The Power of *Conflict*



AN INTENTIONAL PATH TO PERPETUAL GROWTH

Carlo A. Riolo, DVM

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Carlo A. Riolo, DVM
carlo@collaborativeprocess.com
collaborativeprocess.com

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Letter to the Reader

Some of us are wired to want more. Not status. Not titles. Not wealth. But growth — genuine, relentless personal evolution.

But systems and society (business, employers, teams, managers, teachers, institutions) typically aren't fond of people like us. The status quo has no use for creative dissent. So these institutions give us a choice: fall in line or take a seat on the sidelines, outside the circle of convention.

In an effort to fit in, we take the job and follow the rules. Not long after, something feels off, something's not 'right.' Eventually, we realize we're suffocating from the pressure, the desire to effect change, and then the feeling of powerlessness that comes when it becomes clear no one else wants to change or even question. And you're stuck, with no exit in sight, continuing to feed a machine you never wanted to be a part of.

I've been there. After 15 years as a veterinarian and practice owner, I found myself white-knuckling it, playing either therapist or priest for a team circling the drain, wondering when my dream became a trap. The death of a close colleague and the pandemic completely severed any sort of community connection. Each day was packed, not only with demand but

fear. The team didn't have the social or service skills to cope with the conflict of the pandemic, and it became my job to put out fires and hold it all (and everyone) together. There was a great deal of motion happening, but no forward momentum.

But how had I gotten here? I'd been doing all the things the business management books said to do — following the industry gold standards. Why wasn't any of it working?

Instead of the well-oiled machine of improved accountability and consistent, disciplined execution the books and authors said would occur, **I was the emotional tourniquet for a broken system. Our practice was drowning in chaos, and I was bleeding out behind a clipboard and a smile.**

Then it clicked: We hadn't misunderstood or broken those business planning models — they weren't working by design. They were too rigid, too one-size-fits-all, and overly skewed to being so complex that clarity would come only with the help of a hired consultant. Besides being inflexible, it felt like a scheme. Maybe the approach worked for some organizations, but for PAW Health, it decidedly had not.

And the chaos I'd been fighting this entire time? Turns out, it wasn't the enemy. It was the lesson.

So I torched it — ALL of it. The "*This is the way it's always been done; This is the right way to operate,"* and built something new.

A new process. A new system. **A way forward that didn't avoid conflict but relied upon failure.**

And From the Wreckage Came A Got'damn Blueprint: The Collaborative Process

That system — The Collaborative Process™ (TCP) — didn't come from a weekend retreat or a slick and shiny business coach. It came from necessity, exhaustion, and a flat-out refusal to quit. Once I recognized and accepted that the system I existed within was under constant stress and constantly changing, I was able to focus on my long-term growth. But it required me to be 'selfish.' That is, I had to give myself permission to say no to the constant demands on my time, money, and attention and turn my attention to the life I wanted to build. Only then could I help those around me — the people I love, the people I employ, and those I serve.

TCP is a system for perpetual growth. Not hype. Not hustle. Actual tools and actionable steps, a repeatable framework for building a process that works — especially when things break.

I built TCP inside my practice, in the middle of the mess I just described. But it works anywhere: your job, business, team, marriage, your damn self. Because when you commit to growth, everything changes — from the inside out, and it never stops.

Why Me? Why You?

I'm no guru. I'm just the guy who was carrying too much weight from a business he built with his own two hands. Sheer refusal to give up got me through the wreckage and allowed me to create a way out, to create a solution to all that chaos and dysfunction. You can too, from wherever you are, to wherever you want to go.

There are always going to be circumstances that sidetrack us. It's life. You have to hold on tightly not only to *who* you are but also to your *time*. Because if you're losing time and wasting it, the clarity to know who you are or where you're going will evaporate.

This is your life, and it's worth protecting.

If you're done pretending the old ways work and are ready to take the first 'selfish' step toward building a life for you and not letting anyone in who doesn't deserve to be there — then fuck it, **LET'S GOOOOO**.

Introduction

The Beginning of the Breaking Point

In 2015, my wife and I decided to purchase an after-hours, open nights and weekends veterinary clinic in a small, rural Midwestern town. The practice was struggling. Revenue was horrible, staff were unsupported, and patients were suffering. It was a complete disaster, but we saw the potential, and the community needed a veterinarian. Why not us? I was going to have to work somewhere, I had student loans to pay off, and all the staff needed was a leader.

So with eyes mostly wide open, we jumped in as eager new business owners, ready to make our mark as entrepreneurs. Finally, we'd control our destiny.

We had no idea of the pain ahead.

The unrelenting demands, workload, and stress nearly destroyed everything important to us. Forty-eight-hour shifts were bookended by two hours of sleep, six days a week. Eating became less about nutrition and more about portability. If I couldn't walk and eat at the same time, it wasn't happening. Staff meetings took place in the halls, over my shoulder.

