

Changing the way we do things around here: optimising utilisation of staff in a veterinary practice

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Introduction

The session will be an interactive workshop to support participants to action change. The workshop will focus on change to improve utilisation of veterinary professionals.

In 2023 two co-design open access research papers were published (Brown and Ma 2023, Brown 2023), where current members of our profession – employers, employees and educators, imagined a world of optimal utilisation and looked at what that actually looks like, how it would impact the team and what is stopping us from optimising staff utilisation. One paper focusses on companion animal practice and the other on rural animal practice.

These papers will frame this workshop, which is aimed and moving from research to implementation.

Why is change hard?

Even though change is constant, people find change hard. Doing things the same way and justifying the way we do things is a safety response. Being open to change opens us to the vulnerability that we may not have been doing things the most effective way. In the context of utilisation, it may open us up to having to change our narrative, learn new skills, or perhaps we need to stop doing something we love doing. Change is also worrying for perfectionists! What if we get it wrong?

Change requires time, a willingness to examine other ways of doing things, and planning implementation, evaluation of outcomes of the change, reflection, and refinement. It is important it is undertaken in a way that fully understands the system, addresses the factors in the system and brings the people along for the ride. This means involving the people affected by the change. Having your team designing the change with you will improve implementation success and ownership of it.

Understanding why the problem exists

The model of systems thinking is a way of gaining an understanding of why a problem exists and how different aspects of the problem interact and influence each other. It also supports the identification of the root causes of problems, opportunities for change, and identifies potential consequences.

Figure 1 shows systems thinking as an iceberg. The event for today's workshop: "We need and want to improve utilisation of all veterinary professionals, but we are struggling to make change".

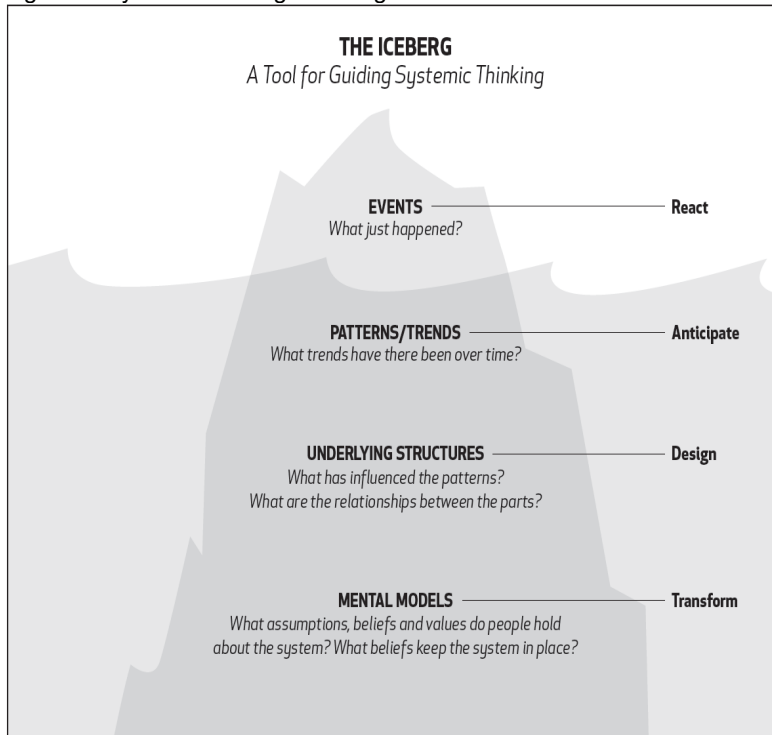
As outlined in the research papers, improving staff utilisation will have benefits for individuals, teams, clients, and the financial aspects of the business, however it also identifies barriers that need to be navigated. On reviewing each of the barriers the participants identified it is possible

to see that the barriers can be attributed to the things under the water in the iceberg model of systems thinking (Figure 1). These are:

- patterns or trends
- underlying structures
- mental models.

They need to be acknowledged, understood how they interact with each other and then how they need to be addressed to support the change before we can progress to implementation.

Figure 1. Systems thinking - iceberg model.



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Implementing change

Once we fully understand the complexity of the problem including the barriers that need to be resolved and how these barriers interact, what barriers can be resolved within the business and what need to be resolved outside of the business, we can then move towards implementing change.

There are various models that we can use to plan and implement change. These help to ensure that we are planning reviewing and implement.

The three models I will introduce in the workshop are: The ABCD model, Knoster model for managing complex change and SMARTER goals framework.

These three models overlap in some way but together include all aspects of planning and implementing change once the problem that is trying to be solved is fully understood.

The Natural Step – ABCD model

This model was designed by the Natural Step (The Natural Step 2016) as a framework for improving sustainability, however it is just as effective examining any situation where change is needed.

1. Define the Vision (A)
2. Identify where we are right now (B)
3. Work out what steps are needed to move from where you are now to the vision (C)
4. Prioritise the steps (D)

Knoster Model for managing complex change

This model (Figure 2) (Knoster 1991) outlines all the factors you need to have successful change and reasons why it can fail. These are:

1. Vision (aligns to A on ABCD model)
2. Skills – what skills do the team need to move from where you are now to the vision)
3. Incentives – why would the team want to
4. Resources – what resources are needed to support success. These could be human or physical
5. Action Plan – (D from ABCD model combined with a SMART goal framework)

Knoster outlines that if one of these essential factors are missing then the complex change plan is unlikely to be successful. Figure 3 outlines what the outcomes are likely to be when specific factors are missing.

Figure 2. Model for Managing complex change



SMARTER goal framework

An action plan needs to be made up of specific achievable goals. Goals need to be set up in order – what needs to happen first (refer to ABCD model – D – prioritise the actions), be specific, achievable, measurable and implemented within a specific time frame. It is important to write these well. Refer to the University of California (2017) reference for a guide. This guide omits two very important aspects of SMART goals – that is the evaluation and review/readjust cycle. This should form part of a goal review and readjustment cycle and is an essential part of a change project.

Conclusion

Moving from “we can’t do that” or “we don’t do it that way” to a completely new way of thinking is challenging and requires a willingness to be open to change. It also requires incremental change. You can’t go from now to the future in one step. The changes need to be planned, incremental and evaluated and refined at each step.

The frameworks outlined in this paper should help keep you set a change plan that is deliberate and manageable, with all the tools in place, kept on track and supported by measuring and evaluating your changes.

References

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