

How (and Why) to “Untrain” Your Team

Success in practice today requires an adaptable practice team.

By Louise S. Dunn

From pharmaceuticals and treatment recommendations to the use of telemedicine, laser, and social media, changes in veterinary medicine and practice management today seem endless.



Louise S. Dunn

Change is difficult, and given the rapid delivery of new information, it's hard to keep up.

Nevertheless, succeeding in practice today requires teams that are amenable and adaptable to change. That means changing the way you think about team training, including recognizing the difficulty of breaking old habits and employing techniques to help your team “unlearn” the old and embrace the new.

“BUT WE’VE ALWAYS DONE IT THIS WAY”

When confronting your team with change, you may hear a resounding “But we’ve always done it this way.” The fact is we are often more comfortable sticking with what we know. It is far easier to make a situation fit our current “mental maps” than it is to venture into the unknown realm of change.¹

The dilemma is how to unlearn the old way of doing things and adapt to the new way.

In many situations, management and team

members are operating with outdated or obsolete mental maps.³ To advance into a new way of doing things, three things must occur³:

1. Recognize that the old way is no longer effective.
2. Create a new way.
3. Ingrain new habits.

ROADBLOCKS TO LEARNING

Unlearning old methods or habits can be difficult for people who have been performing their job for a number of years. In addition, certain common policies and procedures can create a wall. Bureaucratic creep, or the overabundance of steps and checkpoints in standard operating procedures, makes change difficult because the process has taken on a life of its own and dismantling it becomes a major endeavor.

Another roadblock to learning occurs when people feel unable to change their situation or believe that outcomes are beyond their control—attitudes that can result from low self-esteem, chronic failure, or other negative stimuli. So how do you unlearn old ways of doing things?

UNLEARNING OR UNTRAINING

In order to train your team on a new way of doing something, the team must engage in the process of recognizing what has become

obsolete and participating in creating the new way by discussing their prior habits, preconceptions, and knowledge.⁴ Instructors cannot simply conduct a training session and then demand compliance because this does not dismantle the ingrained mental maps.

The following 7 tactics can help dismantle those old maps and untrain your team⁵:

1. Instead of demanding compliance, foster a sense of willingness among the team to unlearn the old way and learn the new way.
2. Encourage pursuit of the unfamiliar, realizing that many team members will show resistance.
3. Conduct the training in a new location. Move away from the location where the team learned the old way to a new location where they can learn a new way.
4. Bring in outside trainers because like-minded people in a group will hamper the unlearning/learning process.
5. Provide a “psychologically safe” environment where team members can ask questions and explore ideas without fear of looking stupid or being dismissed.
6. Set clear and challenging goals, giving team members a sense of ownership and the ability to achieve those goals.
7. Identify a “champion” for the learning process, someone who can offer support, handle glitches, and provide regular feedback to the team as they go through the learning process. [VMD](#)

References available at [AmericanVeterinarian.com](#).

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Adapt or Face Extinction

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

—Charles Darwin

Think about Uber and Netflix. These successful companies did not explode on the business scene because they were the strongest competitors. Rather, they were the most adaptable. These pioneering organizations dismantled the assumptions and practices of their respective industries, experimented, and built new ways to conduct had been considered the routine veterinary business models of taxi service and movie rentals, respectively.²

What are some routine business models that you may need to dismantle in order to take your practice to the next level? Is it your team-to-DVM ratio? Your use (or lack thereof) of social media? Adding telemedicine to your practice? Innovative medical and management ideas will force practices to consider changing from the old way of doing things or, more precisely, to consider adapting in order to advance and survive extinction.

