

Professional Development

PROMOTING POSITIVITY IN ANIMAL CARE: THRIVING AMIDST CHALLENGES

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Photos courtesy of the author.

In today's fast-paced professional animal care landscape, maintaining a positive outlook can be truly challenging. Compassion fatigue, toxic team cultures, unavoidably stressful projects, the inevitable loss of animals, interpersonal challenges with coworkers—it's all sometimes an overwhelming mess. Most of us came into the field to begin with because of a deep-rooted passion for animals and for sharing those animals with other humans, and so finding yourself feeling trapped in a negative spiral when a large part of your self-identity revolves around your job can be extremely unsettling. And worse, this conundrum is increasingly leading good trainers and keepers to leave the field entirely, finding themselves forced to make the difficult choice to prioritize their own quality of life over their passion for animal care. The field often suffers from this loss of expertise. Facebook is filled with support groups for ex-animal care workers, and equally full of groups discussing and struggling to solve the cultural challenges currently prevalent in our field. In an ideal world, a passion for animals and good mental health would not be mutually exclusive, and the importance of self-care and healthy work-life balance would be an integral part of every work environment. But unfortunately, this is often not the case, and the environment is largely outside of our control, leaving us with few options. What to do?

There are obviously no easy answers—just the increasing need for progressive culture change that we can all choose to be a part of creating. But one of the ways in which we can act on a smaller scale is by focusing on the internal environment—ourselves—rather than solely on the external environment we inhabit. It may sound trite, but positivity is a skill worth practicing. . . not in spite of the stressors in our work and lives, but because of them.

I am admittedly not someone most would describe as 'inherently positive.' It is something I struggle with daily, and perhaps I always will. I have some phenomenal coworkers who are almost literal rays of sunshine in any situation—bright, cheerful, always smiling, always quick with a kind word or a supportive action. I do not understand how they manage this so effortlessly, when my own thoughts dart just as quickly to irony, to sarcasm, to pragmatism. But I envy them, and I emulate them when I can, because I have increasingly discovered that practicing a positive mindset is not only essential for my personal well-being but also critical for doing my part to cultivate a healthy and productive work environment. By intentionally choosing to focus



on the positive aspects of work and embracing resilience in the face of adversity, I can train my ability to navigate challenging situations with grace and optimism.

I am admittedly still pretty bad at it.

That said, I'm committing to try, and to keep trying. Positivity serves as a catalyst for personal and professional growth. It empowers individuals to overcome obstacles and be ready to seize opportunities for success. A positive mindset fosters resilience, creativity, and collaboration, enabling teams to thrive in dynamic and unpredictable environments. By choosing to cultivate an atmosphere of positivity, our teams can better inspire innovation, foster teamwork, and enhance employee morale and satisfaction. In environments plagued by toxicity and negativity, maintaining a positive outlook can seem like an uphill battle—or worse, the attempt itself may be labeled as 'toxic' as well, when people enact it by blithely ignoring negative situations and forcing others to do the same when they're struggling. But being positively-minded doesn't (and shouldn't) come at the expense of acknowledging and doing one's part to solve the negative influences in the environment. Making a choice to focus on the positive doesn't mean that I don't see or don't care about the negatives in my life or environment. It is simply a personal choice about how to navigate them—one that, at its strongest, empowers individuals to rise above that negativity and cultivate a culture of respect and inclusivity. By focusing on solutions rather than dwelling on problems, we can effect positive change within our organizations and inspire others to do the same. . . and it all starts with us! Pretty great, right?

During periods of heightened stress and uncertainty, our ability to prioritize self-care also becomes paramount in order to maintain this active positivity. Self-care is specific to the individual and encompasses



Left: Positivity helps us reframe challenges as a learning opportunity.



Right: We become better learners and teachers through positivity.

a range of practices, including mindfulness, physical activity, and healthy work-life balance, all of which can contribute to overall well-being and resilience. The last of these sometimes seems impossible in the animal care field, but establishing meaningful boundaries gives you the space to recover and recharge, and therefore maintain your positivity over time. By making self-care a priority, individuals can recharge their batteries, manage stress more effectively, and approach challenges with renewed energy and perspective. I am demonstrably terrible at this; getting better at establishing these boundaries after years of being 'all-in' and on-call 24/7 has been a struggle that I may never fully resolve. Done poorly, it leads to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and anxiety. Done well, it gives us the space to come back recharged and be our best selves for our animals and our teams. I look forward to doing it well more often as I practice!

Adversity often presents opportunities for growth and learning, even in the most challenging of circumstances. By reframing setbacks as learning experiences and focusing on the lessons they impart, we can emerge from adversity stronger, wiser, and more resilient than before. At our facility, this is most frequently embraced through our team reactions to fly-offs—the talkdown that always follows after the fly-off is resolved focuses entirely on what we did well and what we could do better in the future; it gives us all a sense of closure and a plan for the future. Embracing a growth mindset like

this, especially after a difficult experience, allows us to view challenges as opportunities for personal and professional development, fostering a sense of empowerment and optimism in the face of adversity. During the recent leadup to our USDA pre-license inspection, there were plenty of stressors and potentially adverse situations to navigate, but by making the intentional choice as a team to focus on the positives—on the things we knew we were doing well and the things we knew we could control and improve—it allowed us to tackle an enormous challenge successfully. And to celebrate together after we gained our license!

In addition to focusing on personal positivity, cultivating a culture of appreciation within the workplace can have a transformative impact on employee morale and engagement. When we recognize and celebrate the achievements of our colleagues, expressing gratitude for their contributions and support, we create a sense of belonging and purpose that transcends

individual roles and responsibilities. Our teams can be our biggest supporters or our biggest sources of stress, and investing positively in this area has paid enormous dividends for me as an individual. Again, I look forward to continuing to grow and develop further in this area, and I'm grateful for my coworkers who demonstrate these skills with such grace.

Overall, we live in a world characterized by complexity and uncertainty, and maintaining a positive outlook is difficult. It takes effort. It takes practice. And sometimes, we just want to stew in our frustrations for a while. That's fine, but it ultimately does not lead us anywhere better than we are right now. If we want to experience culture change, embracing positivity is essential for navigating the professional landscape with resilience and grace. If we focus on the positive aspects of work, the areas in which we can enact real change, embrace resilience in the face of adversity, and foster a culture of appreciation and support, we can cultivate a thriving professional environment where creativity, collaboration, and innovation will flourish. Harnessing the power of positivity on a personal level means that we can transcend challenges, inspire others, and achieve lasting success in our professional endeavors.

We deserve it, and so do our animals!

Fostering team positivity is worth the effort!

