FOSTERING RESILIENCE IN YOUNG VETERINARIANS
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It’s no secret: a career in veterinary medicine is considered stressful by a significant proportion of its practitioners across a broad range of career paths within the profession. Evidence continues to emerge on the impact this has on job satisfaction, health, career path and longevity of veterinarians. Veterinary students wonder about what this will mean for them, and express concern about how they will cope with what they perceive to be the tougher aspects of the job, e.g. workload, hours, dealing with clients effectively, performing euthanasia, etc. Surely there’s a ‘good news’ story in there somewhere for new and prospective veterinary graduates? The notion of being able to cultivate resilience is attractive as a foundation upon which new veterinarians can ground themselves in the often stressful and demanding early stages of their careers.

Resilience

What is now the established field of resilience research within psychiatry originates in the study of survival strategies of people with mental illness. In the 1940s, the study of children able to handle stress, develop competence and succeed in childhood in spite of overwhelming hardship provided valuable clues to the nature, progression and outcome of types of schizophrenia. Researchers at the time concluded that a certain quality of resilience played a significant role in mental health. More recently, Harvard Business Review reports that: “More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person’s level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That’s true in the cancer ward, it’s true in the Olympics, and it’s true in the boardroom.” Today, theories abound regarding the nature of resilience, and it has become a sought-after quality in human resources in the business sector.

The term resilience comes from the Latin re-silere, ‘to spring back’, implying a degree of elasticity, an ability to restore oneself in the face of hardship, to adapt and move forward. Defined this way, it is natural that we should aspire to cultivate the self-awareness and flexibility in ourselves and others that resilience embodies.

‘To foster’ is defined by dictionary.com as: 1. to promote the growth and development of, 2. to bring up (a child, etc.), and 3. to cherish (a plan, hope, etc) in one’s mind. This choice of words is no accident; it encompasses the best intentions and wishes of a senior colleague for a junior and what the future holds for them. The desire to foster resilience in young veterinarians is also driven by a number of other objectives. These include:

- The desire to share experience and be supportive. Like a parent, we hope to steer them clear of the consequences of professional mistakes we may have made, and to grasp early in their careers things of value that we did not appreciate until later
- To build confidence and encourage the progression to self-reliance in the workplace
- To promote the longevity of employment within a given workplace, as well as within the profession, in a satisfied and fulfilled manner.

What governs our capacity for resilience? Is it a trait that we either possess or lack? Can it be acquired or developed? Can it be fostered in others? A growing body of research
suggests that resilience can indeed be learned. The various schools of thought generally agree that resilient people and organizations share the following characteristics:

- The ability to confront reality without losing faith
- A propensity to focus on the good, and relate to any circumstance as meaningful
- Resourcefulness; a blend of seeking out what is needed, with an ability to make do with whatever is at hand

This combination of traits is deemed by some authors to simply describe an optimistic personality. Optimists tend to see troubles as transient or an aberration to the usual; they regard circumstances as open to influence. While this viewpoint underpins a happy-go-lucky nature, it does not guarantee a robust sense of reality. In contrast, pessimists tend to view circumstances as permanent and resistant to will; external factors are perceived to undermine their efforts. However, while this view may provide a more sobering sense of reality, pessimists tend to set lower goals, perform less well, and give up sooner. Distinguished in this way, a comparison of optimism vs. pessimism suggests that the core difference between them is simply a fundamental viewpoint or attitude about the nature of life. While interesting, it provides few clues as to how one might affect such a shift in attitude, in oneself or another.

**Sowing the seeds of resilience in the workplace**

Best-selling business and management author Patrick Lencioni puts forward a useful framework for developing and fostering the kind of mental habits and outlook that underpin resilience in life and in the workplace, particularly from the perspective of an employer or mentor. Applying his thinking to veterinary practice, Lencioni would argue that being a veterinarian could be regarded as a ‘good’ job; it is perceived to be well paid, rewarding, does not generally entail sitting behind a desk all day, and is usually pursued by people who love animals and are seen to enjoy the type of work involved. However, in the most general sense, what constitutes a ‘good’ job or a ‘bad’ job is personal and subjective.

In contrast, the definition of a miserable job is not subjective at all. A miserable job is characterized by dread of going to work, and returning home frustrated, weary, cynical and resigned; it is the same whether you are a surgeon, teacher, waitress or professional athlete. Described this way, misery in the workplace clearly entails some loss of faith, a sense of being trapped, and little or no sense of being of value or meaning in the job. This is the very opposite of the experience that ‘naturally’ resilient individuals seem to be able to create for themselves regardless of circumstance.

