

Giving and Receiving Feedback: We All Need It

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In veterinary medicine, feedback often carries a negative connotation. For many team members, the word itself triggers tension. It can feel corrective, critical, personal, and at times even threatening. As a result, feedback conversations are frequently postponed, softened to the point of vagueness, or avoided entirely. When they do occur, they are often reactive—sparked by frustration or error rather than intentionally designed for development.

Yet no thriving veterinary practice, and no growing professional within it, succeeds without feedback. High-performing teams do not avoid feedback; they normalize it. They create structure around it. They detach it from ego. Most importantly, they understand that feedback is not punishment—it is information. Without information, growth stagnates.

Why Feedback Feels Uncomfortable

To improve feedback culture, it is necessary to understand why it so often feels difficult. Veterinary professionals are typically high achievers who closely associate their identity with competence. When feedback suggests that something could have been handled differently, it can feel less like a behavioral observation and more like a judgment of character.

Compounding this challenge is the pace and emotional intensity of veterinary practice. Feedback conversations often occur between appointments, on high-caseload days, or at the end of exhausting shifts. Without intentional structure, comments can become abrupt or defensive. Additionally, many team members fear damaging relationships. Leaders may worry about being perceived as harsh, while peers hesitate to address concerns with colleagues. Silence often fills the space where feedback should exist.

However, silence does not preserve culture—it erodes it. When feedback is withheld, minor issues evolve into repeated patterns. Repeated patterns generate resentment. Over time, resentment contributes to disengagement and turnover. Avoidance may feel neutral in the moment, but it carries a high long-term cost.

The Purpose of Feedback

Feedback serves three primary purposes in a veterinary practice: improving performance, protecting standards, and developing people. When framed appropriately, feedback represents an investment rather than a reprimand.

Performance-focused feedback enhances efficiency and safeguards patient care. Standards-based feedback ensures consistency in client experience and operational compliance. Developmental feedback builds confidence, strengthens retention, and prepares future leaders. Feedback is not about identifying failure; it is about advancing excellence.

In high-functioning organizations, feedback flows in both directions. Leaders provide it to staff. Staff provides it to leaders. Peers provide it to one another. It is timely, behavior-focused, and anchored in shared goals rather than personal opinion.

Correction Versus Coaching

Not all feedback functions identically. Correction addresses immediate issues and often carries urgency, particularly when patient safety or compliance is involved. For example, recalculating a medication dosage protects clinical integrity. Correction is necessary and should be delivered clearly.

Coaching, however, extends beyond immediate error. It focuses on developing judgment and critical thinking. Rather than stating what was wrong, coaching invites reflection: What outcome was intended? What factors influenced the decision? How might the approach be refined in the future? Coaching encourages ownership and long-term growth.

When feedback culture is dominated by correction alone, team members may feel scrutinized rather than supported. Coaching communicates belief in potential. Both approaches are essential, but the balance determines whether feedback strengthens or strains culture.

Open-ended questions are particularly effective in coaching conversations. Asking, “What felt challenging in that interaction?” or “How could that discharge conversation be structured more clearly next time?” shifts the tone from accusation to collaboration. Inquiry fosters development more effectively than directive statements alone.

Delivering Feedback Effectively

Effective feedback is timely. Addressing behavior close to when it occurs preserves context and reduces emotional distortion. Delayed feedback often amplifies frustration and weakens clarity. Equally important is specificity. Generalized comments such as “You need to communicate better” lack direction and may create confusion. Specific observations—identifying the moment, behavior, and impact—provide actionable guidance.

Tone significantly influences outcome. Feedback delivered calmly and privately preserves dignity. Public correction, particularly in high-stress environments, undermines trust and can damage morale. Respectful delivery reinforces professionalism and psychological safety.

Separating behavior from identity is critical. Statements that target character create defensiveness and long-lasting resentment. In contrast, feedback focused on observable actions communicates that change is possible. Behaviors can evolve; personal attacks cannot be easily forgotten. Feedback should consistently aim at improvement rather than humiliation.

