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## Rising to the Challenge

Plus: An Exclusive Interview with  
AAHA's New CEO, Garth Jordan **35**

Ways to Boost Your Team's Morale  
During Tumultuous Times **28**



# Surviving and Thriving

Ways to Boost Your Team's Morale During Tumultuous Times

by Jen Reeder

**THERE'S NO QUESTION: 2020 WAS INTENSE.** From the coronavirus pandemic to outrage about racial injustice sparked by the death of George Floyd, everyone in veterinary medicine has faced heightened challenges in both their professional and personal lives.

In an industry that already had to contend with stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, how can practice leadership boost morale and nurture wellbeing as we move into the new year?

David Hawkins, owner of AAHA-accredited Dogwood Pet Hospital in Gresham, Oregon, said prioritizing the safety of his staff and listening to their concerns and ideas has made a huge difference, such as in developing curbside protocols together.

"Burnout is real in the best of times. Add the enormous stress we have been under since March, and it can be a disaster. I want to enjoy what I do, and I want my team to feel the same," he said.

Photos from left to right, top row: Alexandra Morgan, DVM (Photo courtesy of The Village Vets); Vista Animal Hospital in Erie, Colorado (Photo courtesy of AAHA-Accredited Members Facebook Group); Will Draper, DVM (Photo courtesy of The Village Vets)

Photos from left to right, bottom row: Welcome back board at Leesburg Veterinary Hospital in Leesburg, Virginia (Photo courtesy of the AAHA-Accredited Members Facebook Group); Kaya Bryant, DVM, and veterinary student Aaliyah Johnson examine a cat; technician Amlin Sanders (left), and assistant manager Josette Greider work with a patient (Photos courtesy of The Village Vets)



Hawkins said his practice gave the customer service representatives more leeway to push routine visits further into the future and tell potential clients it would be at least two weeks for available openings; new client appointments are limited to one per day.

“I have also fired a couple of clients for rudeness to staff. Sorry, but we are less able to tolerate this than normal,” he said, adding, “One of the best compliments I have ever received was when I had two different employees express that, other than their homes, work was the other place they felt safe.”

Susan Driever, office manager of AAHA-accredited Animal Hospital Highway 6 in Sugar Land, Texas, which is owned by her husband and new AAHA board member Scott Driever, DVM, said the practice is a “very close-knit family.”

“They’re just amazing under pressure,” she said.

Curbside visits took much longer because of all the phone calls involved, and the practice saw an influx of new clients as people adopted pets to help cope with isolation during stay-at-home orders. So to help the support staff, the Drieveres started rotating paid Fridays off so that everybody had a three-day weekend to recharge. They also bought meals, hosted a margarita party, and did private mental check-ins with everyone.

“One staff member expressed concern that they weren’t able to find disinfectant for their home. So I went to Home Depot and bought a bunch of empty bottles and we sent everybody home with a bottle of [disinfectant],” she said. “Our team members did a lot of looking out for each other. Somebody would go to the store and a text would go out. ‘Does anybody need paper towels?’ ... We have each other’s back, six feet back.”

### Open Communication Is Critical

Monique Aguirre, DPH, CEO of Resilient Counseling, Wellness, and Psychological Services in Atlanta, Georgia, said the pandemic is causing mental distress for everyone, so while it’s important to practice physical hygiene, everyone should also practice “mental hygiene” for the good of themselves, their colleagues, and their patients.

“There are a lot of people who are finding themselves in depression,” she said. “Animals can sense when



Superheroes board at Walden Animal Hospital in Lively, Ontario

something’s wrong. So it’s like you’re bringing all that pressure and unrest to your work.”

To help counteract this, she recommends taking about 10 minutes each morning to stretch and count backward instead of racing around to get ready for work.

“Inhale and exhale and just think, ‘What’s today about?’” she advised. “And how can you make it your best day so that others can also have their best day?”

At the practice, Aguirre said it’s important to remember that some coworkers might live alone and have private struggles exacerbated by social distancing, so your interactions can change the course of their day or even life.

Leadership should promote open dialogue—including about complicated issues such as race—by having a jar in which team members can anonymously deposit topics of conversation for daily or weekly team meetings.