Lencioni compellingly argues that people need three things to feel fulfilled and worthwhile in their jobs; in the absence of them, he believes that misery inevitably ensues. The first of these is anonymity, which he defines as the feeling that people we work with don’t really know us or value us as human beings, or take an interest in us personally. This conjures up a familiar image of a busy workplace where it seems a self-preserving habit to keep one’s nose to the grindstone… an approach understandably encouraged by any boss. However, this approach to management and team culture is what likely leaves new graduates feeling like a commodity or just another pair of hands in their new place of work. Employers and managers who succeed in cultivating an active and genuine interest in staff on a day-to-day basis create an environment that invites cohesion, teamwork, loyalty and job satisfaction.

The second ingredient giving rise to misery is irrelevance, which Lencioni defines as thinking that what we do doesn’t make a difference, that our work seems pointless. He argues that all of us have an inherent need to know that the work we do is important in some way, and matters to someone. Loss of this perspective is particularly tragic in a serving and caring
profession like ours which would seem to have an obvious impact on the lives of our clients. Nonetheless, this loss of meaning or sense of purpose is familiar in the words of colleagues who suffer burnout and some of those who leave the profession, both profoundly disconnected from that which inspired them to pursue a career in veterinary medicine originally. Finding meaning in one’s work and environment is a key element of resilience; a clear set of values (e.g. a well-managed customer service charter, being of service vs. providing a service) provides a workplace with ways to interpret and shape events, and creates an empowering context beyond simply making a living.

The third element is what Lencioni calls immeasurement, namely, the inability of an employee to assess their performance and contribution to the business. This is particularly important for new graduates who generally begin life in the workforce very motivated to pull their weight financially, and who naturally crave a sense of being a valued asset rather than a burden to the practice initially. Our internal judgement of our own performance is subjective at best and often far removed from reality; in the absence of an objective way of determining whether they are succeeding or failing, it is impossible for new graduates to develop confidence, gauge their progress realistically, respond to direction positively and experience satisfaction.

This approach to management may explain why changing jobs or getting paid more tends to have no lasting effect on job satisfaction in the absence of these elements. From an employer’s perspective, providing these things in the workplace is so simple, and costs so little. Furthermore, providing these things promotes and encourages the development of the individual habits that constitute personal and organisational resilience. New graduates in such an environment are far more likely to find their feet quickly, begin to enjoy the pleasures of practice and go on to enjoy a long and fulfilling career.

Leading by example

Fostering resilience ourselves is a natural prerequisite to being able to foster it in others. Enjoying a great career and living a well-balanced, fulfilled personal life (no matter what life throws at you) is quite irresistible and represents perhaps the most profound way to be of service to our junior colleagues. How do you expand your own capacity to be robust under pressure? How do you express an active, genuine interest in others? How do you create and keep alive a strong sense of values in the workplace? How do you provide constructive, objective feedback to employees?

As a profession historically, we have not embraced aspects of personal development as a core element of continuing education and business development, nor appreciated fully what self-development might provide when the going gets tough. Simply put, you can’t take the ‘professional’ you to work in the morning without dragging the ‘personal’ you along as well. We are quite comfortable with seeking further technical training, referrals, out-sourcing and consulting experts, but have only recently expanded this to include self development for ourselves and our staff. Examples include recent additions to Murdoch’s veterinary curriculum, programs such as the New Graduate Support Scheme, AVA’s designated Graduate Friendly Practices, and today’s program in the practice management stream. This approach has become mainstream in the business sector, and it is timely and appropriate that we as a profession follow suit.

The veterinary profession itself has been resilient in the face of extraordinary change over time. For example, vets today routinely field unnervingly technical questions about treatment options from internet-savvy clients. Part of the appeal of a career in veterinary practice has always been its stimulating and dynamic nature. However, alongside the intellectual thrills of resolving difficult and unusual cases, it is the pleasure of a fascination and love of animals
and being of service to those who share it that is deeply rewarding. It is ultimately our desire that our junior colleagues come to fully experience and treasure this privilege as we do.

References

1. Gardner D (2005) Stress can be both good and bad. VCNZ Newsbrief 12

Further Reading