

THE POWER OF THE HUDDLE

How 10-minute team meetings can reduce chaos, sharpen communication, and improve patient care.

BY LOUISE S. DUNN



Many sports teams use huddles during games to strategize, communicate, and boost team morale. In football, huddles are crucial to ensuring that every player understands their role before the next snap. Even basketball, rugby, and volleyball teams briefly huddle during games to encourage one another and adjust tactics. These huddles foster teamwork, enhance focus, and create a sense of unity, helping teams stay organized and motivated throughout the competition.

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For the veterinary team, a huddle can be one of the best ways to encourage teamwork, provide clarity, and reduce chaos. Most commonly, huddles are brief (10-minute) stand-up meetings occurring at the start of each major shift. The purpose can vary from hospital to hospital, but the most common focus is looking ahead at the day's schedule. In addition, huddles can occur when there is a teachable moment, allowing the team to look back at a situation and reflect on what could have been done differently. Of course, you could always stop reading at this point, opting for the no-huddle offense, but will that ensure success for the long game?

Different Huddles, Each With Its Own Benefit

Ten-minute standing meetings might seem basic, but not all huddles are created equal. Before huddling with your team, know the different types of huddles so you can choose the one that will help your team with the “next play.” Here's a look at six different huddles.

1 The Shift-Change Huddle

Take a moment and think about this morning at your hospital. Clients are arriving, the phone is ringing, and patients are getting checked in. Then, the client service representative asks if it's OK to squeeze in a sick cat. The staff members within earshot start to grumble. There's no time. Hospitalized patients still need to be looked at. The kennel attendant called out sick. Suddenly, the CSR has become a clueless bad guy trying to ruin everyone's day.

But what if the shift had started with a huddle? Before the phones ring and the patients check in, the team huddles in the treatment area. They are informed that the kennel attendant called off and are told who will be filling in. The hospital census is reviewed on the whiteboard. The appointment

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book is reviewed, and the team identifies areas in the schedule where sick pets can be squeezed in.

Now, when the CSR answers the phone, they already know the game plan to execute this morning. Prior to the start of the next shift, there is a review of the morning results, a discussion of potential trouble spots, an update on the hospital census, and a new game plan communicated to the team.

2 The Problem-Solving Huddle

These huddles are for those crucial times when the team is facing a time-sensitive issue. They discuss what is causing the problem, brainstorm potential solutions and decide on the best one, assign tasks, and proceed with the immediate next steps.

A problem-solving huddle might be useful when the team faces an unexpected influx of emergency cases. The team identifies key challenges, assigns tasks (e.g., triage, surgery prep, client communications), and adjusts the schedule to accommodate patient needs. This type of huddle helps the team function under pressure.

3 The Safety-Update Huddle

Keeping the team informed of safety updates is crucial for a safe and secure work environment. This huddle allows the team to discuss a recent safety risk or a procedural update, reinforce protocols, and ensure everyone is aligned on best practices.

An example of when to employ this type of huddle could be infection control and prevention situations, such as when a patient is diagnosed with or suspected to have parvo, kennel cough, rabies, or another infectious disease. The team reviews quarantine procedures, how to prevent cross-contamination, proper sanitization techniques, use of personal protective equipment, and other steps to protect the animals in their care and the health of the veterinary team.

4 The Skill-Swap Huddle

Less impromptu than safety-update or problem-solving huddles, skill-swap huddles are planned and allow team members to exchange knowledge and expertise on specific tasks or skills. The goal is to improve team competency and foster continuous learning.

For example, a lead technician skilled in taking radiographs could share tips and best practices with the rest of the treatment team. Meanwhile, other team members may discuss strategies for effectively explaining the procedure to the pet owner.

5 The Marketing-Update Huddle

What promotions, social media campaigns, or client

engagement initiatives is your practice focused on this month? Conduct a veterinary team huddle to ensure everyone is aligned on your current marketing strategies.

“When marketing is part of the broader team conversation, everyone becomes an advocate for your brand, creating a seamless experience that strengthens client trust and fuels business growth,” said Eric Garcia, CEO of the veterinary digital marketing firm Tapir. He offered additional tips for running the marketing-update huddle:

- ▶ **Keep it quick and relevant:** Integrate marketing updates into the huddle with a short, structured format. Share key promotions, client feedback, or social media trends in under two minutes to keep the team engaged without overwhelming them.
- ▶ **Make it interactive:** Encourage team members to contribute by sharing client stories, common questions, or ideas for content. This helps marketing stay connected to real-world interactions and ensures messaging aligns with client needs.
- ▶ **Tie it to goals:** Demonstrate how marketing efforts support overall business objectives, whether it’s increasing appointment bookings, promoting a new service, or improving client education.