Receiving Feedback Without Defensiveness

Receiving feedback constructively is equally important and often more challenging. Defensiveness is a natural response rooted in self-protection. However, defensiveness limits growth. Professionals committed to development practice pause before responding, listen fully, and ask clarifying questions rather than immediately justifying their actions.

Receiving feedback effectively does not require agreement with every comment. It requires curiosity. Questions such as “Can you provide an example?” or “What would improvement look

like from your perspective?” transform feedback into a collaborative exchange. Even a simple acknowledgment—“Thank you for bringing that to my attention”—signals maturity and openness.

When feedback is viewed as data rather than personal attack, its value becomes clearer. Data may feel uncomfortable, but it informs progress.

Psychological Safety as a Foundation

A sustainable feedback culture depends on psychological safety. Team members must feel able to speak honestly without fear of humiliation or retaliation. When psychological safety is absent, feedback becomes political. Concerns are suppressed. Mistakes are concealed. Resentment accumulates quietly.

Leadership behavior strongly influences psychological safety. Leaders who acknowledge their own mistakes openly model vulnerability and normalize imperfection. Inviting feedback on leadership decisions demonstrates humility and signals that growth is expected at every level. Authority alone does not create trust; humility does.

Establishing Feedback Rhythms

Feedback should not be reserved for annual evaluations. When performance discussions occur only during formal reviews, they become high-stakes and emotionally charged. Instead, feedback should be integrated into daily operations through brief check-ins, post-shift reflections, regular one-on-one meetings, and structured coaching sessions.

Routine feedback normalizes development. It shifts the perception from a dramatic event to an ongoing refinement. Consistently making small adjustments prevents larger corrections later. Predictable rhythms reduce anxiety and build confidence.

Peer-to-Peer Accountability

In aligned practices, feedback is not limited to supervisory roles. Peer accountability strengthens culture and reduces reliance on hierarchy. However, effective peer feedback requires maturity and shared purpose. It must remain private, behavior-focused, solution-oriented, and respectful.

For example, rather than expressing frustration, a colleague might say, “I noticed the client seemed uncertain about the follow-up plan. Could we review how we’re explaining that?” This approach preserves dignity while reinforcing shared standards. Peer feedback enhances cohesion and reinforces collective responsibility for excellence.

Feedback and Retention

Many professionals leave organizations not solely because of workload, but because of stagnation. When individuals lack developmental direction, they may feel overlooked or undervalued. Constructive feedback provides clarity about performance expectations and growth pathways. It communicates investment in potential.

Silence can be interpreted as indifference. Clear feedback communicates belief in capacity. When team members understand what excellence looks like and see progress toward it, engagement increases and retention strengthens.

Balancing Reinforcement and Refinement

A feedback culture focused exclusively on correction can feel heavy and discouraging. Conversely, a culture centered only on praise may lack realism. Sustainable development requires both reinforcement and refinement. Positive feedback identifies behaviors worth repeating and strengthens confidence. Constructive feedback identifies areas for growth and sharpens competence.

Specific reinforcement is particularly powerful. Naming observable strengths—such as calm tone during difficult conversations or clarity in financial explanations—transforms positive behaviors into intentional habits. Balanced feedback cultivates both confidence and accountability.

Conclusion

Feedback is not merely a managerial responsibility; it is a shared cultural commitment. In a profession where stakes are high and emotions run strong, clarity protects patient safety, strengthens client experience, and develops future leaders. Avoiding feedback may feel compassionate in the moment, but over time it weakens standards and diminishes growth.

Handled thoughtfully, feedback strengthens relationships rather than damages them. It communicates care, investment, and belief in potential. High-performing veterinary practices normalize feedback, deliver it with professionalism, and receive it with maturity—recognizing that excellence is never achieved in isolation.

We all need it.