In 2020, we were introduced to a new reality. Nobody could have predicted the scale of the global Covid-19 pandemic, with all the changes it entailed and the upheavals to not only the way we work, but the way in which we interact with each other. The pandemic has highlighted some key learning points about how to function as a team, not just in an increasingly virtual world, but in an ever-changing work environment. A year on from when the pandemic first hit, let’s look at how we can apply these to our future ways of working, focusing on the aspects of the past year that have been good, bad and ugly.

**Communicating in a Covid-19 world: ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’**

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**The good**

**Team work**

The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted the importance of a well-functioning team that can work together in trying times. Indeed, when the pandemic first hit, we saw that the more cohesive the team was, the better the practice coped.

Team cohesion is all about practice culture, including the values that the team live and work by. This cohesion is about having clear guidelines illustrating what is important, how to work well together and how to create an environment where people can learn from mistakes (Box 1).

As the pandemic was a completely new situation, nobody had the experience or the knowledge about how to deal with it. Consequently, teams that were able to adapt quickly by delegating roles and responsibilities and trust their teammates to get on with tasks that they had been set, flagging any problems along the way, were able to move from strength to strength through these changing and challenging times.

Moreover, practices with less detailed systems, processes and protocols were able to function more flexibly and with greater improvisation. Under normal circumstances, systems and processes help teams function well by ensuring consistent quality and reducing cognitive load and decision time. However, in a crisis situation, a team functions better with heuristics – simple rules that allow for a greater degree of improvisation and lateral thinking. For example, there might be a protocol in place for how to perform general anaesthesia; but, if something goes wrong, we switch to heuristics, assessing the situation and changing our approach to it based on what we see at that particular time.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, practices that have been quicker to switch to a heuristic framework have found it easier to handle the ever-changing environment.

**Problem solving**

With new situations came new problems. The rapidly changing circumstances throughout the pandemic meant that the sum of challenges became bigger than any one person could handle without a potential negative impact on their wellbeing. Instead, practice managers gave their team the leeway to handle problems and challenges on the ground in the way they deemed best. This resulted in some people having to step up to roles that they previously were not so involved in, perhaps to fill in gaps where others were self-isolating or to cover those away from the workplace due to caring responsibilities.

As ever, to ensure that the whole team respected any decisions that were made as the Covid-19 situation evolved, it was important to be mindful of the practice framework (eg, the overarching rules), as well as the practice culture (ie, treating others with respect and listening to their viewpoints).

**Adaptability**

The rapidly changing circumstances caused by the pandemic and the need to respond to these quickly really illustrated how adaptable a practice was. Practices that were used to a changing
Covid-19

environment (eg, mobile vets with diaries that constantly need juggling, or practices that were in a growth and development phase) found it easier to be flexible and work around changing protocols and recommendations as government advice and guidelines changed. Likewise, the more training and depth of knowledge that the reception team had, the easier they found it to follow the frequent changes of direction that they were exposed to, particularly when talking to clients (Box 2).

The bad

Inconsistent advice
Throughout the pandemic, the government has been trying to balance different priorities while playing with an incomplete deck of cards. Inevitably, this meant that the advice given to practices on what they were allowed to do changed on an ongoing basis, due to the need for constant risk assessments (this continues as the Covid-19 situation still evolves).

Changes of direction and recommendations are difficult for people to cope with, especially when recommendations move into the ‘grey zone’ and are less clear in their meaning; think back to the confusion regarding aspects of personal protective equipment (PPE), vaccines, routine emergency procedures and drug or material shortages. Without very strong messaging regarding the recommendations in place at any one time, confusion within practices has been inevitable – where this confusion leads to anxiety and stress, it has the potential to put a strain on people’s health.

Physical changes to the work environment
Veterinary surgeons and nurses understand PPE very well – they are used to wearing it and understand its importance. However, that doesn’t mean that they are used to wearing it all the time when at work, and receptionists and admin teams are certainly not used to the discomfort of constantly wearing a mask and learning how to fit and remove it correctly.

