Disaster Planning is for Veterinary Hospitals, Too!

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Quick, there's a fire, call 911! The very thought of a disaster within your veterinary hospital must bring shivers to your spine. Those who have experienced it wish they never had and those who prepared for it are grateful they did!

The Institute for Business and Home Safety (www.disastersafety.org) estimates that 25 percent of companies are unable to reopen after a major disaster. Unfortunately, tragedy strikes, then a business considers the importance of disaster planning and emergency preparedness.

Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration (OSHA) requires small businesses to create a fire prevention and emergency response plan. This includes veterinary hospitals! Phil Seibert, CVT, owner of SafetyVet, advises, “When it comes to preparing for emergencies, the best advice is to leave all rescue duties to the professionals and establish a triage and treatment area for the animals once they are evacuated.”

Nadja Torling, current practice manager of client relations at Wheat Ridge Animal Hospital, was working at a boarding kennel when a fire broke out in the kitchen and laundry area. She was the first to arrive on New Year’s Day when she smelled a hint of smoke. As she entered the kitchen area she was horrified to find it filled with smoke and a foot of water on the floor. At that moment, a second employee walked up and Nadja yelled to her co-worker, “call 911!”

As the day unfolded, it was apparent their emergency training had paid off. Tragically, three dogs were lost in the fire; however, the team pulled together and performed well under the circumstances. The firefighters quickly evacuated the dogs. During previous training sessions, the employees were concerned if they could leave the building without saving the animals. It is the policy of the boarding facility to evacuate the people first and allow the trained fire fighters to do their job. Everyone let the professionals fight the fire and evacuate the dogs, the way they had trained in their drills. Torling says, “It is important to continuously review protocols to keep them current and have drills where you physically have to go through the motions. If you’ve done it in training, it’s a lot easier to know what to do when there’s an actual emergency.”

The best advice; allow the professionals to take care of the evacuation of animals. Team safety is PRIORITY! Consider designing a drill, even as simple as turning out the lights.

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**President’s Message**

**School is out but the bullies are still here.**

What is Workplace Bullying? With the growing dialogue around high school bullying these days, it was only a matter of time before workplace bullying revealed it’s ugly head in business management circles as a topic of great concern. And what a problem it is. In the United States, workplace bullying has been found to be four times more prevalent than sexual harassment and you may not even know it’s a problem at your hospital.

A recent survey done by the U.S. and Canada Workplace Bullying Institute found that only 13% of targets who reported bullying behaviour to their manager actually received the help they requested. Forty two percent said their manager compounded the problem, and 40% said he or she did nothing. Perhaps most disturbing is a recent workplace bullying Web site that suggests that up to 53% of workplace bullying is initiated by managers, many not being able to recognize their destructive actions themselves.

Above the Law and Below the Radar

While most schoolyard bullies are openly aggressive, workplace bullies are perhaps the more dangerous ones as they hide their intent to all but their targets, using hand gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other stealthy actions. Physical abuse is rare and they’re very careful not to contravene human rights or labour laws covering sex, orientation, age, race, or religion. Instead they wage their covert attack by telling jokes, teasing, sarcasm, and giving the silent treatment, often covering their tracks by saying “I was just kidding”… but the damage is already done.

Other hidden forms of workplace bullying can be in the form of exclusion from staff events or offering unsolicited non-factual information. For example, a team member may say that someone was late for work this morning, whereas the workplace bully might say he or she was late and out drinking last night. The extra comment serves the bullies purpose to further isolate and alienate their target from their coworkers.

**Bullies Cost Money**

The humiliation and deliberate isolation of team members has a terrible psychological cost to the target and a huge financial cost to a business. Staff turnover, loss of productivity, higher health care premiums, and the possible defence of liability lawsuits are real costs to be concerned about. The province of Ontario enacted Bill 168: Workplace Violence and Harassment into legislation in 2010 becoming a leader in protecting those in their workplace from this type of abuse. Most states and provinces fall well short of this level of protection. It’s worth a detailed look.