Bedtime at home with my newborn and three-year-old became a rarity. I was running on autopilot with no fuel.

With my marriage stressed to a breaking point, I began to question if I was making a difference — anywhere. For nearly three years, each day, I felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest. Multiple visits to the hospital confirmed I was not having a heart attack; I was suffering from chronic exhaustion. Something had to change; I could not go on like this.

Fast-forward 10 years: Our practice is one of the last-remaining walk-in veterinarian urgent care centers in northern Wisconsin. Our employees are thriving, and under our leadership, revenue increased nearly sevenfold in the first five years. Patient care had grown from 4,000 cases to 17,000, and outcomes have also improved, with the patient mortality rate reduced by nearly 50%. Most importantly, our family life is stronger than ever.

A turnaround like that doesn't happen by accident and without steep cost. It came as a result of a flat-out, do-or-die attitude. One where **failure was never an option**.

The Part No One Talks About

The night before kindergarten career day, my mother asked, "What do you want to be?" With no hesitation, I said, "Veterinarian." With that, she took a black marker and, sacrificing my white 'church' shirt, wrote "DVM" on the pocket. Never veering off course, at 19, I was accepted into a doctoral program.

The further I progressed in veterinary school, the more I began to sense something wasn't right. During my first rotation, the chief clinician pulled me into her office and said, 'I don't like you or your cavalier attitude. People like you don't make it here.'

I hadn't done anything wrong. I was just being myself — optimistic, collaborative, and human. That was my first taste of the machine.

Once I was on the inside, the industry's polished veneer started cracking. The community of dedicated professionals I thought I was joining turned out to be a myth.

As the months wore on, I didn't just witness the dysfunction, I lived it. It was omnipresent. Divisiveness within staff, among departments, and between clinics in the community. For students, there was a complete absence of real-world, relevant training and education, and a lack of trust existed among clients and health care professionals.

The industry's dirty underbelly had revealed itself, and it was impossible to unsee. I was left with a painful and deep sense of abandonment — not only by the veterinary industry but also by my own perceptions about it. The story I'd been sold (and believed) did not exist; I'd just bought the bullshit I'd been fed.

As I left the hospital for the third time, with the same pressure on my chest, it hit me: The conflict *is* the system. And holy fucking shit, we're not supposed to *avoid* conflict — we're supposed to *walk right into it*.

Conflict isn't the issue; it's the pathway to change. And the only way out of the conflict is going straight through the belly of the beast, sword in hand.

Conflict Is Not the Enemy

Once I realized that conflict isn't to be avoided or fled from, a new reality came into focus: Call them what you will, challenges, struggles, and hardships are not a sign of failure or confirmation that you should give up. Quite the opposite! Times of strife and difficulty are the milemarker that indicates you are exactly where you're supposed to be: at the brink, ready to create the antidote from all that poison.

Conflict isn't the enemy of growth; it's a signal that change is necessary.

Conflict = Change = Growth

Hard stop.

When you understand and accept this truth — when it lands in your bones — you stop trying to survive the chaos and start using it as fuel to accomplish something bigger and better — more true to you.

When you decide to use conflict to guide your next actions, two things happen:

1. You start acting and living with intention.
2. You don't just change yourself. You give those around you permission to change.

You become the match. And when you strike, you spark the system.

You don't have to believe me, but think about it. If the old system worked (doing your best to avoid conflict), you wouldn't be reading this.

Conflict isn't
the problem,
it's the pathway.
This is how
we grow.

How to Use This Book

I want to make one thing clear.

You're not here to learn how to manage a team better, set smarter goals, or find a magic, work-life balance hack.

You're here to build the life you want — not the one you've been told to want or expect. You're here to burn down the parts of yourself and system that no longer serve you.

We don't fix the system by adding features. **We start by tearing it down**.

Throughout the book, you'll encounter **Reality Checks**. These questions aren't traditional journal prompts; they're more like a mirror that tells only the truth. Don't skip them. They're included to prepare your mind for the content that follows and to help open your mind to any comfortable patterns you've settled into — before we dive into uncomfortable truths. Take time with these questions; you may even want to write down your answers.

Some of the Reality Checks might make you uncomfortable or irritated. Please don't run from this — that's the intent. The

goal isn't to feel good about your situation — it's to get brutally **honest about where you are so you can move forward**.

If you find yourself getting defensive or wanting to rationalize your answers, that's exactly when you need to lean in harder. The discomfort means the process is working; the excuses mean you're not. Don't answer these Reality Checks based on an ideal state. This is your chance to see and tell YOUR story and create the reality you want. Be honest and brave enough to see yourself as you exist, right here, right now.

