

CLOSING THE LEADERSHIP GAP

Women remain underrepresented in veterinary leadership. Here's how we can correct that.

BY BETHANY WEINHEIMER, DVM



“Wow. Pretty color!” The nail technician tilted my hand so the glitter would catch the light. As I looked up, my smile faded. The color didn’t match the white with gold accent I had selected. I was at a loss. Do I say something? Do I risk hurting the feelings of the hardworking technician?

My friend leaned over. “Hi, ma’am. This isn’t the color she asked for. There needs to be white behind the gold, like this one,” she said as she pointed to the correct color on the color swatch ring. “Can you change the color?”

The nail technician nodded, and I left the spa believing I had the power to ask what I wanted from the world.

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“The worst-case scenario is that they’re going to say no,” said Dr. Jamie Perkins, principal of DVMoms. “But you’re not going to get what you want without asking. Know your line in the sand and stand by it.”

But where should our line in the sand be drawn? Why, as women, do we think that speaking up for ourselves and prioritizing our goals damages our relationships or makes us less considerate? Why do we desire to be likeable and successful, and why does society struggle with both of those being true at the same time? Why do we prioritize the feelings and needs of others over our own?

It starts with what we’re taught subconsciously and from an early age. According to psychologist and professor Dr. John Gottman, the play, curiosity, and exploration of young girls are centered around relationships. This gives us a unique sense of caring about others’ input and makes us more emotionally intelligent. While high emotional intelligence is a strength, it can diminish our assertiveness as we work to protect relationships.

Women make up nearly 69% of the roughly 133,000 U.S. veterinarians. And more than 80% of current veterinary students identify as women.

Despite female dominance in numbers, researchers found that women in veterinary medicine held just 16% of C-suite positions in 2020. The World Organization for Animal Health found that only 21% of chief veterinary officers worldwide in 2023 were female.

Why do women remain underrepresented at the executive leadership level in veterinary medicine, and how can we bridge this gap?

The Bias

Many women have been told that they were not eligible or accepted for jobs because they were “too perfectionistic,” “too emotional,” or they “care too much.” This is not unique to veterinary medicine.

“Give yourself permission to discover the next version of yourself or let it go and move on to the next thing.”

In “The Likability Trap,” author Alicia Menendez describes this as the fictional, and often unattainable, balance between warmth and strength. According to the book, most women — 56% — recall being described as “unlikable” versus 16% of men. And 80% of women recall being negatively described as “emotional” versus only 11% of men. Personality-trait descriptors, such as “abrasive,” “difficult,” “friendly,” and “helpful,” were commonly used to describe women but were rarely used for men.

The Broken Rung

The broken rung concept shows that there are structural barriers that persist for women, including receiving less career support and being given fewer opportunities to rise. This phenomenon unintentionally drives the aforementioned statistics.

Sponsors, or structured mentors who advocate for their trainee in rooms the trainee isn’t in, have a substantial impact on career outcomes. It has been shown that women are less likely to have a sponsor than men, and even when entry-level women do have a sponsor, they’re usually promoted at a lower rate than men.

To “climb the ladder,” we need all the steps in the right place. If there is a broken rung, the math never recovers. If fewer women are sponsored, fewer become managers, which means there will be fewer women medical directors, owners, regional leaders, and chief officers.

In veterinary medicine, the broken rung we need to mend is offering sponsorship with structured learning. Are we asking women if they desire a leadership role? And when they do want to lead, are we giving them the structured support needed to develop their skills?

Fortunately for Dr. Lori Teller, executive director of the Texas Veterinary Medical Association, someone did just that for her, and that’s how she got her start in organized medicine. “Somebody comes and talks to you, and they’ve seen something in you that you may not have seen in yourself,” she said.

Dr. Teller’s experience should be the rule, not the exception. Every leader should ask, “Who am I sponsoring? And have I told them what I see in them?”

The Caveats

When discussing the leadership gap in our profession, certain questions always come up:

- ▶ Do women even want to be leaders?
- ▶ How does motherhood impact a woman’s leadership journey?
- ▶ Does corporate consolidation mean fewer opportunities?
- ▶ Isn’t it a matter of time before women naturally transition into these seats as they continue to be overrepresented in the industry?

Industry-wide studies examining veterinary leadership should be done regularly so we can track our progress, or lack thereof, in this area.

Not everyone sees this inequity. And, while the statistics are historically there, it's important to balance this data against our own lived experiences, available support, and opportunities for advancement.

The Part That's Harder to Admit

Through my time interviewing, coaching, and working alongside women leaders for nearly a decade, I have seen how we can hold ourselves back. We often underestimate our readiness, skill, or worth. Many of us struggle with imposter syndrome and self-sacrifice. I've been guilty of these in my own leadership development journey. These challenges or doubts don't go away, but we get better at overcoming them.

"We have to first look at ourselves," said Dr. Jill Clark, founder of IGNITE Veterinary Solutions, when describing how we unknowingly sabotage our own success. "In an effort to be all things to

all people, I didn't set any boundaries," explained Dr. Clark, as she reflected on her burnout journey, including a time when she missed Mother's Day to take care of patients. "You absolutely have to set boundaries for yourself."

And even if we aren't fighting burnout, many of us are fighting imposter syndrome. "I see imposter syndrome on a daily basis," said Dr. Audrey Wystrach, cofounder and co-CEO of PetFolk. "We all have it. We all sit in rooms and wonder if we're qualified to be there."

Despite her inner questions and doubt, Dr. Wystrach's get-it-done attitude helped her rise. "Don't close doors because you don't think that you fit there," she said.

