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Do You Have a Trust Gap?

A Self-Assessment and Starter Guide for Veterinary Practice Owners



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A Note Before You Begin

If you're reading this, something brought you here. Maybe you've been caught off guard by something your team knew before you did. Maybe meetings feel quieter than they should. Maybe you sense there's more going on beneath the surface than people are telling you.

That's the trust gap — and it's more common than most practice owners realize.

I know because I've been there. I sat at my desk running team meetings where I asked for input and got silence. I thought I was being open. What I didn't realize was that asking isn't the same as earning the right to hear the answer.

What I learned over time is that trust isn't built through big gestures or perfect leadership. It's built in small, consistent moments — the way you respond when someone brings you hard news, the questions you ask before you give your opinion, the things you said you'd do that you actually did.

This guide gives you five of those moments. Start with the self-assessment to see where your gaps are, then work through the tactics one at a time. You don't have to do everything at once. Pick one. Practice it. Then add another.

The impact is worth it.

— *Dr. Kelly*

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to be simple and practical — something you can actually use, not just read.

Start with the Self-Assessment. Seven questions that help you identify where your trust gap is showing up. Be honest. The score isn't a judgment — it's a starting point.

Work through the five tactics. Each page focuses on one skill: how to hold a real one-on-one, how to receive feedback without getting defensive, how to name what you're observing, how to lead with curiosity, and how to show up consistently. Every page includes scripts you can use right away.

End with your action plan. The last page helps you get specific — what you're going to work on, what your goal is, and what your first step will be.

You don't have to do everything at once. Pick one tactic. Start this week. Then add another.

Take It a Step Further

Need help putting these skills into action? Download the ***Conversations That Build Trust*** Cheat Sheet for practical scripts and tools that help you build trust through everyday conversations.

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The Self-Assessment

The questions below are designed to help you see your practice more clearly — not to judge where you are, but to give you an honest starting point.

Many practice owners are surprised by their score. Not because they're doing something wrong, but because the trust gap is quiet. It doesn't announce itself. It shows up in the small things — the meetings that feel a little flat, the problems that arrive a little late, the sense that you're carrying more than you should be.

Rate each statement honestly based on what's actually happening in your practice right now. There are no right or wrong answers. The score simply tells you where to start.

Rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = rarely and 5 = almost always. Answer based on what's actually happening in your practice — not what you hope is true.

#	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1.	My team waits for me to make decisions rather than acting on their own.					
2.	In meetings, the same people speak up while everyone else is quiet.					
3.	Problems in my practice tend to escalate before I know about them.					
4.	When I ask my team how things are going, the answer is usually "fine."					
5.	I've been surprised by a team member's resignation, conflict, or frustration I didn't see coming.					
6.	My team talks amongst themselves about things they don't bring to me.					
7.	I often have to repeat myself or address the same issues more than once.					

My total score: _____

What Your Score Means

7–15 Healthy foundation. You're building trust consistently. The tactics in this guide can help you go even deeper.

16–25 Some gaps are forming. A few intentional changes could make a real difference. Pick one tactic and start this week.

26–35 The trust gap is likely affecting your team and your practice more than you realize. The good news? These are learnable skills. Start with tactic one.

Next Steps: Now that you have your score, the next five pages each focus on one tactic for closing the trust gap. Review them and notice which one resonates most — that's where you start. Then turn to the action plan at the end and make it real.

Let's talk about what's getting in the way.

Book a complimentary discovery call.

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Start with One-on-Ones — and Make Them Real

WHY IT MATTERS

Your team will never open up in a group setting if they haven't first experienced you as someone safe to talk to one-on-one. Regular individual conversations — even 30 minutes every few months — are where trust is actually built. They signal something a team meeting never can: that you see this person as an individual, not just a role.

HOW TO HOLD A ONE-ON-ONE

Use these questions as a loose agenda — not a script. Let the conversation breathe.

Personal check-in

- How are you doing — at home and at work?

Work discussion

- What's going really well right now?
- Where do you think there are issues or problems?
- Where might you be struggling that I can help with?

Follow-up

- Any updates I should know about?
- Let's follow up on anything from last time.
- What else should we be talking about that we haven't?

Closing

- What do you need from me?

TRY THIS

The goal isn't to get through the questions — it's to actually hear the answers. When someone responds, resist the urge to move to the next question or jump to advice. Pause. Reflect back what you heard: "It sounds like you're feeling stretched thin — is that right?" Then ask one more: "Tell me more about that." The real conversation usually starts after the first answer.

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Tactic 2 of 5

Prove That Feedback Is Safe

WHY IT MATTERS

Your team watches how you respond when they bring up difficult concerns. A defensive reaction teaches them that honesty has a cost. Over time, those moments build into a decision to stay quiet.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Defensiveness doesn't always look dramatic. It can show up as a change in mood, quickly explaining yourself, or not following up. Your team notices all of it — and even valid explanations can feel like deflection.

They also notice when you stay calm, thank them, and take action on what they shared.