**How do we Prevent Workplace Bullying?**

Since many actions are committed out of our sight, early prevention helps create and maintain a work environment that is adverse to the workplace bully. You can do this by considering the following actions:

- Actively build self esteem and a positive attitude within your team.
- Include all staff in all practice events. Leave no one behind.
- Give team members a balanced workload… don’t play favourites!
- Ensure your staff policy manual has protocols for Conflict and Dispute Resolution, Harassment, and No Gossip.
- Embrace 360° Staff evaluations so the bullies can’t stay hidden.

Remember to stimulate the mind and enhance your environment!

Tom MacDonald, CVPM

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**LEGAL MATTERS**

**Question:** How much of a discharged employee’s file are they entitled to have copies of?

**Legal Advice:**

“There is some discussion in legal circles about whether the content of the personnel file is owned by the employer or the employee; ultimately, my view is that the content of the file is more likely to be considered the property of the employer in that the employer is the one that determines what information, if any, is to be collected and retained. Certainly, my view is that any document that has already been delivered or signed by the employee or any document that the employee has specifically requested to be filed in the personnel file should be delivered to the employee. Any document that is a confidential note to the file does not, in my view, need to be disclosed. This may be subject to local laws with any particular state or province; accordingly, it would be prudent to check with your local attorney to confirm the approach in your own jurisdiction.”

Douglas C. Jack, Esq.

**Post 06/18/2012. Please note the date of this post. The law changes frequently and as a result this may not reflect the current state of the law.**

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**VHMA Legal Matters** is free to VHMA members - scroll through our current posts or submit your own question.

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for an hour and emulating a power outage. Prior to performing a drill, while in a team meeting, inform all employees of Emergency Guidelines, expectations, and possible scenario. Verbally walk them through an emergency situation. Consider a “Lunch and Learn” where a fireman or police officer will discuss emergency evacuations and safety.

Your drill may include the following components in a mock, physical experience:

- “Quick, there’s a fire!” NOW WHAT?
- 1. Call 911 (establish relationships with local fire departments and police).
- 2. Create a map of the facility with exit routes and an emergency gathering place and locations of fire extinguishers.
- 3. Generate a list of all employees, patients, and client contacts of the day (difficult if no electricity).
- 4. Set up a triage treatment area for evacuated animals.
- 5. Have access to enough leashes and carriers.
- 6. Identify a prearranged, temporary facility (establish relationships with nearby veterinary hospitals and boarding facilities in case of an emergency).
- 7. Have a computer back up, medical records, flashlights, batteries, and electrical generator with gas to allow for days of usage.
- 8. Have access to medical supplies and delivery.

When planning your drill, outline the event weeks in advance, prepare for lighter appointment scheduling, generate a sign stating your team is in training, inform local emergency agencies, turn over the phones to a message machine, and allow for deferring of the drill. Give yourself at least 2-3 hours for the mock disaster to unfold. The Disaster Coordinator’s task may take weeks to properly achieve. Stuffed animals may be used in the drill to facilitate evacuation and triage “realness.” Use your imagination, consider as many glitches that may occur and toss the scenario out to your team.

The most difficult conversation your team may ever have is around the topic of an immediate emergency evacuation with an anesthetized surgical patient. With your team answering the question, “What do we do in the case of an emergency and a surgical patient on the table?” Who will make the medical decision? How will your team feel about walking away? This is a tough concept, one that will bring tears of frustration and uncertainty, although it must be understood, TEAM SAFETY is PRIORITY. One technician stated, “I won’t leave!” The following discussion included liability risks and a reality check.

Your local and state veterinary professional associations may be great resources for you as well. Networking with professional organizations may be crucial to disaster recovery and emergency planning. Your challenge is to engage and network with your local, state, and national organizations in the preparation of disaster planning.

In conclusion, veterinary health care teams are encouraged to step up, speak with management and create a Disaster Plan to include written documentation and periodic training drills. The safety of the team, clients, pets and business depend upon it!

To read the entire article with comprehensive list of references and websites, view www.rebeccarosecvt.com.
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