The Fixes: For Women Who Want to Lead

Many women are already leading, even without the title. They show up every day with heart, grit, and dedication. Closing the leadership gap means current and future leaders coming together with empowered mindsets to raise others.

For women interested in leadership, here's how you can take control of your leadership development journey.

1 Practice "Highest Self"

Lean into practicing neuroplasticity and intentionally shifting your patterns and thoughts. You have the power to change your limiting beliefs and shift your mindset. You can do this through meditation, exploring the idea of the higher self, and envisioning your best self five years from now.

Find someone you look up to who shows you it's possible. Learn from them. What characteristics do they have that you want to possess? Having someone to admire and observe helps you envision the possibility of you gaining those qualities too.

2 Shift Self-Worth to Self-Prioritization

When you put effort into developing your self-worth, it will shift your prioritization. "Put your oxygen mask on first," said Dr. Wystrach. "If you don't carve out time for yourself, then nobody else is going to get the best version of you."

During Dr. Wystrach's personal time, she works out, reflects, and drinks her caffeine. "I had to learn to give myself an hour every day," she said. "And I had to make it mandatory."

By prioritizing time for herself, Dr. Wystrach can show up as a better mom, wife, veterinarian, and founder. This message was similar across a majority of women leaders: Doing the internal work, such as meditation, yoga, or morning routines, is one of the best ways to reflect, develop, and grow. This consistent practice develops neuroplasticity and increases self-worth over time.

3 Give Yourself Grace

Perfectionism ties results to your identity, but if we can create a healthy process for mistakes and failures, everyone

wins. The concept: When I make a mistake — because I will — I will learn from it. The more you allow yourself to make mistakes without the shame spiral, you grow. And the more you grow, the more likely you will be to show grace to those around you.

"Give yourself some compassion. It's OK to know that we are not going to be perfect," said Dr. Cheryl York, medical director at Bluebonnet Riverside Vet in Austin, Texas. "Perfectionism is a form of shame."

And perfectionism leads to life paralysis, a concept that Brené Brown discusses in her book, "The Gifts of Imperfection." It refers to the opportunities we miss because we're too afraid to do anything that might be imperfect. Perfectionism and life paralysis can be fought by developing the skill of shame resilience.

4 Develop as a Leader

Good leaders learn, practice, and intentionally develop their leadership skills. Dr. Brianna Armstrong, co-owner of Firehouse 183 Animal Hospital in Austin, Texas, said that leadership microdosing works because it treats leadership skills the same as clinical skills: repetition under supervision, feedback in real time, and room to process the emotions that come with hard conversations. Regarding entrepreneurship, she said, "Give yourself permission to discover the next version of yourself or let it go and move on to the next thing."

5 Embrace Community and Coaching

Every woman deserves a sponsor, coach, and community. Find like-minded people to help support and grow you on your journey. Therapists and coaches are a great investment for internal development. Also, find a community that works for you. As Dr. York shared, "What I've started to realize is that I

TIP: BUILD RE-ENTRY RAMPS

Part-time and season-of-life pathways keep caregivers in your leadership pipeline and can help bring women back to veterinary medicine if they need a break.



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can't get through this alone. So being able to share stories, to be vulnerable, and to have conversations with your friends and other people you trust will help you through that journey."

6 Raise Your Hand

If you are interested in a leadership role, tell your boss. In fact, tell everyone at your company, and keep telling them. It's part of your boss' job to have a functional succession plan, and he or she might not know it's something you want. Tell your boss that you want to grow, and ask what skills you need to learn to get there.

7 Learn When to Say Yes

Identify your authentic values — the core beliefs that come from your inner self, not from family pressures or social norms. Use your authentic values to help you learn when to say yes and when to say no. Saying no protects your time and allows you to prioritize the things that mean the most to you.

The Fixes: For the Industry

For allies of all genders across the industry, here's how you can assist in the development of your future leaders:

- **Bring others to the table:** If you have a seat at the table, be aware and make a seat at the table for someone else.
- **Create psychologically safe environments:** Create safety for people to share their mistakes, feedback, and ideas. Allow your team to help you come up with solutions to problems.
- **Train intentionally:** Don't leave development to chance. Encourage mentees to ask questions, and avoid "sink-or-swim" training processes.
- **Reform structures:** Fix the broken rung with intention. Post leadership openings on an open forum, instead of quietly hand-picking a successor. Ask other women, even those who are quiet, if they want to be leaders. Define what readiness for the role means — what are the specific skills required?
- **Be a supporter:** Be present and truly listen with curiosity to the women around you.

To close the gap, women must do the internal work to grow from the inside out, and hospitals must build ladders with all rungs intact that outline each step of becoming a successful leader.

The future of veterinary medicine can be self-aware, collaborative, and deeply committed to the people who heal the pets. That future is already standing in your exam rooms and surgery suites. Let's partner to do the work, build the ladder, and open the door. This is how we close the leadership gap in veterinary medicine. **TVB**

SPONSOR OR MENTOR?

Most veterinary practices have mentorship. Almost none have sponsorship, and the difference may be exactly where our profession's ladder breaks.

- **A mentor talks to you.** They answer your questions, give guidance, and help you think through the hard cases. Mentorship builds competence and confidence, and it matters.
- **A sponsor talks about you.** A sponsor is someone with a seat at the table who says your name in the rooms where promotions, raises, and ownership tracks are decided. Sponsorship uses another leader's influence on your behalf.

McKinsey researchers describe women as "over-mentored and under-sponsored," — rich in advice, but poor in advocacy. The data shows that every new sponsor increases your chance of promotion by about 10%, and people with four or more sponsors are five times more likely to be promoted.