You'll find **Reflections** throughout the book. These prompts are designed to do two things:

1. Help you process what you've just learned
2. Connect it to the world you're living in

They're not homework assignments. They're there to remind you that the stories of your life are lessons to guide your journey. Don't skip these either — doing so will just stall your evolution.

Remember, you're not broken. You're just operating within a broken system.

That's why I'm here.

Not to fix you — but to equip you with awareness and skills to build something better. Because life isn't always fair, and our individual situations all differ. You may even ask yourself, *Why has my life always been so hard?* I get it, shit can suck, and it's

a bitter pill to swallow — but that's your past, and your past doesn't define your future, not even your next step.

The moment you wake up to where you are today and take action toward the future you want, that's the day you put yourself on the path of prosperity.

Who This Book Is For

I don't know you, your specific situation, or the industry in which you're employed, but I do know what happens when organizations are built around broken and outdated management models that treat only the symptoms instead of fixing the disease.

Take a look at the following work-focused statements. Do any of them hit home?

- ☐ Sunday-night dread hits like clockwork.
- ☐ You're running on fumes, but you know you can't stop because so much depends on you.
- ☐ Minor issues make you explode, and afterwards, you hate yourself for it.
- ☐ It's 'normal' to wake at 2 am, mentally triaging the day's disasters.
- ☐ The person in the mirror is someone you used to roll your eyes at: cynical, exhausted, and merely existing, not living.
- ☐ You remember why you chose this career, but don't recall the last time you were energized by it.

Any yesses?

Great! You're on the right path. Keep going.

It's Me, I'm the Problem

Sometimes, *we're* the self-inflicted glitch in our own system. Maybe some of those 'yes' responses are the result of our decisions and beliefs.

This is understandable. We bought into the myths we were fed along the way. Altruistic bullshit like, *"If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life."*

If that's the 'truth,' then whatever's going wrong in my professional life is my fault, right? We often believe this so deeply that we stay and adapt. We gaslight and martyr ourselves, believing suffering is part of the job. As time passes, dysfunction, outdated thinking, and bureaucratic inertia become the uncomfortable norm, but we wait, hopeful that something will "give"; that someone more connected, more respected, will show up to fix what ails the workplace, your career.

Then one day, you find yourself here — worn the fuck out and resentful of a profession that once gave you hope.

Here's the truth: It's time to stop waiting for someone else to make it better. YOU have to do it, and you CAN do it. If you're thinking, *"Who is this guy? You don't know me,"* you're right, I don't.

But I believe in you. Not because I'm peddling some break-room, motivational bullshit, but because I've watched people take ownership, dismantle their own excuses, and start

building the future they actually want. I've faced the same mirror this book asks you to.

No one else is coming to make this better. No board, no expert, no magic policy change. It's you. **Only YOU can own your reality and change it**. That's not a pep talk — it's the only way out.

Rigidity, 'Rocks,' and Rinse-Repeat: What Traditional Business Management Systems Miss

If there's a professional growth or business management framework, trust me, I've explored it. Hell, I've even tried implementing some of their suggestions in my practice and in my personal life. But as well-intentioned as some of these management systems may be, none of them adequately address (or even acknowledge) what I think is the most important aspect of growth: what it means to be a human.

Instead, many of these business systems, including the most well-known, are rampant with hyperbole and bureaucracy. Goals and objectives are relabeled as "rocks" and tracked on a 90-day calendar, but only if they slot into the topics inside a cleverly spelled acronym. Team meetings take place, but for the most part, serve as a vehicle for leadership to pat themselves on the back for the work of others.

I find these rules and their hype-heavy operating systems rigid with their one-size-fits-all mentality. They're often divisive (and weird) and, by design, leave out people. They choke innovation and, in the name of "efficiency," overlook many of the people who comprise an organization.

For businesses getting crushed by unpredictable costs, tight margins, and staff shortages (practically every veterinary clinic on earth), these systems are fucking useless. Honestly, they go down like snake oil — without a spoonful of sugar.

My takeaway? **Most operational systems fail because they empower the managers furthest from the issues to generate disconnected solutions for individuals weeping for relief.**

Many of these systems assume people need clearer goals to track on a spreadsheet. What we actually need is a new way to communicate — an entirely new language that allows each of us to take real ownership. One that builds who we are professionally as much as who we are individually. A system for all systems. A system to grow our flawed existence, in perpetuity.

Which brings us to you.

Here's your first Reality Check. Remember, these aren't fluff questions designed to make you feel productive. These questions are surgical. They're designed to cut through the bullshit you've been telling yourself and prime your brain for the content that's coming next.

REALITY CHECK

It's time to hold up the mirror, stare yourself in the eyes, and find the person trapped behind the myths, the falsehoods, and the way it's "always been."

Conflict is here, but don't fear it. It's inviting you to open the door and come out and play. When you do, you'll find perpetual growth waiting on the other side.

