

in the Spotlight

Just to whet your appetite, leadership expert and inspirational speaker **Ian McKelvie** gives us an exclusive interview prior to his headlining appearance at VPMA/SPVS Congress in January.

Ian, you're CEO at BECAUZ, a global consulting firm that specialises in accelerating breakthrough change and transforming leaders and teams. Tell us a little bit about your personal journey.

IM: In every business role, I've always had the privilege of running teams of people and taking on big challenges. I've worked for large global corporations and also developed 4 successful start-up businesses. I became known as the 'team turnaround exec' because I had a knack for hiring smart people and boosting team performance, especially within businesses that were desperately underperforming. About a decade ago, I took stock, and realised I wanted to align my purpose with my work. I've always been very curious and driven but frequently the human stuff didn't make sense to me. I'm amazed that even with all the potential we have, we often find ourselves not living into what's possible or getting ourselves into a mess with each other. So I wanted to throw myself into changing that and BECAUZ was born. I'm not naturally a 'soft-edge' person; but it takes working at both the soft and hard edges of a business in which I want to transform people and organisations. We certainly haven't got it all figured out but we believe that learning from every experience creates that strategic edge for ourselves and our clients.

You specialise in leadership for large corporate organisations. How does that translate down into our SME's and vet practices?

IM: In my experience of many different businesses across many different cultures



(I'm British by birth, have lived on four continents, hold a Canadian passport and spend a lot of time in India and Singapore). And what I've found is that although people and businesses might have different objectives, they still have

to deal with each other, collaborate, compete, communicate and grow. Business and life are a series of processes where everyone has an opportunity to grow and reach their potential. Whatever the end result looks like, the principles

of this growth are the same at both a human level and business level. Growth takes guts; we need to get out of our comfort zone and challenge the edges that are holding us back. If we don't stretch and push our comfort zone, it shrinks. If I'm running a business, say a veterinary practice, chances are I don't hear what's really going on or what's holding the business back. People aren't going to tell me what's rubbish about the practice, my leadership or my strategy, and I will travel along in a bubble – in large part because I am afraid of asking the team, delegating and challenging everyone to bring their best. For the sake of my team and my business, I've got to push myself out of that reverie - ask questions and listen. The more you do it, the easier it gets. If you don't push the edge, your team will eventually sell out on itself; by this I mean that everyone gets numb – and sweeps things under the carpet and boy does it get lumpy. And you know what – everyone feels it – if there's something wrong, or the culture has taken on a negative feel, then your staff will feel it, your patients will feel it and your clients will feel it as soon as they walk into your business. And for small businesses this risk of a poor culture developing is more prevalent because of the internal politics and human dynamics within a small team. This is often complicated by spouses working in the business and new players which can upset team dynamics.

What are your tips for maintaining a positive culture?

IM: OK. Let's list them:

1. Strategic Alignment. If you own/run a team, make sure all your people are aligned and pulling in the same direction – even a few degrees off will cause issues. You need to have conversations on alignment and commitment.

2. Leadership Development. Look at how we develop ourselves as leaders. It is through our leadership that we provide direction to the business. We need to be open to listen to feedback on ourselves and our business. That's the hardest part - no-one likes to be told they have an ugly baby!

3. Executional Excellence. Learn to execute with excellence. All systems must be set up to interact and continually improve.

4. Sustaining Health. Look at how you sustain momentum and health and vitality in your team. You can't create any level of care in your practice that's greater than the level of care for your people. And we've got to take care of ourselves too. Being a leader or owner of a business is hard. We all think our boss is the one getting all the goodies and having a fantastic time. So it can be a lonely place. Having healthy relationships provides confidence.

5. Innovation and Creativity. Get innovative within the team – especially in the tougher roles. Being a practice manager for instance is a hard role. They're the jam in a sandwich and need to pull everything and everyone together. It's doubly difficult if you've been promoted up through the practice ladder. Suddenly there's a lot of conversations going on that you're not being included in. Again we need to move out of our comfort zone to make this better, and open ourselves to questioning the status quo and listening.

6. Master Change and Transition. Think about change from a different perspective: As a consultant I spend a lot of time looking at change. We think that humans in general don't like change. But in fact what they don't like is loss. They don't like the psychological aspects of transition. It makes them feel vulnerable. But we need to acknowledge this and face this if we are to grow.

You manage quite a large team, yourself. What qualities do you look for when you're recruiting and selecting people for a role in your team?

IM: We have a profile of a person that would make a great teammate as well as represent our company well to our clients. We are going out and getting under the bonnet of team dynamics and it's important for our business that our people are the right fit. It's the same for vets. People bring their beloved pet to you – it's a cherished relationship that we must maintain. So we ask ourselves: does this person represent our brand; do they have authenticity, curiosity, integrity and the edginess that is vital? Will they represent what's special and unique about us? Sometimes you get a niggling feeling – is this person right for us? And you have to address this question with a mix

of the head and the heart. My biggest mistakes have come when I haven't listened to both. And it's an expensive mistake to bring someone in and then have to ask them to leave.

One of the biggest challenges in growing a vet practice, is that vets are primarily clinicians who are more psychologically geared towards analytical problem-solving and working in isolation, rather than being naturally business-minded and people-focused. How can this be best addressed for a vet who manages their own business?

IM: Soft skills are the hardest skills to master. It's especially tough when you have an expertism mind-set. If we are an expert in our field then it's tough to get into a learner mind-set. We don't want to put ourselves into those situations where we might look stupid. It's the tyranny of competence that holds us back. Sticking to what you're competent at tends to make you reluctant to develop new business or people skills. The first step is to get into a learner mind-set. If the edges that are hurting you are not on the technical side but on the people-skills side, then you need to look closely at what's going on. Experiment a little. Put yourself into that uncomfortable zone to learn and grow. And this is a good lesson for our teams. Demonstrating behaviours like vulnerability and humility is amazingly powerful. Showing that you are willing to risk that discomfort to grow and widen your perspectives and skills is truly leading by example.

Finally Ian, you're a bit of an extreme sports enthusiast. Simple question – why do you do it?!

IM: I tend to do things that force me to be ultra-present. Whether that's flying a helicopter or white-water rafting. These things demand my attention fully - I've got to be hyper-focused and from this I get an altered state of flow. It's not even the adrenaline rush. These activities give me brief moments when time doesn't exist. These are precious moments.

Ian McKelvie is speaking at VPMA-SPVS Congress from the 23rd to 24th January. The full programme and synopses can be viewed on www.vpma-spvs-events.co.uk