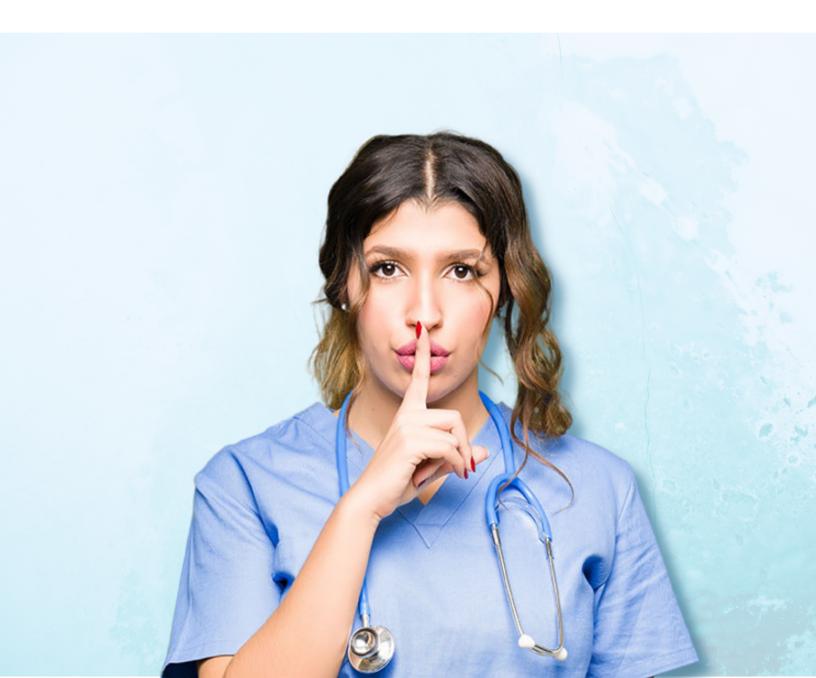# HOW TO STOP THE GOSSIP IN YOUR VETERINARY PRACTICE

HOW GOSSIP CAN DESTROY THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A TEAM

When gossip happens in a practice it gets in our way and we aren't able to do our best work. Instead, we find ourselves getting pulled into problems and dealing with challenges we didn't want or ask for. These issues can begin to dominate our time and prevent us from focusing on service to our clients or care for the pets.

Gossip in your practice can:

Divide People Into Groups as They Take Sides

When someone gossips, the recipient may wonder, "if this is how they're talking about others, I wonder what they say when I'm not in the room." Gossip can also cause team members to feel like they have to "choose a side." As a team then becomes divided, it directly interferes with people doing their best work as a team.

Deprive People of Feedback and Improvement Opportunities

Gossip can cost people the chance to get better at what they do. For example, suppose an employee is often late or sometimes misses important steps in the process your practice has for providing care. If we are complaining about these things to others, without offering support and feedback to help the person improve, that team member will not have the opportunity to develop and contribute at an even higher level. We have now chosen, as part of our culture, to put gossip in place of support.

HOW GOSSIP CAN DESTROY THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A TEAM

Build Unhealthy Habits Around "Venting" as a Solution

It can be easy, particularly in chaotic environments like veterinary practices, to assume venting is okay, that it's a helpful thing to do. In reality, venting creates an environment in which individuals are pulled into drama and conflict.

Reduce Communication that Helps us Do Our Jobs Well

In a veterinary practice, a team's ability to communicate well is crucial. How a functional team communicates between front and back, about care, the pets' needs, and about client concerns is critical in determining how well we do our work. There are so many things that don't make it into the pet record, and when we have gossip in our practice it gets in the way of communication that helps the entire team perform better, provide better care, and better client focus.

Take Focus Away From Pets and Clients

If an employee is thinking about gossip she heard about another team member, she's not thinking about the client or the pet. Gossip interferes with our ability to think about what we need to do to provide the best service and care possible. It takes our focus away from what we need to do to help the team be successful. Our brains cannot focus on gossip and the job at the same time, and we will reactively focus on the gossip instead of focusing on the opportunities we have as a team to make a meaningful difference for the pets and the clients. Ultimately, the pets and the clients don't care if we get along, they need our attention.

HOW TO STOP THE GOSSIP IN OUR PRACTICE

(1)

Make Choices Together About How Much Gossip We Want on Our Team

Simply asking at a team meeting, for example, "When we think about the kind of team we want to be part of, how much gossip do we want?" is a way to make choices together that help us move toward a better future. The answer seems simple, we probably don't want a lot of gossip on our team, but this lays the foundation for what we start doing differently to actually create the team we want, together. We want to focus more on what we are moving toward as a team, not what we have to stop doing.

As leaders, one of the most important things we can do is make sure our team is moving towards something better, more than just moving away from something bad. Working to get to a place we look forward to is far more effective than working to escape what we don't want or don't like.