When the team understands the potential impact of your marketing initiatives, they’ll be more likely to engage and support the efforts.

6

The Technology Huddle

AI and other technologies are evolving at lightning speed. Many of

HOW TO HUDDLE



When possible, keep your huddles consistent, so the team knows what to expect. Consider this template:

- ▶ **Step 1:** State the purpose of the huddle.
- ▶ **Step 2:** Discuss main points, issues, challenges, updates, or new information.
- ▶ **Step 3:** Encourage the team to ask questions.
- ▶ **Step 4:** Assign specific tasks or next steps, define who is responsible, and provide a timeline.
- ▶ **Step 5:** Wrap-up or summarize the key takeaways.
- ▶ **Step 6:** End on a positive note to motivate the team.

your practice’s existing tools are likely being updated on a regular basis. Hold technology huddles in your practice to discuss the use of new or existing technology to improve operations, solve problems, or optimize processes. This huddle can focus on anything from software systems to medical equipment, from new technology to a recently discovered “hidden gem” feature. The goal is to ensure all team members are current on the tools they are using and to troubleshoot any challenges that may arise. Given the growing number of features being added to veterinary

platforms, conducting quick feature-sharing huddles helps everyone maximize the tool’s capabilities and become more proficient users.

Communication Is Key

Even though huddles are quick, communication is vital. Avoid these communication faux pas to ensure a successful huddle:

- ▶ **Information overload:** Keep the huddle concise and relevant. Think of it as a micro-session with quick, digestible content that can be easily absorbed and applied.
- ▶ **Running overtime:** Poor time management will disrupt workflow and frustrate the team.
- ▶ **Lack of a clear objective:** Why is this important? Why does the team need to hear this? Why is this going to make a difference right now?

ADDITIONAL READING

[Teambuilding.com](https://teambuilding.com) provides 18 team huddle ideas. Visit bit.ly/team-huddles.

Knowing the “why” will help to ensure buy-in.

- ▶ **Ignoring input:** Failure to engage the entire group, dismissing ideas, or not checking for understanding will hamper progress and breed contempt.
- ▶ **Negative tone:** Don’t be a “Debbie downer.” Incorporate words of encouragement.
- ▶ **Lack of action items:** Summarize key takeaways and next steps so the team can immediately apply them in their daily routine.

Part of communication will involve the use of technology that enhances team communication and collaboration. Slack, Google, Microsoft 365, and Zoom (just to name a few) can be employed to share files and facilitate communication between team members who are not on-site but still need to get the information from the huddle.

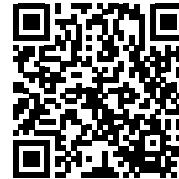
The Benefits of Team Huddles

Quick team meetings, whether impromptu or planned, help the veterinary team:

- ▶ Avoid confusion.
- ▶ Identify bottlenecks that can wreak havoc on patient care, client service, and team performance.
- ▶ Raise issues for immediate solutions or escalate concerns to practice leadership.
- ▶ Praise colleagues.
- ▶ Announce new patients, clients, or team members.
- ▶ Provide updates about clients or team members.
- ▶ Provide updates on practice goals.
- ▶ Share important notices about changes to policies or procedures.
- ▶ Stay informed so they are more likely to make good decisions.
- ▶ Be more efficient and prevent the redundancy of tasks.
- ▶ Get timely answers to questions or concerns.
- ▶ Stay accountable.

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After the Huddle

Have your team huddles been effective? When evaluating the efficacy of your huddles, look at immediate and long-term outcomes.

Immediately after the huddle, observe if team members are actively applying what was discussed, such as implementing new procedures or using updated tools. Depending on the topic, monitor key performance indicators, such as improvements in efficiency, reduced errors, or increased patient satisfaction. For example, if the huddle focused on infection control practices, assess whether the team is consistently following hygiene protocols, and check for a reduction in infection-related incidents.

Regular check-ins and open communication can also help track whether behavior changes have been sustained, ensuring that your huddles are leaving lasting impacts on team performance.

Brief huddles enable communication that builds a culture of trust. Certified veterinary practice manager Trisha Jones notes the benefits of a huddle for any veterinary team: “In just a few minutes, we align on priorities, anticipate challenges, and ensure every patient receives the best care possible. Huddles are the backbone of a high-performing team. Clear communication leads to smoother workflows, stronger teamwork, and better outcomes for pets and their owners.”

All huddles — whether on the field or in the veterinary practice — share the same goal: to ensure a win for the team at the end of the day. **TVB**



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