators would agree that engaging students and practitioners in this aspect of their development is an ongoing challenge. There are many reasons why this is the case.[1,2] Fortunately, there is much we can borrow from the business, psychology, and education literature about developing confident and competent professionals. We know, for example, that adults learn best in environments where they can observe and experiment freely, applying their learning to solve real-world problems in a social environment of physical comfort and psychological safety.[3,4] With this in mind, the veterinary workplace has the potential to offer new graduates exactly the environment they need to continue to develop their "whole-veterinarian" skills.

Despite growing appreciation of, and therefore investment in, the idea of developing and supporting the "whole" practitioner, veterinarians and veterinary nurses/technicians continue to report low levels of professional satisfaction and wellbeing, and recruitment and retention of new graduates have become a profession-wide concern.[5,6] The modern veterinary practice is busy, with increasing demands for veterinary care; cost-of-living concerns that heighten financial pressures (both for clients and for the practice); and seemingly few opportunities for colleagues to take time to interact to discuss challenges, assess difficult cases, or engage in nonwork talk. These issues place significant individual and sociocultural barriers to learning and

growth. This article suggests that coaching and mentoring interventions, when applied in a supportive culture, might provide some relief to frustrated and disillusioned veterinary teams.

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

There are numerous articles and textbooks on the "doing" of professional development (many are to be found within this journal[7] and the reference list at the end of this article), and regulatory bodies have started to formalize professional development as part of the new graduate's transition into the veterinary workplace.[8,9] Career coaching and mentoring, as a strategy to support individual and team learning, is increasing in popularity, and the veterinary profession is catching up with and learning from some of the earlier adopters, such as the business and sporting worlds.[8,10,11]

Coaching and mentoring have much in common in that they are both concerned with creating an environment where people can undertake high-quality thinking around specific (and often challenging) aspects of professional life.[12] Some important differences between coaching and mentoring are that mentors are chosen for their discipline-specific expertise (coaches are most often discipline-neutral), and mentoring is more likely to be undertaken altruistically and over longer periods (**TABLE 1**). One intervention is not necessarily "better" than the other. Rather, the approach taken should be the best fit for the development needs of the individual or team. If discipline-specific guidance and expertise is required, funding is limited, and/or workplace vertical connections need bolstering, then mentoring could be the best fit. Alternatively, if there is a more general requirement for mindset and behavioral change around "being" a professional, if nonveterinary role modeling is sought, and if funding is available, then coaching might be the preferred choice.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ENGAGEMENT

There is a wealth of information and guidance available to those interested in receiving coaching or mentoring,[13,14] developing their coaching and mentoring skills,[12,15] or implementing schemes within the workplace.[16,17] The issue is then not "what to do?" but identifying the drivers and barriers to engagement in coaching and mentoring initiatives in our own workplace.[16] We know that engagement with learning is impacted by individual and sociocultural factors,[18] and we may therefore need to work on both in order to maximize chances of success. For example, we are aware that the characteristics and skills that increase the likelihood of making it through veterinary school (e.g., hyper-focus, overwork, stoicism, altruism) can act in direct opposition to sustaining professional wellbeing,[19] and new graduates experiencing that friction could benefit from time spent revisiting embedded drivers and values with a coach or mentor in order to incorporate and prioritize personal learning in their daily decision-making activities. Similarly, those entering the profession with an existing commitment to self-care might struggle in a culture that models and rewards presenteeism and unrestricted caseloads.

TABLE 1 A Comparison of Coaching and Mentoring[12]*

	COACH	MENTOR
Method	▪ Conversational, structured	▪ Conversational, semi-structured
Professional expertise	▪ Coaching, professional development	▪ Mentee's discipline/profession
Duration	▪ Defined, often >1 year	▪ Prolonged periods
Primary reward	▪ Financial	▪ Professional altruism
Ratio	▪ 1:1 or increasingly small group	▪ Usually 1:1
Approach, strategies, and tools	▪ Equality ▪ Relational ▪ Frameworks ▪ Active listening ▪ Incisive questions ▪ Goal setting ▪ Curiosity ▪ Action plans ▪ Accountability	▪ Expertise ▪ Professional ▪ Prompts ▪ Active listening ▪ Incisive questions ▪ Goal setting ▪ Advice and guidance ▪ Action plans ▪ Support

**Note there is much overlap between the 2 approaches, and the authors are summarizing rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive or single "correct" description.*

TABLE 2 Small Changes That Can Have a Big Impact on Work Interactions

INSTEAD OF THIS	TRY THIS
TALKING	**ACTIVE LISTENING**
Taking a deficit approach *"These are the problems, and we need to fix or stop doing them."*	**Taking a solutions-focus** *"These are all the things we are doing well and we could do more of them."*
Solving others' problems *"How can I help?" or "I would do X…"*	**Facilitating others' thinking** *"What help do you need?" or "What has worked for you before?" or "What are the options?"*
Superlatives *"Great job!"*	**Descriptive praise** *"I noticed you did X, which resulted in Y—that was impressive because…"*
Direction or judgment *"This is what you should do to improve X."* *"That was the wrong way of doing Y."*	**Curiosity and openness to learning** *"What would good look like?"* *"I noticed you did X, which resulted in Y—tell me more about that."*

Individual coaching or mentoring could help this person gain insight into the source of their discomfort, but it may be, in this case, that workplace culture would be a more productive focus of attention.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

Coaching and mentoring of new graduates do not necessarily need to be structured or implemented in a formal way. It can instead be a commitment to cultural changes that mean a change in mindset (e.g., how we work, what "good" looks like) or approaches to team interaction (e.g., prioritizing the planning of time for colleagues to meet rather than a day filled with patient appointments that leaves colleagues working largely in isolation) (**TABLE 2**).

These work culture changes are championed by individuals with the aim of bringing about positive sociocultural change to the whole practice.[17] This type of approach is particularly important when practice cultures are acting in opposition to workplace development or wellbeing.[19] Clutterbuck et al recommend "embedding" a coaching and mentoring culture so that it becomes the way of thinking about, rewarding, and doing business.[17] This includes encouraging, rewarding, and recognizing coaching and mentoring at all levels across the business. Training internal coaches and mentors goes some way toward achieving this goal because more and more team members become accustomed to the basic conversational tools that stimulate a mindset of learning and growth. Additionally, in creating time and space for others to think well, we must first create this time and space for ourselves. The internal volunteers cannot help but develop self-insight and healthy practices as a direct result of facilitating this in others.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

The sociocultural environment of the veterinary practice/profession profoundly impacts a new graduate's capacity to grow into their profession.[20] No amount of individual resilience or coach/mentor skill will be sufficient to withstand or undo the damage done by a chronically stressful and overwhelming workplace, and no workplace culture on its own should take responsibility for the workplace experiences of its individuals. The truth is that we all play a role in determining the sociocultural environment of our workplace and can therefore all impact whether or not it is an environment that drives or limits learning. The new graduate transition is therefore a whole-team effort, and it starts with being open, curious, and intentionally optimistic about how individuals and teams relate, communicate, and operate together. TVP

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