In some cases where clients have been allowed in the practice building, or where they are seen for consultations in stables or barns, there has been the additional frustration of seeing them wearing dirty or ill-fitting masks that constantly slip down below their nose and mouth. This is a cause for concern as we can only assume that these make no difference whatsoever in reducing the spread of Covid-19 between those involved, potentially risking the safety of practice staff.

Mental load
The pandemic has led to an increased mental load for everyone. Mental load is a reflection of the number of things we hold in our brain at any one time. This ranges from specific work tasks to the shopping that needs doing, what we are wanting for dinner to whether the car needs servicing – the constant news updates about Covid-19 and how this applies to our work and private lives is only adding to our mental load. Dealing with an increased mental load is incredibly energy draining, only adding to our mental load. Dealing with an increased mental load is incredibly energy draining, only adding to our mental load.

Dealing with the confusion surrounding the recommendations has become the ‘norm’ for everyone working in the profession. Moreover, practices may have also been operating with a reduced team due to furlough or self-isolation measures, potentially putting further strain on the rest of the team to get tasks done.

The ugly

Pandemic fatigue
During the first lockdown there was a ‘surge’ reaction where we stayed sharp and aware of what was going on (Box 3). However, as time went on the mental load of that surge was no longer sustainable and we started seeing increasing levels of denial, forgetfulness and apathy in regards to Covid-19. Handwashing and mask-wearing levels fell, especially during mid- and late-2020 when the government messaging was less ‘black and white’.

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BOX 1: ACCEPTING THAT FAILURE IS NORMAL
‘Shiteventersunite’ is a Facebook page that has recently taken the horse world by storm. The group went from around 10,000 members to 282,000 members in three months. So what drove this success? The page is dedicated to mistakes, showing how bad things can be, how horses will misbehave and how riders do poorly. What is fascinating about the group is the sense of relief that members share of having found a place where nobody is judged for just getting it wrong. The sheer number of comments from people stating that they had given up riding/were feeling down about it until they came across the page, is profound. Why is this the case? When failure is normal and acceptable, trying is the low-risk option. When we try, we have the possibility to succeed. So celebrate the fails because that is how we learn and how we keep trying.

BOX 2: ADAPTABILITY AND UNDERSTANDING CHANGE
In order to enable adaptability and be comfortable with change, it is important to share information with every team member, but to do so in a way that is relevant to their job. Information is no good if people cannot translate it so that it is applicable to their colleagues and their clients. It is only when they understand the relevance of the information being passed to them that they can change in beneficial ways in response to a changing environment. When receiving new information and advice, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Why – What is the reason for recommendations changing?
- What – What do the recommendations consist of?
- How – How do we explain this easily to clients? How does it have an impact on the practice?
- What if – What are the benefits if we comply with these new recommendations?
Typically, we shift blame to others for things we feel are our fault. Anger, upset and frustration may increase as people or relationships, including the workplace, are no longer met. Dissatisfaction sets in and we are more likely to start looking to change things in order to meet our needs. Psychological projection is a defence mechanism where we defend ourselves against unconscious impulses or qualities (both positive and negative), by denying their existence in ourselves and by attributing them to other people or relationships, including the workplace. Typically, we shift blame to others for things we feel in ourselves and as a consequence, anger, upset and grief may be projected inappropriately. If individuals have a good level of self-awareness, they are more likely to be aware of where the dissatisfaction is coming from and be able to attribute it to the correct cause – in this case, to the pandemic.

During the first lockdown, a number of practices commented on how they received many more job applications on their adverts. These weren’t from people who were out of a job, but from individuals that were already in excellent positions but were looking for new opportunities – their life and emotions had changed and so they went looking for a reason to explain this, often incorrectly attributing it to troubles in their work environment.

Projection also leads to increased emotional surges and inappropriate anger. For example, clients may have come across as seeming a little unreasonable and many practices have seen an increase in client complaints; these are often because a client has inadvertently looked for an outlet for their underlying frustrations brought on by the pandemic.

