Out of Bounds: The role of Self in Establishing Personal and Professional Limits
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Many veterinarians and veterinary teams are 'willing workaholics'. Too often, they are asked to see one more patient, make one more phone call or squeeze in one more surgery into an already overscheduled day. Because veterinary team members love what they do and identify with the deep sense of purpose they receive from their work, they are agreeable participants in a vicious cycle of overwork. What are boundaries, and how can veterinarians and team members create and maintain them so they can stay "in bounds"?

Why are boundaries hard to set in veterinary medicine?

There are three basic reasons that boundaries are difficult to establish and enforce in veterinary medicine. These factors relate to the roles that veterinarians and team members perform in their professional lives.

1. Veterinary Teams do purpose driven work
Those that work in veterinary hospitals are engaged in work that they love, feel passionately about and that creates meaning in their lives. This can create conflict between work and other life activities because employees cannot let go of work. This behavior has been termed 'obsessive passion' and is a major contributing factor to burnout. The Mayo Clinic's list of six burnout risks includes two that are related to this mindset: "You identify so strongly with work that you lack balance between your work life and your personal life" and "You work in a helping profession".

2. Lack of a professional identity
Professional identity is the term for how an individual perceives themselves as professionals. It has implications for their behavior, ethical principles, and the way they interact with the world. A variety of factors influence the process of identity formation and may include professional role models and mentors; the workplace culture, dictated by the norms and values that exist in the business; and societal expectations. In the absence of a well-formed professional identity, these factors can pressure the veterinary team member into situations where boundaries can be hard to enforce.

Proactive professional identity development is rarely managed in veterinary hospitals. For newly graduated veterinarians transitioning into practice, the expectation to work long hours to prove themselves and gain experience is significant. So is the need to overcome 'imposter syndrome'. Greater clarity as to role expectation will help in developing a positive professional identity in practice and will decrease the ambiguity and uncertainty they experience.

A recent study evaluating burnout in veterinary technicians found that the "lack of societal awareness of the key role of the veterinary technician in animal medical care, and the lack of an established professional identity with clear boundaries"[1], are contributory factors to burnout. Workplace expectations further confused their professional identity, as the role of the credentialed technician is devalued when employers make menial, non-professional tasks such as janitorial work, part of the job expectation.

When there are unclear professional identities, it is more difficult to feel empowered to set boundaries.

3. Self-Conflict
Further complicating healthy boundaries is self-conflict; as stated above, veterinary medicine is purpose-driven work. Non-veterinary studies[2] have found 70% of employees believe their sense of purpose is largely defined by work. Based on workplace surveys I conduct as part of my consulting services, as well as my own experiences, I suspect that this significantly underrepresents the veterinary workforce. Simply put, what we do is a huge part of who we are.

The cost of non-existent or poorly enforced personal boundaries to the veterinary team member is significant. Employees that are driven by purpose[3] are significantly more stressed and score lower for well-being, resilience, and self-efficacy, all factors that can contribute to burnout.

Establishing and Maintaining Personal and Professional Boundaries

What's important to you?

When creating boundaries, it is important to understand the personal sacrifices made for work and their costs. The first step in establishing boundaries is an individual exercise that helps define what matters most to the individual. The four circles exercise[4] helps examine the importance and compatibility of the person's various roles and responsibilities in life.

- Step one: Draw circles that represent the 4 domains of life: work, family/home, community (friends, neighbors, religious or social groups), and self (mind, body, spirit), varying the sizes to represent how much you VALUE each. This should not be confused with where you spend the most time and effort, although there might be some similarities
- Step Two: Move the circles to show whether and to what degree they overlap.
- Step Three: Think about the values, goals, interests, actions, and results that you pursue in each domain. List three examples for each of your domains.

Example:

Step One

Work

Self

Community

Home/ Family

Step Two

Home/ Family

Work

Self

Community
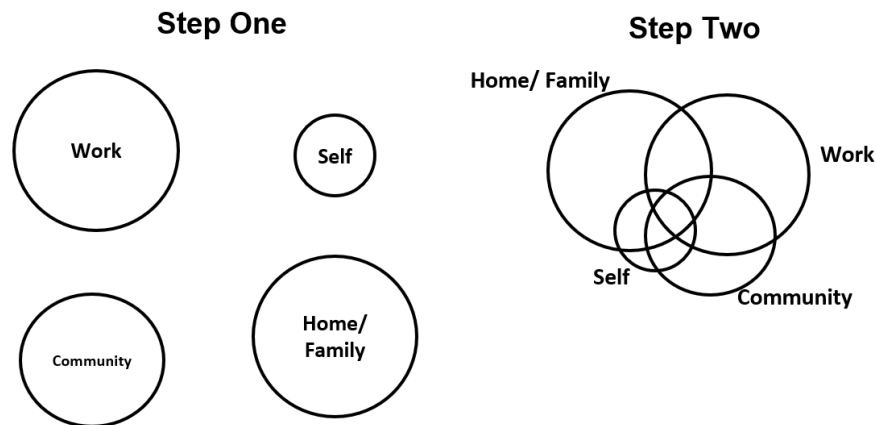
Step Three:

