

How the Avengers Beat Thanos: Building Great Teams

David Liss, RVT, MBA

Los Angeles, CA

Veterinary Medicine is a team sport. You cannot do it alone. I think many of us in the industry would agree with this statement. However, the question remains as to whether we actually have high-performing teams in veterinary medicine.

In a research report from Salesforce, 99% of employees preferred an open, honest and collaborative environment but <50% of employees felt that their workplace was collaborative and 89% of employees felt that the lack of collaboration in their workplace led to workplace dysfunction.

So, what is a great team? Characteristics of a great team include:

- Achieves (or aims at) clear goals.
- Members know their roles.
- Communication is flawless and constantly improved.
- Cooperation is not optional.
- Individuals do not lose their voice.

Another very important characteristic of a high-performing team is a high-performing leader or coach. This leader needs to instill a vision, giving the players something to aim for and struggle for. Leaders also need to understand they cannot do all the work themselves, and delegate work, to empower members of the team to achieve results themselves and relish their own wins. The leader must be an excellent communicator and communicate goals and expectations to the team. Leaders must be honest. This is a tough thing to master, but clear honesty and letting each team member know where they stand is important. Leaders must be approachable so their team feels they can reach out to them and express frustrations or identify opportunities. A leader also must make the hard calls, someone who would hire an employee, give one tough feedback, and eventually fire them if needed.

A dangerous trap to fall in to is to call work your family. This actually has negative consequences because it creates cognitive dissonance. Work is not your family. You will move on from work, your family cannot fire you.

Great teams are not built at inception. Great teams require constant work. They need process, structure, and practice. This can occur through team building exercises which will, in turn, improve cooperation and collaboration. Teams have to get to know one another, and there is no better way than through situational practice.

Strong leaders understand their teams. What makes them tick. Thinking about Maslow's hierarchy, each person, per Maslow, requires a foundation of physiological needs and then safety needs that must be in place before they can fully self-actualize. After these, a person needs to feel a sense of belonging, be given esteem, and then they can fully self-actualize and desire and strive for greatness. Most workplaces do not provide basic physiological needs but might provide safety needs (paycheck) and can then instill a sense of belonging in their teams, treat the employees with regard and then push them to dream bigger.

Teams face change. It is inevitable. However, a strong leader can guide teams through change. There is something called the change process and is the emotional response folks go

through during change. This includes emotions like shock, denial, anger, depression, acceptance, enthusiasm and finally commitment. This takes time, and a leader must support each step of this process.

So how does a leader get results? You build towards results through accountability, trust, communication, respect, feedback and collaboration. Accountability is the core tenet of building a foundation of trust. You, and your folks, must do what they say, and take ownership of their own tasks. You win? That is your win, and you should be lauded. You mess up? You have to own it and face the consequences. But it is in the trying that the battles are won. Not in avoiding wins or opportunities.

Trust has to be built on a foundation of psychological safety at the workplace. Psychological safety occurs when people and teams can openly admit mistakes without fear of damaging consequences, they can learn from failures, everyone openly shares, and there is better course correction and prevention. This comes from the basic foundation of trust which is consistency over time. If you are consistently fair, people will trust you. Employees who work for trustworthy managers will advocate for the hospital, are more engaged, are more loyal and more committed which enhances productivity and reduces turnover and attrition.

Leaders must be excellent communicators. You get your points across in a psychologically safe way. To improve team communication, you must first make time for it. Then, you must ensure you have the understanding of the team and work through misunderstandings. Get to a culture of encouraging follow up questions, this means your team is listening and processing. Make communication a regular occurrence so it becomes second nature. Communication sometimes requires follow up, note where follow up is needed and do so. Treat communication as precious and do not squander it. Adults need to process the why, so be prepared to share the why's behind decisions or messages. Lastly, it is easy for us to assume we know why someone is responding, but there are thousands of reasons for adult behavior, so do not assume you know why a response is occurring. Instead, seek to understand through curiosity.

Leaders have to give tough feedback. They do so through the SBI model. Situation, Behavior, Impact. This frames the issue inside of a situation, you can describe what you were told occurred. Then, identify the behavior that is at issue, what is it you need to discuss. Then, address the impact (the why) and this is an effective tool for delivering tough feedback that will be psychologically safe.

To develop an effective team, you will need to make collaboration not optional. It is not optional to say, "that is not my job." Or if someone asks for help, or is observed to be without help, it is not optional to abscond from helping.

Building high performing teams is paramount to the success of a veterinary hospital. Through modeling the way, open communication, sharing tough feedback, setting expectations, iterating, practicing and inspiring a vision, veterinary practice leaders can build long lasting, resilient, efficient and profitable practices that can take on any challenge.