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8 ways to earn the respect you deserve

By Brendan Howard

Disrespect hurts emotionally and professionally. Take heart and try this approach to getting your just dues. It can help you love your job—and the people who come with it—again.

You know the symptoms: Doctors or co-workers who talk down to you, ignoring your education and experience. They relegate you to simple, repetitive tasks at the clinic when you're capable of a lot more. They badmouth you, your position, or your work in front of clients and colleagues.

What this all amounts to is that sickening, angry feeling of disrespect. Your self-esteem plummets, your frustration level rises, and you wonder whether your job is worth the agony. Fortunately, fixing this problem starts with you. Here's how to show others you deserve recognition.

Step 1: Act the part

If clients don't take you seriously, you're undermining the care you give their pets and, ultimately, your career. "I'm not disrespected," says Janice Reilly, LVT, clinical coordinator at Valley Cottage Animal Hospital in Valley Cottage, N.Y., and instructor at Bergen Community College's veterinary technology program in Paramus, N.J. "The difference is my presence." Reilly meets clients with head held high, making eye contact. She greets the client and the pet. When she explains medical issues, she uses medical language. To present yourself in the same way, follow these tips.

Speak clearly and slowly enough to be easily understood when you present information to pet owners, even when you're in a hurry. Mumbling makes for lousy customer service.

Smile on the phone and in person. Reilly reminds her team to do this and sit up straight, because people calling in notice your change in voice.

Dress like a professional to be treated like one, says Brenda Tassava, CVPM, director of operations at Broad Ripple Animal Clinic and Wellness Center in Indianapolis. "You can't look like you just rolled out of bed," she says. So make sure that whatever uniform you wear is clean and wrinkle-free.

Some days, no matter how you look and act, every client reminds you you're not the doctor. The bottom line is lack of credibility, says Andreas Pahl, MBA, hospital administrator of Valley Cottage Animal Hospital. "When you're not wearing the white lab coat, a client wants to know why you're touching their pet," he says.

You must do your part to illustrate your expertise, but it's also up to the doctors to establish credibility for you and your team members. But first you must show the doctor you can be trusted.

Step 2: Establish rapport

To build this credibility, ask the doctors at your hospital if they wouldn't mind introducing you—regardless of your role—whenever you're handling something. The simple act of explaining to clients who you are and what function you play in their pet's care will go a long way. When asking this of the veterinarian, be gentle and respectful. Try something like this: "I've noticed that when you introduce the staff members it seems to make the clients feel more comfortable. Do you think we could do that more often?"

In the worst-case scenario, if the doctor won't adapt, introduce yourself. Many times—especially if you're the receptionist—you see clients before the doctor anyway, so you should've already reached out to them. Before you do anything, politely offer your name, position or title, and what you'll be doing for them or their pets. Then introduce the doctor. If you say something complimentary about the doctor to the client, then the doctor may get the hint and reciprocate.

Step 3: Ask for opportunities

Of course, if you're not confident in your ability to accomplish the items you're talking to clients about, that's a problem. But it can be fixed. Veterinarians and managers may expect the same abilities from everyone who works with them, and this isn't reasonable, Pahl says. "I don't want one doctor upset with a newer, less experienced technician because that technician isn't as skilled at something," he says.

You must let your managers know if duties are outside your current capabilities. In the same breath, ask for additional training. Think of your need for learning as an opportunity. Remember that saying nothing is more likely to erode your credibility than is your lack of skill. "No problem can be resolved if it's not addressed," says Dr. David Grant, owner of veterinary CE provider Animal Care Technologies in Denton, Texas.



Some of you may feel disrespected because your job seems like it's a dead end. When veterinary team members are surveyed about what's important in their jobs, continuing chances to grow often come in at first or second, according to Kate Bailey, CVPM, a former practice manager who's now with veterinary consulting firm VMC Inc. in Evergreen, Colo.

One way to move ahead is to get cross-trained. If only a select few experienced team members are suited for certain tasks, ask your practice to train you so, if they're out, their duties could fall to you. And if you're the one with the experience, pitch in and help your teammates expand their skills. "When I'm away, I don't want anyone to miss my skills, just my personality," Reilly says. After all, your colleagues' competence affects how people regard you as well.

Step 4: Make your own way

So you think you're ready to go solo on a procedure or administrative task, but the doctor or manager isn't confident in you? Dr. Grant says your boss may find it difficult to trust you with advanced responsibilities when he or she doesn't personally train and supervise you. Rather than giving up, invest time and energy into thoroughly researching the treatment or administrative protocol. "A technician who only whines that the doctor won't teach them will probably gain little ground," Dr. Grant says. But you may find your supervisor is more willing to respond once you've shown initiative.

Read up on the task at hand, says Dr. Wendy Rib, a faculty member at the school of veterinary technology at St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, Fla. If you're a technician, strive to know every procedure as well as the surgeon. And be ready to allow the doctor or manager to observe you handling the task a few times. "Take that initiative to elevate yourself and prove how important and how skilled you are," Dr. Rib says.

Many team members are frustrated by the feeling that doctors underutilize their skills. Try a little forgiveness. Pahl says doctors sometimes like to complete tasks technicians can do because they're fun. Appeal to your

boss's business sense by highlighting the financial advantage of better using your skills—and leveraging their own. This also works with practice managers who hesitate to delegate.

Speaking of boosting profit—and patient care or efficiency—you may not be the owner, but sharing your ideas to improve the practice reflects well on you. "Take on projects to build and contribute to the practice in addition to regular duties," suggests Julie Legred, CVT, former president of the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America and now a Banfield, The Pet Hospital, team member. Maybe you could figure out a way to improve the practice Web site or a new way to organize appointments.