- Work: Learning how to be a self-sufficent, confident veterinarian; being appropriately rewarded for my efforts; Partnership or practice ownership in the next three to five years.
- Family: Attending events that are important to my family, like sports activities, school activities and family get-togethers, even if they are after work and could conflict with emergencies; Helping my parents with needs as they age; Starting my own family.
- Community: Participating in outdoor activity social clubs; Participating in community charity events; Veterinary volunteer leadership role with the goal of becoming the state VMA president in the next ten years.
- Self: Prioritize my health by getting exercise at least 4 times a week; Spend at least one day of each weekend doing things I enjoy, not that I have to do. Travel, with at least long weekend trips every three months.

Are the examples between the domains compatible or in opposition? If in opposition, what are some ways you could change how you work or how you think about the purpose of your work, without diminishing the personal value you derive from it?

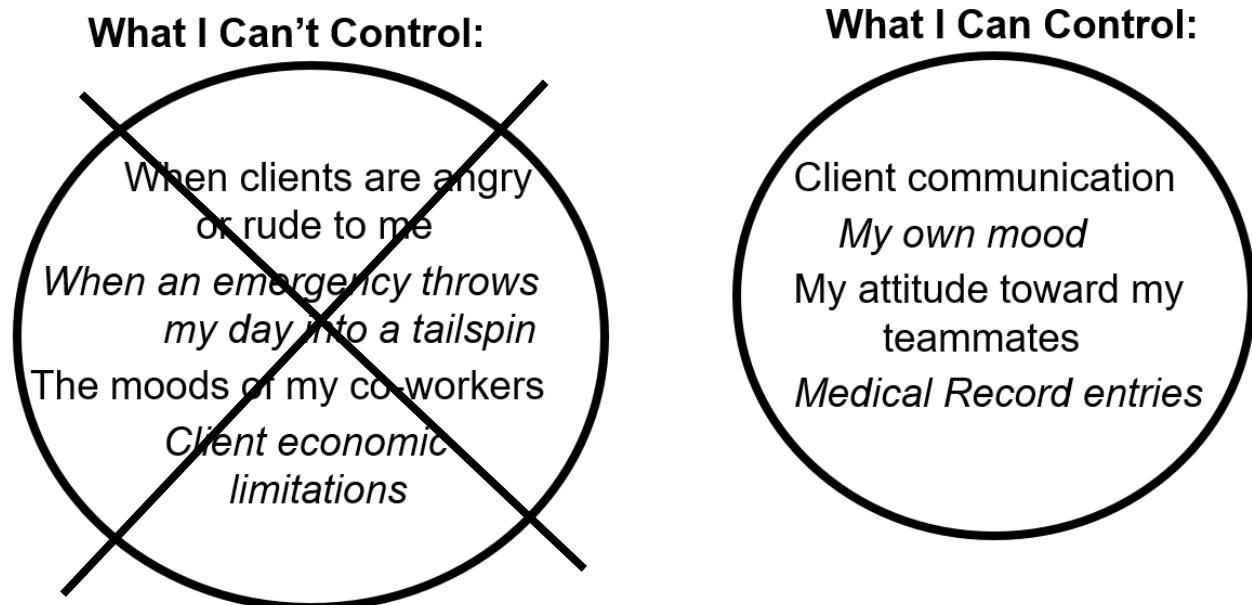**What are the stressors that sabotage boundaries?**

Our response to stress, including boundary breakdown, is often worsened when we feel a lack of control. To establish effective boundaries, you need to understand and manage the causes of your stress[5]. As simple as it may sound, it can be helpful to make a list of the sources of stress that inhibit your ability to set and keep boundaries.

- Step One: Make a list of the stressors for each of the four domains of life: work, family/home, community, self. These represent barriers to setting boundaries.
- Step Two: For each domain, make two circles. Title the first circle: 'things I can't control'; the second circle should be titled 'things I can control'. Put the stressors from step one in the corresponding circles.
- Step Three: Put an 'X' through the first circle; these represent areas where large amounts of negative energy are expended. To lessen the stress you feel from these, figure out how to change your attitude toward these stressors toward acceptance.
- Step Four: From the second circle, choose one item from the list and identify a single action step you can take to create a positive change.

