

# 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 What Is Leadership, and Why Do We Need a Book on Veterinary Leadership?

There are many definitions of leadership, and it is such a fundamental aspect of human existence that we instinctively understand the concept even if writing down a workable definition can be difficult. Here's one of the many definitions I am happy with:

*'Leadership is the function that is devoted to enhancing an organisation's effectiveness.'*

– de Haan and Kasozi 2014

By this definition, leadership is not invested in 'leaders' but can reside in many people both inside and outside of an organisation. Leadership is a prerequisite of a professional's existence, be it in the service of peers, clients, patients, or society. In addition, this definition implies that leadership exists in an organisational context, which will influence what leadership looks like. As I shall explore in this book, leadership and followership are essential parts of the same function and cannot be examined independently. Leadership is a social process and, together, 'leaders' and 'followers' construct leadership. Leadership is also a singular, individual, experience; what you see, hear, feel, understand, and respond to as a 'leader' will be different to everyone else and will be informed by your own personality and experience. As a complex social interaction, leadership is not easily broken down into 'how to' instructions. It is important to remember that when thinking about the issues raised in this book and how they might apply to you and those around you.

Good management is important alongside good leadership, but they are not the same. Good leadership is doing the right things; good management is doing things right (Table 1.1). The veterinary professions need both leadership and management, but they do not necessarily have to be done by the same people. We may all know good managers who are poor leaders and vice versa. Management is about planning, organising, staffing, controlling activities, and solving problems, (Kotter 1990). Leadership is something different (Table 1.1).

Leadership is as important in our day-to-day, every day, as much as it is in when tackling the major issues of our time. Leadership takes place when we are getting family out of the door in the morning, when trying to achieve consensus in a team meeting, when

**Table 1.1** The essence of leadership.

Leadership function
Interpreting
Creating direction
Nurturing commitment
Trusting
Creating collective identity
Creating psychological safety
Coordinating
Enabling collective learning
Providing resources
Developing and empowering
Promoting honesty and fairness
Role modelling
Containing paradox
Negotiating complexity and change
Facilitating collective intelligence

Source: Based on Yukl, G. (2013), *Leadership in Organisations*, 8th ed. Pearson Education Limited; England and West, M. et al. (2015), *Leadership and Leadership Development in Health Care: The Evidence Base*, The Kings Fund, pp. 1–36. doi: 19022015.

identifying and prosecuting a big change project, and when co-ordinating the management of a global crisis. To paraphrase Jena et al. (2018) ‘*to be a veterinary surgeon is to lead*’. The existence of flat leadership hierarchies found in many of the environments that veterinary professionals work means that leadership is required everyday – whether it be taking up authority and discharging responsibilities towards peers, other members of the veterinary team, or clients – it is a prerequisite of the job from the outset. Leadership (as opposed to ‘The Leadership’) can come from any place in organisational hierarchy and does not necessarily imply formal authority. Indeed, waiting for leadership to come from those who have designated authority can create a leadership vacuum which can, potentially, be disastrous, as examination of human factors and their contribution to medical error can show (Zipperer 2014). Throughout this book I will be using scenario examples that cover some of the topics under discussion, and these will be chosen to illustrate the broad importance of leadership in veterinary medicine as well as the specific point in mind.

There is a vast literature on ‘leadership’ – from the books that line shelves in airport bookstores, to a deep and wide academic canon. Leadership as a discipline in the veterinary context has, however, been relatively unexplored and implicit up until now. Recent initiatives to bring leadership into the veterinary agenda have gained a certain amount of traction, however. The global experience of the COVID19 pandemic has, I believe, shone a spotlight on the need for strong leadership in a crisis and I hope it will bring to the fore the importance of leadership as a subject to study in the veterinary professions, whatever the demands of the time. As we shall explore in this book, there *is* a veterinary context to

leadership, with aspects that are specific to the nature of veterinary work, the type of people that join the veterinary professions and the social, economic, political, and legal framework within which we function.

## 1.2 My Leadership Experiences

For me, a formal leadership role as a managing director of a large referral practice followed from a successful clinical career. It is not uncommon for technically proficient professionals to be promoted into leadership, as I was, and I found it hard. Leading a team of veterinary professionals was demanding, exciting, exhilarating, and rewarding – but also, at times, frustrating, stressful, and exhausting. To try and make this experience easier for me, in the service of the organisations in which I led and through my innate drive to ‘sense-making’, I have explored the subject of leadership both through formal learning, wide reading and coaching others. I have used this exploration to ask why I found leadership such a challenge and what I would like to have understood before I took on a demanding leadership role. In doing so, in addition to my direct experience, I believe I have learned some lessons about leadership in veterinary medicine that I can usefully share in a way which is, I hope, engaging, and interesting. I have direct experience of leadership on my side, legitimate academic experience, and the time to both read and write.