“We have to communicate,” she said. “Otherwise, we are keeping a lot of things bottled up, which eventually is going to be like a soda pop bottle and explode—and that’s not what we want.”

Colette Ellis, a certified stress-management coach and founder of Start Within Coaching in New York, New York,

“One of the best compliments I have ever received was when I had two different employees express that, other than their homes, work was the other place they felt safe.”

—DAVID HAWKINS, PRACTICE OWNER

agreed communication is key and that leadership needs to become “more comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

“If people bring things to your attention, really listen to them and give them space to share what their experience is,” she said. “Resist the temptation to immediately be defensive.”

In addition to approaching employees with empathy and compassion, practice owners and managers should offer that to themselves as well.

“From the leadership perspective, it’s also about checking in with yourself—knowing where you are personally because it really does start with self,” she said. “Then, if it’s a round robin [discussion], maybe you’re the first person to say, ‘Look, this has been challenging for me and here’s why.’ So creating that space where then others can feel like, ‘Oh, it’s safe for me to share what’s going on with me in this work environment.’”

### **Straight Talk Makes Stronger Teams**

That’s proved valuable for Will Draper, DVM, co-owner of the Village Vets, which he founded with his wife, Françoise Tyler, DVM, and includes three AAHA-accredited practices in metro Atlanta, Georgia. At the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, they instituted a “Biweekly Zoom Virtual Cocktail Hour” to support their teams.

When the national conversation turned to racial injustice in America, Draper shared some of his experiences with racism as a Black veterinarian practicing in the South for almost 30 years. There was the time when a dog growled at him and a white colleague remarked that it was because Black people “have a different smell” from white people. Several clients refused to work with “colored people,” but Draper turned the other cheek and helped many change their views with his skills and compassion.

“I’ve been in situations where I’ve realized that there may be people who would want to stand in my way, but it never deterred me,” he said.

Draper said speaking candidly in virtual meetings—and providing the opportunity for his team to do so as well—has increased camaraderie among the diverse team, which includes 26 veterinarians.

“When they know they can say whatever they want to say, it just brings you closer. It makes you stronger,” he said.

Draper and Tyler have also tried to bolster morale at their practices by giving custom Village Vets masks to employees, offering to help cover the cost of online RVT or CVT classes, and buying lunches.

“2020 has taught me how amazing and strong this team is,” he said. “Feeling like our team is committed to getting through it the best we can and keeping everybody safe helps me sleep better at night.”

He is also taking time for self-care. While he finds it depressing to still have to talk to his children about what to do if they’re stopped by a police officer, he’s channeled some of that frustration into exercising at home. He’s lost 25 pounds and feels much healthier.

Some white colleagues have reached out to Draper to just talk, and at times almost apologetically discuss the lack of diversity on their teams. Some cite a lack of applicants. So when practices have a job opening, he suggests sending employment announcements that read “Equal Opportunity Employer” to historically Black colleges and universities like his alma mater, Tuskegee University.

Draper hopes part of his legacy will be creating practice-ownership opportunities for people of color.

“I am determined to come out of this a better person, a better practice owner, a better father, and a better husband,” he said. “I want to personify a proud Black man whose voice is heard, and one who is going to be part of the solution.”

### The Importance of Diversity and Inclusion

Alexandria Hicks-Nelson, DVM, laboratory animal medicine resident at Stanford University’s School of Medicine and board member of the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association (MCVMA), said studies show there are financial benefits to having a diverse workplace. She suggests that management evaluate the hiring process as well as exit interviews with employees who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

“Sentiments of feeling unwelcome, unheard, or used, or if people think there’s ‘nowhere to go’ in terms of advancement, can highlight key lapses in inclusion or lapses in the equity that these individuals have experienced,” she said.

She urges practices to adopt a zero-tolerance stance toward racism—such as a client using racial slurs—and to promote active bystander strategies for the entire staff.



The team works in masks at Lincoln Animal Hospital in Lincoln, Rhode Island

“Active bystanders understand they have a role to play as not just a witness but a participant in social interactions,” she explained.