Repeat this activity when your boundaries are not respected, either by you or others. This will help you to learn how to manage your stress and set enforceable boundaries.

 Example:

Stressors/Boundary Breakers: Work

What I Can't Control:

When clients are angry or rude to me
When an emergency throws my day into a tailspin
The moods of my co-workers
Client economic limitations

What I Can Control:

Client communication
My own mood
My attitude toward my teammates
Medical Record entries

- Action Step Example: I will create positive change by using communication skills to help relate better to clients. During every appointment, I will ask at least 3 open-ended questions, pause after the client speaks

at least twice and use two empathetic statements per visit. I will ask my examination room assistant to help measure my efforts.

Work-life balance versus work-life boundaries

There is much conversation around the increasing lack of work-life balance in veterinary medicine. A root cause of this problem, the inability to establish functional boundaries, is often overlooked and unaddressed. As explained in a Harvard Business Review article[6], work- life balance requires an unsteady equilibrium between different parts of our lives, such as time and energy. Trying to balance competing interests is unsustainable and exhausting. On the other hand, work-life boundaries offer a viable way of keeping things in their proper space.

Functional personal boundaries facilitate healthy interactions between the various parts of our lives: Home, work, self, and community. When these boundaries don't exist, or are poorly maintained, the outcomes are feelings of being overwhelmed, which leads to stress and unhappiness. What boundaries need to be established to lead to a sense of 'wholeness and synergy'[6]?

- Temporal Boundaries:
  Preserve <u>undisturbed</u> time for family, friends, exercise, and other non-work activities.
- Physical Boundaries:
  Creating physical boundaries means disconnecting from work, both physically and electronically, to create a separation between work and the employee. This can be accomplished by leaving the office at lunchtime to take a walk, go to lunch or read a book. It also means not completing medical records from home or logging in to check on patients during time off.
- Cognitive Boundaries:
  This is likely the most difficult boundary to establish and requires a conscious decision to not think about work and to be fully present in the world around us. It requires a persistent, dedicated effort to enforce this boundary. It also yields substantial rewards because our focused attention is one of our greatest resources.

Enforcing boundaries is an ongoing process, not a one-time solution

Because boundaries shift as conditions change and new priorities arise, effective boundary setting is continuous and dynamic. The following five steps[7] will help the create new behaviors needed to set effective personal and professional limits.

- Pause and de-normalize:
  Take time each day to identify sources of stress and unhappiness. Evaluate how these issues impact your job performance and relationships, at work and home. How do these factors align with what's important to you? It is worth making time every day to ask these questions, and to recognize mismatches between the current situation and priorities. This is the first step in setting a boundary.
- Pay attention to your feelings:
  Ask yourself "How do I feel about the situation?" and "How do I want to feel?". An awareness of an emotional mismatch between the answers to the two questions opens the door to taking needed action toward realignment.
- Reprioritize:
  Think about the costs of the current situation: what are you giving up, how long will this last and what are the long-term consequences of the situation? Because boundaries are constantly evolving, it is necessary to intentionally reprioritize other demands to align with what matters most, your true priorities, and not those imposed by the workplace.
- What are your alternatives?

What needs to change to help your work better align with your priorities. What would the ideal situation look like? Visualizing the desired future state will help you to understand steps that need to be taken to actualize the future.

- Implement changes:
Once you have created the roadmap forward, it's time to act. There are two basic ways this change occurs. The first is publicly, which is an obvious modification. One example would be work schedules such as a compressed schedule that involves working three 12-hour days, or an 8:30-3:30 shift five days a week, allowing parents to be home with children outside of school hours.
The second action might be a private change, which is self-driven. Examples are self-imposing boundaries, such as leaving on time at the end of the shift, and actively disconnecting during your lunch break.

The process explained above is "not a one-time activity, but rather a cycle of continuous re-evaluation and improvement. It's easy to slide back into "business as usual", consciously or unconsciously. For people to make real changes in their lives, they must continuously remember to pause, connect with their emotions, rethink their priorities, evaluate alternatives, and implement changes — throughout their personal and professional lives."[7]

Boundaries are tricky. They require self-awareness, self-reflection, and determination. As 'willing workaholics', most veterinarians and veterinary team members willingly smudge the line between the intersections of our lives, with detrimental outcomes. Setting personal boundaries is the first step in 'staying in-bounds'.

References

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