

“Being Happy at work is important. Tips to make it happen!”

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Veterinary medicine is very technical and requires all of us to be at the top of our games. Many times, we feel like jugglers in the circus dealing with clients, patients and needy doctors. Add to the equation we must deal with family issues and other relationships both at work in our personal lives - this can be exhausting and lead to fatigue and even burn out. The keys to success lie in our hearts not in our heads, and I would argue that one of the most important feelings is happiness. In this essay I plan to share some tips on how to be happy and have a long productive career in veterinary medicine.

Currently we hear a lot about work life balance. The world tells you that this is the key to staying fresh and happy at work. The issue is that goals are different for all of us. If you have a goal of reaching the top of your firm as an upper level manager, how do you accomplish this with more free time and less work? We all know that growth takes work. In our organization the reality is that when one team mate is gone on vacation, “balancing,” the rest of the team must work harder to pick up the slack. I have always wanted a tee shirt saying “Your Balance is my work” on the front and “My Balance is your work!” on the back. So, if this is true the people on vacation are happy and those at work are a little grumpy because they have more work. Unless they love what they do! Keeping a positive attitude and being willing to cross train allows for the team to continue flow as some team mates are away. We keep our staff from putting themselves in a box and challenge them to play roles that they would not normally do. This allows them to grow and stretch at work until it’s their time to “balance.”

The opposite of happiness is frustration so if we can manage this we will be more likely to be happy. Frustration is a feeling we deal with all the time when our expectations are not met. It really takes happiness to a new low and affects our speech, our body language and our work performance. I would argue that frustration is a large time consumer of our days. It can lead to sadness, anger, and discontent which affects everyone around us. So how can we manage this emotion? A few years ago, I heard a speaker define frustration as the gap between expectation and reality. So, the only way to fill the gap is to either lower my expectation or by improving your reality. Here is an example. Sally the lab tech had a certain way she wanted all lab submissions prepared. She took a lot of time letting all the doctors and team mates know how she expected things to be done. Overall the team submitted samples in a proper manner but there were a few submissions that were not filled in completely and this frustrated Sally to a point that she was so upset she would not run the sample. Then the results were delayed, and the doctor became frustrated. Sally explained that she expected everything to be done a certain way and the doctor explained that she was multitasking and could not complete the submission fully. There was a stand off until the doctor said “You are right, and I will try to do better.” This is raising the reality. Then Sally said “I understand, and I will run the samples in these situations when you are multitasking.” This would be lowering her expectations of submissions. From this example I hope you can see that all that you must do is manage the gap and frustration goes away. To stay happy at work you must manage frustration.

Another great way to be happy is to honestly manage your work day. There are four main areas of our day. Things we love to do and do well. Things we love to do and don’t do well. Things we hate to do and do well. Lastly things we hate to do and do not do well. Let’s start with the first area and the one that

makes us the happiest. We all like to do things that we do well and work to have these opportunities. There is not a problem with this and we should be doing these tasks. The second area is things we love to do and don't do well. These are the things we work at and they can make us and those around us frustrated. So the way to handle these is to seek mentors or simply ask for more training. Being humble in these situations can make you and the team happy. Now for the difficult two. There are those things we hate to do and do well and they are typically what everyone else asks us to do because we can. We are not happy doing them, but we do them anyway and our happiness at work drops. What if we came up with an easier solution and or added in technology to improve flow. Then these hate to do tasks becomes a like to do tasks (or an easier less time consuming to do task) and our happiness improves. Finally the dreaded "things I hate to do and don't do well." These make us unhappy and can make the work day miserable. There is only one way to happiness which is to outsource or simply explain you cannot do this task well. Your unhappiness is not worth the work, and you aren't doing it well anyway. Honestly understanding your skills and trying to get better will make the work day a happy day.

A happy career in veterinary medicine also depends on your understanding of your "S curve". We may argue that money is our driver, but research shows differently. The experts say that 84% of people feel trapped in their roles. We all need money but what we long for is growth. Just like a plant that stops growing begins to die, the same is true for our careers. There is a book called "Build an A team" by Whitney Johnson that explains the changes that occur and must occur in our work lives that keep us engaged and happy. All of us start at the bottom of the S in the introduction and "learning phase" which can last 6 months to a year. This is a time we are excited for a new adventure and we are focused on learning how to be competent at our tasks. The middle section is the "sweet spot of competence." This is a productive and innovative time where we are the most engaged and happy with what we do. This can last from 1-3 years and is a wonderful happy time at work. Then the third phase of our work life is the "mastery phase." This is the time in our careers we are all working towards and we are at the top of our game in our task or discipline. It's a time when we can mentor others by coaching and training those around us. There is a lot of happiness in sharing. The thing to watch out for is a feeling of entitlement. For example, "this is how I do it here," "or that's not my job" are phrases these folks might say. They are guarding against change and protecting their space only to find out they will become disinterested and even bored with their job. To be happy these people need to be disrupted and challenged to start the growth over and get on a new "S curve" of growth and work happiness. At the top of the S there is only two directions to go. One being up which is progress and the other being down which is regress. The book says this cycle happens about every 5 years, so manage your career for continued growth and be happy.

"Happiness Lies not in the mere possession of money, it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort." -- Franklin D. Roosevelt

Think about your team and what their happy score might look like. Our team does this on a regular basis and it goes like this. On a scale of 1-10 write down how busy you feel? Next write down how happy you are at work? You should have 2 scores. Then we take the scores and find out the aggregate score of each question for our team. We do not allow people to think about their answer but to quickly respond and tell us how they feel. Our goal is to have a happy score just a little higher than our busy score as an aggregate. We also tell the team if they have a happy score or a busy score below 6 please come to us and let's talk. We love people to have high happy scores, but we also want them to have high busy scores for both personal and business success.

Happiness takes work and can bear fruit in many ways. Look at yourself and see where you might try one or two of these tips to elevate your game. Veterinary Medicine is a wonderful career and you can make a difference with your positive approach to growth!