For instance, if a client yells or says something disparaging to a BIPOC member of the team because of their race, a second employee—the bystander—can choose to interrupt the situation rather than staying silent. An active bystander can distract the client with humor or by saying, “I don’t understand. Please explain your comment,” to give their colleague a chance to leave the situation and potentially alert management.

Microaggressions, or subtly discriminatory incidents, should also be regarded as inappropriate for the workplace, she said. A coworker claiming a BIPOC colleague is “well spoken” may mean the statement as a compliment, but the unintended message is that they have lowered expectations for people of that race. Saying, “That was a great presentation,” removes the implication and directs praise to the merit of the employee’s work itself.

“It’s very important to focus on things that you can do at the practice or institutional level,” Hicks-Nelson said. “It’s very scary, the prospect of being wrong. But be forthright. Acknowledging you’re trying to do better will appeal to people’s best nature.”

With all the available resources online, as well as speakers like her who are happy to talk to practices, there’s no reason to try to do everything on your own, she noted.

AAHA practice consultant Beth Armstrong, CVT, CFE, CCFP, CTP, said she and the rest of the AAHA team care deeply about inclusivity and wellbeing. She suggested practices create training videos to promote and nurture diversity, and to review employee manuals that might be outdated, such as not allowing braids despite their cultural importance, or dictating cleavage requirements for females.

Armstrong urged members to participate in AAHA’s virtual “Lunch and Learns” to share ideas and success stories with other practices. She’s heard some terrific wellbeing strategies, such as closing for lunch—actually turning off the phones for 30 minutes and eating as a team.

“There are so many times in an animal hospital that they just work through the day and don’t get a lunch,” she

said. "This way, they all get to just relax and talk to each other and not have to worry about anything for at least a half hour in the day."

Some practices have created "thank you boards" where colleagues can pin notes like, "Thank you for helping me with this patient," or for setting up for surgery or coming in early. At the end of the month, a manager puts the messages in a dish and, during a monthly meeting, pulls one out at random. The person who was thanked wins a gift card.

Another practice manager promotes wellness with a point system. She allots points for activities like taking a walk after work, seeing a counselor, or working out. Then employees can cash in their points for scrubs, gift cards, and other prizes.

"The smallest things that we can do for one another can make a world of difference," Armstrong said.

Practice consultants are available for free one-on-one consultations with anyone on a team about wellness tools, she said, and leadership qualifies for a free month of Aspire, a component of the AAHA Culture Initiative. She also recommends joining the Facebook group Not One More Vet, which aims to prevent suicide in the profession, and listening to the podcast *Vet Tech Café* for discussions of current issues.

Armstrong said she's been in the veterinary field for 19 years and knows there are always ups and downs, but she truly loves it because there are so many amazing people in the industry.

"Keep pushing forward, keep making goals," she said. "We truly do make a difference." ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is incredibly grateful to veterinary professionals for all they do for pets and people.

"How can you make it your best day so that others can also have their best day?"

—MONIQUE AGUIRRE, DPH

## Wellness and Diversity Resources

### AAHA Resources

[aaha.org/culture](https://aaha.org/culture)

[aaha.org/publications/newstat/articles/2020-06/committing-to-antiracism-in-the-veterinary-profession](https://aaha.org/publications/newstat/articles/2020-06/committing-to-antiracism-in-the-veterinary-profession)

### Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association:

[mcvma.org](https://mcvma.org)

**BlackDVM Network:** [blackdvmnetwork.com](https://blackdvmnetwork.com)

### National Association for Black Veterinarians:

[nabvonline.org](https://nabvonline.org)

**Not One More Vet:** [nomv.org](https://nomv.org)

**Vet Tech Café:** [vettechcafe.podbean.com](https://vettechcafe.podbean.com)

## For More Information

**Dogwood Pet Hospital:** [dogwoodpet.vet](https://dogwoodpet.vet)

**Animal Hospital Highway 6:** [sugarlandvets.com](https://sugarlandvets.com)

**Resilient Counseling, Wellness & Psychological Services:** [resilientcwps.com](https://resilientcwps.com)

**Start Within Coaching:** [startwithincoaching.com](https://startwithincoaching.com)

**Village Vets:** [thevillagevets.com](https://thevillagevets.com)

**Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association:** [mcvma.org](https://mcvma.org)