



OPINION

What Makes a Good Leader?



Dr. Laura Baltodano with Rosie

Leonidas led his army to glory against overwhelming forces, but all 300 of his men died in the battle of Thermopylae.

Was Leonidas a good leader?
What makes a good leader?

In veterinary medicine, leadership encompasses more than being a good clinician. For example, education, training, and experience well prepare veterinarians to deal with complex medical conditions and respond appropriately, such as, *Mrs. Smith, Fifi has been diagnosed with diabetes. If she is going to have a good quality of*

life, you will need to give her daily insulin and feed her a special diet.

That type of knowledge may serve veterinary professionals well in matters of antibiotics, blood tests, and echocardiograms, but how do veterinarians lead the entire team through daily battles, emergencies, and the proverbial Monday-morning quarterbacking?

According to the Veterinary Leadership Institute,¹ veterinary professionals need not only medical proficiency to meet their clients' changing needs but also the skills and competency to adapt to their evolving roles. To successfully lead a team of dedicated professionals, veterinarians must be more than a walking encyclopedia of medical knowledge; they must be able to empower all team members to maximize their respective roles while integrating clients' needs and wants. To best meet the needs of clients and patients, veterinarians must be able to work as part of the team. Team members look to the veterinarian for leadership and guidance, which naturally casts the

veterinarian in a leadership role; nevertheless, no team exists without all the other members who play critical roles in practice success.²

Boss vs Leader

Many children play games such as Follow the Leader, in which everyone automatically follows a leader. A boss whom everyone follows in the workplace is not automatically a good leader.

A boss is typically more authoritative, does not always promote team growth or value creativity, and is more dominant. In my experience, a good leader motivates the team in numerous ways: leading by example, keeping lines of communication open for team concerns and ideas, being honest, promoting a positive practice culture, being consistent in regard to the practice mission, and valuing each team member's role.

The Servant Leader

One successful management style is that of a servant leader—one who helps team members reach their full potential by providing the tools that allow them to

A servant leader helps team members reach their full potential by providing the tools that allow them to develop their skills and become more autonomous.

Leadership Qualities

In the author's experience, the best leaders:

- Are **consistent** about the practice mission
- Are **honest**
- **Lead** by example
- **Maintain** open lines of communication for team concerns and ideas
- **Motivate** the team
- **Promote** a positive practice culture
- **Value** each team member's role.

develop their skills and become more autonomous.³ Following is an example of a servant leader management style:

The veterinary practice recently hired an office manager new to the role. As a servant leader, the veterinarian gives her the important task of implementing preventive care guidelines into the practice, including passing that knowledge on to the rest of the team

during team training. This empowers the new team member; as she takes ownership of the role within the team, her value to the team increases. Plus, a positive correlation exists between empowering team members and providing better care for patients.⁴

A servant leader places higher value on developing leaders than merely training team members, which ultimately results in decreased team member turnover, happier and healthier team members, and a successful practice.³

Conclusion

So, what makes a good leader? No matter his or her style, a good leader ensures that the goal is worthwhile and shared by those being led, and, most importantly, earns and nurtures the trust of his or her team.

It is likely that the Spartans following Leonidas knew well in advance that they would die at Thermopylae; nonetheless, they trusted that their leader's goal was worth their efforts and sacrifice. I believe that is the essence of leadership. 

Editor's note: *Laura Baltodano has worked as a Veterinary Business Management Association (VBMA) officer at Washington State University, where she completed the VBMA's gold business certificate program and participated in the 2011 Veterinary Leadership Experience. She currently manages a Leigh Acres, Florida, veterinary practice.*

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