These are things we can talk about with our team openly in ways that help us all become engaged in moving forward. If we are not clear on our destination as a team, we can't possibly make real, consistent progress toward anything better.

(2)

Define Gossip as a Group

How do we define gossip? How would we describe it? Often, gossip can be described as people talking about other people in a negative way. But gossip doesn't have to be negative. What if we let someone know that we have observed a team member doing something well? While we're still talking about someone, now we're doing it in a positive way. So, gossip can be defined as sharing information about a person that we're not sharing with that person, often in a way that doesn't help us get better.

HOW TO STOP THE GOSSIP IN OUR PRACTICE

3

Create a Plan for Helping Each Other as We Move Toward Our Goal

Once gossip has been defined as a group, we then need to create a plan to get to the place we want to be as a practice and as a team. When thinking about our plan, we want to consider:

○ **Behaviors and Words**

Questions you might ask in a meeting could be something like, "What do we need to do when someone comes to us and gossips? What behavior and words can we use in our response?" For example, you might suggest responding with the question, "Is this just gossip, or is this a challenge you're trying to solve?" By asking this question we can create awareness and allow team members to make choices that help the team and the practice. Other questions we might use when we encounter gossip are: "What do you think you could do to help this situation get better?" Or, "Do you think that person knows how you feel about their actions and do you think it might help if you shared them?"
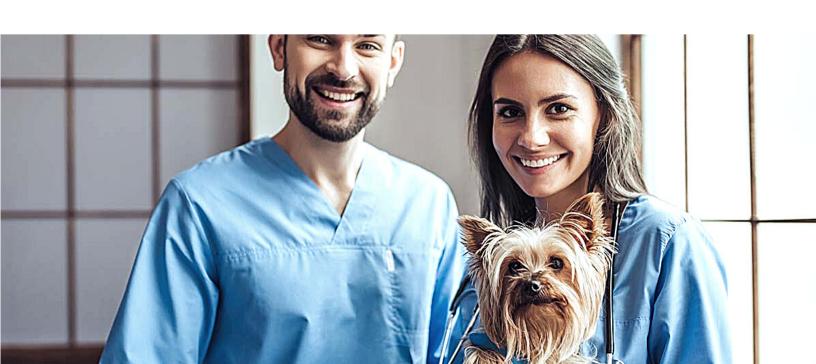
HOW TO STOP THE GOSSIP IN OUR PRACTICE

Discuss, Support, and Practice

4

Our brains build habits through repetition. If we want to manage gossip in our practice it is important to talk about and practice how we respond, and the decisions we make when it happens. Talking about how we handle gossip in a staff meeting is a great step, but unless we discuss and practice it often and consistently we won't build good habits. Think about how many sutures you have to tie or catheters you have to put in or client questions you have to answer before you become comfortable and confident doing those things. This is exactly like that. Our brain doesn't consider what is "good" or "bad." it simply works to automate whatever we repeat. In many cases this is good, because it helps us do our work consistently. But if we don't build good habits to address gossip through regular discussion, support, and practice, we are limiting our ability to become a strong, effective team. Even taking time to do some role-play around gossip during your meetings is good. It can feel a little awkward at first, but becomes something people can get involved with and it will help them to create good habits as a team.

WHAT WILL NOT WORK

As leaders, we need to be aware of things that won't work to stop gossip in our practices. We may have the best of intentions, but doing these things can actually contribute to our challenges rather than help solve them:

1

Telling People to Stop

If we just say, "Hey, let's just stop the gossip," won't that put an end to gossip? After all, we are in a position of authority. But just telling people to stop gossiping doesn't work. Any more than telling people to show up with a better attitude or have a better work ethic works. Humans don't really improve because of more instructions until they go through the process of defining what success for them really means first.

2

Punishing People Based on Gossip

As we begin to build habits around how we handle gossip, punishment can be an enemy. When employees see that they will be punished for a certain behavior, they naturally will focus on just not getting caught. In this instance, punishment is not likely to build good habits that help us become consistently better. Instead, it simply changes the awareness of employees about when and where they can "get away with" gossip.

WHAT WILL NOT WORK

3   Engaging in Gossip Ourselves

This may seem obvious, but it is really easy to fall into the trap of gossiping. As leaders, we often think part of our responsibility is to listen to concerns employees have. This is positive in a general sense. If we allow someone to come to us to blow off steam, we may feel like we helped that employee by listening. What we've actually done, though, is become part of the gossip cycle. Instead of only allowing a person to vent, we can make progress and encourage engagement by asking good questions after they vent, like, "Are we just gossiping here, or is this something you would like to solve or change?" Or, "If you wanted to address this and help it get better, what would be your first step?" If we can help our team members think this way, we can help our team take a situation they want to just talk about and turn it into a process for improvement and increased accountability for how we solve problems as a team..

The future of your practice is always connected to the way your team communicates, solves challenges and supports each other as they improve together. Eliminating gossip in your practice can be a significant step toward building that better future.

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