## 1.3 My Approach

This book is grounded in practical experience and the ‘real world’ of leadership in veterinary medicine and outlines thoughts and ideas extrapolated to that context from writing and thought leadership from outside the veterinary professions. Given the rate of change of thinking around leadership/followership and the relative scarcity of active research in the veterinary context, it is inevitable that a textbook of veterinary leadership will not be able to rely on a strong specific evidence base. It is, therefore, based on my own opinion, perspective, and practise, supported where possible with reference to background reading and with specific reference to published works as required. I am writing as practitioner, translator and interpreter. It will, I hope, create differences of opinion, and the ideas I put forward will be open to challenge. Given the breadth and depth of the literature on leadership and influences upon it, there will be areas that I overlook, deliberately or otherwise, which others may feel deserve inclusion and emphasis. That is well and good; if it stimulates debate and discussion and further reading that will be pleasing and, if there is any stimulation of further research on leadership in veterinary medicine, so much the better.

There is a separate argument that making a study of leadership entirely based around published numerical data (‘evidence-based’) fails to emphasise that it is a socially constructed individualistic phenomenon, the richness and variety of which is lost if it is broken into numbers and data points. We must be prepared to use and draw from other approaches, such as the use of personal narrative, as required to help us construct a rich understanding of what leadership means for veterinary medicine. With this in mind, I have tried to take a balanced approach as I write, emphasising what is known/understood (cognition), behavioural approaches to

leadership, and also considering the unconscious; what might be out of day-to-day awareness. Throughout the book I have placed vignettes to illustrate particular points and these are deliberately designed to emphasise emotional responses to the subject matter, and to illustrate the importance of 'leadership' as an individual experience, co-created with others.

## 1.4 Who Is the Book for?

Leadership is a professional function, and understanding the concepts of leadership-followerhip should be of benefit to any professional. As such, leadership is one of the many nontechnical skills that is learned (intentionally or otherwise), alongside technical development from first-year undergraduate to experienced professional. This book is a combination of both the practical and theoretical, acting as both an introduction to the concepts and challenges of leadership, with an obvious emphasis on the veterinary context, as a source of scenarios to provoke reflection and discussion, as a single-point of reference to the (sparse) veterinary literature and as a pointer to the wider subject of leadership. It can act as a supporting text for those undertaking leadership learning journeys, as a primer on the subject for those contemplating a leadership role, and as a source of support for those in post who are facing the day-to-day challenge of leadership in veterinary medicine.

Ultimately, I have written the book I would have wanted to read many years ago.

## 1.5 How to Use This Book

The book is divided into two parts:

**Part One** covers major areas of veterinary leadership. It is discursive and aims to distil and make relevant information accessible. Each chapter is subdivided into subject areas and supported by tables, figures, vignettes, references, and further reading as appropriate.

**Part Two** includes a number of leadership challenges, designed to cover a range of situations where veterinary professionals may need to show leadership, and aimed at encouraging deeper engagement with, and holistic integration of, the material presented in Part One. These scenarios can be used as you see fit; for your own reflection, in discussion with others or to stimulate learning in any other way.

## 1.6 What Is 'Good Enough'?

If you are still wondering why we need to think more about leadership in veterinary medicine, perhaps it is helpful to reflect on what 'bad' leadership looks and feels like. It is likely that everyone has been on the receiving end of leadership behaviours and actions that have left them feeling angry, frustrated, cynical, and de-motivated. The veterinary professions are rife with such tales and have been for as long as I have been a student of veterinary medicine and, I am sure, a long time before that. On the other hand, 'good enough' leadership, in the everyday, often goes unnoticed and unrecognised. Let's help bring leadership forward as an essential part of professional life; worth studying, understanding, practising, and improving.

## Questions

- 1 Look around you at the ‘not good enough’ and the ‘good-enough’ leadership. How would you like people to experience your leadership?
- 2 What does ‘leadership’ mean to you? How do you *feel* about leadership as a discipline? Why might that be?
- 3 Think about your leadership challenges. What do you hope to take away from this book that will help you?

## Further Reading

West, M., Armit, K., Loewenthal, L. et al. (2015). *Leadership and Leadership Development in Health Care: The Evidence Base*. London: The Kings Fund.

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