And don't forget that everyone, including assistants, receptionists, and kennel attendants, can help build new treatments and profit centers into a practice. Broad Ripple Animal Clinic's Tassava saw her assistants start a canine massage therapy program—a successful one at that.

Step 5: Pitch in

When you excel at something, others may let you do it—even if you shouldn't have to. Tassava says one kennel attendant quit her practice after a few weeks because he did such a good job cleaning up that exam room assistants left messes for him. She didn't know this kennel attendant was feeling disrespected—or why—until his exit interview. "When someone's on the ball with an unpleasant task, it's easy to let them do it," she says. But the goal in a veterinary clinic should always be this: When you have the time, do it yourself. As you seek more and better training and gain responsibility, don't think of pitching in with the dirty work as a demotion—or disrespect.

Moreover, if you're asked to do something "beneath" you, think twice before griping. Nancy Humphrey, RVT, a senior technician at Sanford Animal Hospital in Sanford, N.C., says pitching in is a crucial part of the job. Because of staff cutbacks at clinics nationwide, team members have been asked to handle unchallenging duties. "You have to be willing, for the good of the team, to do something that isn't your favorite thing to do," Humphrey says. "Take pride in the fact that you can do it." This will ultimately lead to more respect.

Step 6: Vent

Sometimes the way a doctor treats you has nothing to do with how well you do your job, how much training you have, or how much initiative you've taken. Pahl says this is particularly true with new veterinarians. "When they have bad experiences in the exam rooms with clients," he says, "they'll come out sometimes and give the support staff a hard time. 'Why are you crowding my workspace?' or 'How come that blood work isn't run yet?'" A technician may have called in sick, appointments may be backing up, and everyone may be behind, but new doctors don't have the awareness for workflow yet.

You can change these circumstances, Pahl says. Find a moment when the doctor is in an open, relaxed frame of mind, and try saying something like this: "Doctor, I could tell you were upset by that client situation. You seemed to want to speak to me harshly, as if I were responsible for upsetting you. Is there anything I can do next time to help you when a similar situation occurs?" Often simply calling attention to the behavior in a respectful manner can help the doctor see things from your perspective and change future behavior.

Now, whether the disrespect is sudden and fleeting or incessant, you likely need to vent a little. Many owners and managers set an open-door policy to allow constructive complaining behind closed doors to minimize outbursts in the practice, or you can talk as a team.

Either way, ridding yourself of bad feelings is healthy, says Valley Cottage Animal Hospital's Reilly. "You don't want to spend your day handling pets when you're upset or angry," she says. At her practice, an owner of a sick, hospitalized dog was particularly rude and demanding in the weeks she was in and out of the hospital. When the dog passed away, Reilly asked team members in a technician staff meeting to discuss the medical issues of the case. Then she asked them what bothered them most about the owner. "They felt it was corny at first, but afterwards they told me they felt so much better," she says.

You can go too far, of course. The whole point of venting is to do it in a fashion that doesn't interfere with your job or lead to more disrespect. Rather, it should be freeing.

Step 7: State the problem

While venting may make you feel better in the moment, it won't fix long-term feelings of disrespect. If you've done your part to generate an environment of mutual respect with doctors, colleagues, and clients and nothing is working, the next step is to talk to your boss—even if he or she is the problem. Don't raise issues in the heat of the moment when you're angry. Leave a note on the manager or owner's desk asking for time to discuss something at the end of the day, says *Firstline* Editorial Advisory Board member Sheila Grosdidier, BS, RVT, a partner with VMC Inc. in Evergreen, Colo. Then use these tips to make this conversation successful:

Don't assign an attitude to someone's behavior. For instance, if Dr. Rogers complains about you in front of others, don't assume that hurtful behavior is Dr. Rogers' overall attitude. Dr. Rogers may have just been negligent or careless. She may not have known people were listening or may not have thought about it. "You don't know what's going on in the core essence of that person," Grosdidier says. "Wouldn't you like them to give you the benefit of the doubt if the tables were turned?"

When you speak, only speak from your own experience—don't complain about things other people told you, says Broad Ripple Animal Clinic's Tassava. And look for solutions. "Tell your boss you want this to be a better workplace," she says. "Ask what you can do to make it better and address the problem." Opening yourself up to that criticism in a healthy way is productive, she says. "If you want respect, you need to put yourself out there and set higher standards for yourself—even higher than what other people expect."

Step 8: Know when to move on

You've done it all. You've communicated your feelings. You've taken initiative and addressed reasonable complaints about your quality of work. You've tried to be positive and hoped it would rub off. Nothing seems to help.

The best you can do might be to minimize contact with the offending co-workers by adjusting your work schedule. But sometimes the problem might be too big to fix. For instance, VMC Inc.'s Bailey helped consult at a practice where the technicians were overworked. They were doing anal gland expressions and nail trims that the assistants could do.

But the doctors wouldn't budge. "They were afraid to use unlicensed people to do any procedure," she says. Bailey tried to convince the owners that retention would improve if technicians and assistants could both upgrade their tasks. No go. Nothing changed. In these types of situations where you believe nothing will change, it may be time to quit and find a different job.

Right or wrong, overcoming disrespect takes work. Ideally, you could flip a switch and doctors, colleagues, and clients would recognize your worth. But such a switch doesn't exist. To be seen in a new light, you must put forth an effort. And the self-respect involved in doing so will get you well on the way to being appreciated by others.


89% of team members generally feel respected by the doctors in their practices.

83% feel respected by their co-workers.

65% think clients respect their recommendations.

VetMedTeam.com April 2009 survey



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