CHECK YOURSELF FIRST

Your body often reacts before your words do. When you notice these signs, pause and respond with curiosity instead.

Body signals to watch for:

- Tight chest or racing heart
- Heat in your face
- Clenched jaw
- An urgent need to speak right now

Phrases that signal defensiveness:

- *"Well, actually…"*
- *"But I was just…"*
- *"That's not what I meant…"*
- *"I had to because…"*
- *"But what about when you…"*

TRY THIS

The next time a team member shares a concern, resist the urge to explain yourself. Start here:

"Thank you for the feedback — I'll take it into consideration."

Then follow up. If you want to understand more before responding, try:

- *"Tell me more about that."*
- *"Help me understand what you're experiencing."*
- *"I didn't realize that was happening. Thank you for telling me."*
- *"That sounds frustrating — what would make this better for you?"*

Your team doesn't need you to agree with everything they say. They don't expect to always get their way. They need to know their opinion was heard, their voice mattered, and that it was worth the risk.

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Tactic 3 of 5

Make the Invisible Visible

WHY IT MATTERS

Your team communicates more than they say out loud. When something is off — tension after a difficult conversation, frustration that hasn't been named, disengagement that's been building — it shows up in how people carry themselves long before it shows up in words. Leaders who learn to read those signals and name them build a different kind of trust.

BE AWARE

Watch for these nonverbal cues — they're often the first sign something needs to be addressed:

- Avoiding eye contact or looking down during conversations
- Arms crossed or body turned away
- Short, clipped answers when someone is usually talkative
- Quieter than usual in meetings or one-on-ones
- Visible tension — tight jaw, forced smile, flat affect
- Checking out — distracted, phone-focused, disengaged

You don't need to diagnose what's wrong. You just need to notice and say something.

TRY THIS

In a one-on-one:

- *"I noticed you seemed a little quiet today — I just wanted to check in. How are you doing?"*
- *"You seemed a little tense when we were talking earlier. Is everything okay?"*
- *"I noticed you haven't been making much eye contact today. I want to make sure we're good."*

In a team meeting:

- *"I'm noticing the energy in the room feels a little flat today — is there something on everyone's mind?"*
- *"Things have been quieter than usual in our meetings lately. I'd love to hear what's going on."*

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Tactic 4 of 5

Choose Curiosity First

WHY IT MATTERS

When a team member comes to you with a problem, the instinct is to solve it. But jumping straight to your answer — even the right one — sends a message you didn't intend: that their thinking matters less than yours. Left unchecked, that dynamic teaches your team to stop bringing ideas and start waiting for instructions.

BEFORE YOU ANSWER

Notice when you're about to do any of these:

- Jump in with a solution before they've finished talking
- Share a similar story from your own experience
- Tell them what you would do
- Ask a question that leads them to your answer

These feel helpful in the moment. But they shift the focus from their thinking to yours. The goal is to stay in their world a little longer before bringing in your own.

TRY THIS

The next time someone brings you a problem, pause and ask before you answer:

- *"What do you think is going on?"*
- *"What have you already tried?"*
- *"What would you do if I weren't here?"*
- *"What feels like the right next step to you?"*
- *"What do you need from me — advice, or just someone to think it through with?"*

You don't have to withhold your perspective. Just place their voice in front of yours.

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Tactic 5 of 5

Show Up Consistently — and Mean It

WHY IT MATTERS

Trust isn't built in a single conversation. It's built in the accumulation of moments where your team experienced you as someone who meant what they said and followed through. Consistency isn't about being perfect — it's about being predictable. Your team doesn't need a flawless leader. They need one they can count on.

SHOW UP AS EXPECTED

These are the moments that build or erode trust without you realizing it:

- Canceling one-on-ones repeatedly
- Saying you'll look into something and never following up
- Asking for input and never acknowledging what you heard
- Being present in some conversations and distracted in others
- Following through for some people but not others

None of these feel significant in the moment. But your team is keeping score — not out of resentment, but because they're trying to figure out whether they can count on you.

TRY THIS

Closing the loop is one of the most direct expressions of consistency a leader can show. It tells your team that what they said mattered, that you took it seriously, and that you're someone who follows through. Try:

- *"Last time we talked, you mentioned X — here's what I did with that."*
- *"I heard what you shared with me, and here's what I decided and why."*
- *"I said I'd get back to you on this — here's where I landed."*
- *"I haven't forgotten what you brought up. I'm still working on it and will have an answer by Friday."*

You don't have to have all the answers. You just have to show up the same way, again and again, until your team stops wondering whether they can trust you — and starts assuming that they can.

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My Action Plan

The trust gap closes one conversation at a time. Use this page to get specific about where you're starting and what you're committing to.

The tactic I'm starting with:

Why I chose this one:

My SMART goal — what I will do, how often, and for how long:

Example: I will hold a 30-minute one-on-one with each team member once a month for the next 90 days.

What might get in my way:

How I will handle it:

My first step this week:

Who I will share this goal with to stay accountable:

How I will know it's working — what will I see or hear from my team?

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