**Key learnings from the past year**

**How to achieve high-function levels**

In a rapidly changing environment, a well-functioning team is key. Achieving high levels of function is dependent on understanding the roles of the individual team members and appreciating how these roles combine to form a greater whole. It is about being honest and willing to engage in conversations, and about being willing to listen to feedback as well as give it in a kind, yet clear, way.

Obtaining high levels of function requires clear agreement on values and how these are expressed in everyday behaviours. Good teams avoid assumptions and understand that everyone has good intentions; the individuals within the team constantly work on increasing their own self-awareness, while appreciating everybody else’s. Furthermore, hierarchy should be avoided at all costs. Leadership is an action, not just a role designator, and teams are about trust, not just about who works with whom.
Wearing PPE has been challenging for the whole team during the pandemic, with body language and words becoming even more important as smiles are hidden behind masks.

Leadership
In order for the team to work well, the practice has to provide clear boundaries as to what responsibilities people have and what decisions they are allowed to make. The faster the change, the broader the boundaries and the greater the need to shift from rigid rules, systems and processes to increased heuristic thinking. Using simple flow charts instead of detailed plans can help the team engage in active problem solving. In a challenging time, leadership has to pull back and focus on giving broad direction, identify key strategies and provide strong support to the members of the team. The leader provides the ‘why’ and the big picture ‘what’ (eg, during the pandemic, identifying and focusing on the key safety priorities) – the team provides the ‘how’ and identifies the benefits.

Communication
Providing the team with clear direction, explanations of current government and profession recommendations, and methods to rapidly provide communication through a number of different media (ie, mixing in-person and online meetings) lies at the heart of coping with change.

Involving the team in how changes to routine takes place is essential. It is important to clearly post any agreed points or updates in a physical location, such as a notice board – it is tempting to think that an email will do the job, but in an increasingly virtual world, people are more likely to take notice of something tangible and physical. It may also just offer a small piece of ‘normality’.

Meetings
Very regular team meetings are key to keeping people engaged in work, but these do not have to be long (ie, think about scheduling 15-minute meetings twice a week). They are a forum for people to express their opinion and to raise issues regarding a new decision, making it easier for the practice manager to know what they might need to address before the decision is implemented. All viewpoints should be acknowledged and clear explanations given as to why a certain route has been chosen.

Virtual meetings and the requirement to wear PPE mean that there needs to be an increased focus on building and maintaining relationships. Without being able to see facial expressions, such as seeing people smile, words and body language become increasingly important, both for our colleagues and our clients. Moreover, sarcasm is less likely to be understood and it is harder to project warmth simply with a smile when this is hidden behind a mask.

We often underestimate how important casual interactions in the workplace are to our wellbeing. With social distancing in place, we need to actively address how we can allow those interactions to take place. You could set up safety screens in areas where people eat to allow them to sit relatively close and still see each other during breaks, or you could organise drinks parties on Zoom with the team. Each practice will have their own ideas of how to create fun ways to interact with each other and also with those colleagues working remotely or those on furlough.

Summary
It is so important to be able to recognise and acknowledge that during a pandemic people do not have the energy levels and mental resources that they normally would. Therefore, we should expect decreased resilience, increased emotional lability and increased levels of conflict. You should speak openly about pandemic fatigue and mental load with your team and make it permissible to own tiredness and worry – we’ll all end up coping better as a result. Trying to obtain ‘perfection’ is the enemy here. When mistakes, tiredness and stress are all allowed (and clearly attributed to the rapid change and the pressures of Covid-19), team resilience and support increases and we are more likely to cope better as the pandemic progresses.

Indeed, as the journey continues we will need to address the collective, psychological trauma that the pandemic has imposed on us, and look to healing the complicated and ambiguous grief that is present. We are set to move into the ‘recovery phase’ of the disaster model (Box 2), where we can look to hope at the end of the tunnel – let’s all pull together, learn from the good, the bad and the ugly, and find our way forward.

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