Networking and Mentorship: Building Your Support Structure

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Networking goes beyond finding your next job. Yes, a network alerts you to new opportunities and can help you land a new position. But it is so much more. We all need a tribe. Humans are herd animals (well, mostly anyway). We each must create a group that envelops us in support and moves us forward. We need mentorship from those who are wiser and more experienced, to teach, protect, and keep us in check. We also crave the energy and enthusiasm of newer associations, to remind us to try new things and keep us refreshed.
CAREER ADVANCEMENT

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Simply put: Your network connects you to others. This connection is powerful—it helps us feel that we are not alone, that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. A solid network stimulates ideas, keeps things in perspective, helps shoulder the burden in hard times, and softens the blows of disappointment.

We, as veterinary nurses, both new and experienced, need to seek out members for our tribe who push us to grow, reach further than we thought possible, and catch us when we fall.

DIVERSIFY YOUR NETWORK

Take an active role in shaping your network. Add people into your circle from all walks of life. You want to develop a network of people who think differently than you do. Welcome alternate perspectives and learn from a variety of approaches. It is often beneficial to receive a range of different advice, and then you can choose the parts that resonate most. Your network should be well-rounded and include people from many backgrounds and levels of experience.

Consider including individuals such as:
- Coworkers
- Peers at other hospitals
- Classmates
- Teachers
- Coaches
- Family members (yes, sometimes they really do have good advice)
- Counselors and therapists
- Managers (your own or someone else’s)

Also think about joining groups within the veterinary industry, such as:
- Professional organizations
- State associations
- Social media groups
- Continuing education seminars
- Support groups
- Committees

LOOK OUTWARD

Stretch your network beyond veterinary medicine. Seek mentors who can help you build skills in areas beyond just your technical skills. Think about people you know who excel in specific areas in which you would like to grow. These mentors may be within the veterinary profession, but there are many talented individuals outside veterinary medicine who can share valuable knowledge as well.

Reflect on the competencies you would like to gain. Sometimes these become apparent when observing someone else in action. When you have that thought of, “I’d like to be able to do that,” then you’ve identified a goal!

Think about what you would like to learn, and someone you admire who does that thing really well. Would you like to be able to communicate more concisely? Cope better with disappointment? Attempt new things more willingly?

Here are some ideas to get you started:
- Explain anesthesia to a reluctant client
- Clearly communicate concerns to your manager
- Efficiently triage emergency cases

approaching mentors

Some mentors fall into step with us naturally. But other times, we have to actively seek them out. Mentorships do not need to be formal, they just need to get started. Asking someone to mentor you can be intimidating, but it doesn’t have to be. Here are some pointers to get you started:

Initiate the conversation.
Keep it simple. Tell the person what you appreciate or admire about them, and ask if they would be willing to help you learn similar skills.

Be specific.
Have a clear idea of what you would like to learn from this person, then share it with them. This will help you use time efficiently. Your goals may change over time, so be sure to re-evaluate often.

Put some structure in place.
Talk with your new mentor about structuring discussions. Do conversations need to be scheduled? Do you set up a recurring time and place to talk? Do you connect on an as-needed basis? There’s no one right answer, but it’s a good idea to discuss what works best for both of you, as you certainly want to be respectful of their time.
● Calmly approach a coworker with a disagreement
● Readily accept changes in hospital protocols

Once you have a mentor in mind, talk with them to let them know specifically what you’d love to learn (BOX 1). Most people are more than willing to share their approach and give you pointers. Also talk with them about the mistakes they made along the way, so you can try to avoid the same pitfalls.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH SUPPORT

Good mentors listen. They are an effective sounding board. They can help you work through uncertainty and frustration. Good mentors encourage you when things are rough, reignite your fire when motivation sags, and nudge you when you hesitate.

Good mentors challenge your thinking. They may not always tell you what you want to hear. After all, this is not a fan club. You are looking to grow, and sometimes we need to hear the hard stuff. A good mentor will be able to tell you the things you didn’t want to hear but needed to. They will be able to do so respectfully and with kindness. Out of this comes growth.

CREATE A NET THAT WORKS

We all need a safety net at times. Life has a funny way of going sideways, and sometimes we skid out of control. Once in a while we crash. Layer your network so that the support you need is available when you need it.

Find those people who create a safe space for you to vent, talk things through, and gain perspective. Sometimes we just need a shoulder to cry on. Other times we need someone to give us another viewpoint on a situation that went awry. We need people to coach us through the hard times and help us overcome obstacles.

COMMON MISTAKES

Letting fear get in your way. Don’t be afraid to seek advice. It’s OK to not know everything. Seek out mentors who are approachable and with whom you feel comfortable being candid.

Refusing to push your limits. The only way to expand your boundaries is to reach beyond your comfort level. Good mentors should challenge you to stretch and will support you as you do.

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Failing to adapt your network over time. Some mentors will remain in your network for life. As you grow as a veterinary nurse and as a person, the types of mentorship you require will change. Be cognizant of your adapting needs and continuously be on the lookout for people to add to your inner circle.

It’s your network. Select members who give you the support and encouragement you need to be the best veterinary nurse and person you can be. 

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Founder and president of Starpath Consulting LLC, Carolyn has an insider’s perspective from more than 20 years in the veterinary profession as a CVT, practice manager, HR director, HR partner, and HR consultant. Carolyn’s deep understanding of veterinary team dynamics is the foundation for Starpath Consulting LLC, which provides veterinary-focused HR support. Carolyn is a Colorado native, and is grateful for the blue skies, Rocky Mountain views, and sunshine. She lives in southwest Denver with her family and 3 dogs. Carolyn is passionate about veterinary practice culture and empowering hospital teams. She offers résumé review and individual coaching services; see details at starpathconsulting.com.