Ask yourself — really ask yourself:

1. What part of your current path did you choose; what part, if any, feels like it was chosen for you?
2. Have you hidden or suppressed aspects of your true self — your genuine enthusiasm, boundaries, or unique perspective — to fit in? How has this impacted your professional or academic experiences?
3. When thinking about how you approach your work, which is the most important: purpose, external validation, or financial security?
4. Are there areas of your life where you're waiting for someone to initiate a change you could begin yourself?
5. Have you given up on growth because you can't be perfect?
6. Describe a moment when you realized that a system you were a part of — academic, professional, or personal — was designed to create competition or division rather than collaboration.

7. Have you ever felt that you had to "suffer" or "earn your place the hard way" to be considered legitimate or deserving in your chosen field?

If these questions cause uncomfortable feelings (maybe even piss you off?), good! That means you're one step closer to being honest with yourself.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Job 1: Become a Veterinarian

That proclamation of 'Veterinarian!' I made to my mother the night before kindergarten career day? I never wavered. While other kids bounced between astronaut and firefighter, I was locked in. Middle school, high school, college — every decision, goal, and choice pointed me toward a single outcome: veterinary school.

And it wasn't just my dream anymore. My family had adopted it, too. Everywhere we went, my mom introduced me as "the future veterinarian." Every encounter with an animal — bathing a flea-covered stray cat with my dad, caring for the classroom rabbit over summer, grieving a childhood dog — you could bet your ass I'd hear, "One day, you'll be the one fixing them."

The pressure from all sides was genuine, but so was my focus. My tunnel vision, determination, and deliberate actions paid off. By the age of 19, my plan had worked. I got my acceptance letter to vet school.

It was a celebration for the ages. Coming from a family of generational immigrants, my relatives lost their minds upon hearing my news. It was for a good cause: my great-grandparents had come to America decades earlier, in search of something better — not just for them, but for the children they would bear as well.

And now, generations later, one of "theirs" would become a doctor. *"All that hard work finally paid off. Eh, young man?"* they said, with hugs and mighty claps on my back.

> My relatives were correct — getting into vet school at such a young age had been hard work. But the academic victory was not my accomplishment alone. It was a collective win. My success was connected to the actions (and in many cases, the sacrifices) of those who came before me.
>
> Their lessons of heritage, family, and future remain with me still:
>
> - Our responsibility is to those who come next.
> - We sacrifice so they may have better lives.
> - We are the vessel that carries them into the future.

After getting into veterinary school, I knew, I just knew that I was launching into the greatest years of my life. I'd be among people who shared the same calling and the same intellectual horsepower. And finally, I'd be accepted as a member of the elite group of "Veterinarians" I'd been chasing since kindergarten.

The childhood dream was becoming reality.

I Was One of Those

It didn't take long for the dream to sour. Whatever beliefs I had about vet school being a place of unity and mutual respect were crushed before classes even began.

Orientation was the standard get-to-know-you exercise — eager young people with nametags, sharing hometowns and how we'd gotten here.

I was in my element. This was the connection I'd been waiting for — having been everyone's companion but no one's friend — a real chance to be an equal. When it was my turn, I spoke the truth: I'd wanted to be a veterinarian since I was a kid.

The reaction? Scoffs. Smirks. Condescending chuckles.

"Oh...you're one of those," they said.

"One of what?" I asked.

It turned out that my early clarity was treated as immaturity. Being a 'kid vet' made you an outcast — a punchline, not to be taken seriously. My presence? A fluke. A joke. Murmured comments and eye rolls made it clear that I hadn't 'earned' my spot — that my acceptance must have been an accident or that the college was filling a quota. To them, I was just a child, fond of hugging bunnies, playing out an altruistic game of dress up.

That label — 'one of those kids' — and the ridicule I felt hit hard. Until that moment, my desire to become a veterinarian had been a source of pride, a badge of honor — proof of a lifelong commitment to my goal, to the work, to my family and their sacrifices. But here, in the place I had fought so hard to reach, it became a joke.

It didn't make sense. I had earned my right to be here — academically, I ranked among the highest of any incoming class. But none of that seemed to matter. I had been cast out and, because of my age, marginalized as undeserving. Many of my classmates had tried for years to gain entrance without success. So a 'kid' who made it in one try? I clearly didn't deserve to be there.

At that time, I didn't have the language to describe what I was experiencing, but this was my first collision with "scarcity thinking" — the unspoken belief that someone else's opportunity comes at your expense. What a joke.

But worse yet, it was my first lesson in the veterinarian industry's unspoken rules: enthusiasm is naïve, clarity is suspect, and passion must be hidden if you want to belong.

The Moment of Isolation

At the end of orientation, our class lined up for the White Coat Ceremony — a rite of passage where faculty drape you in your first official white lab coat, symbolically welcoming you into the profession. My parents were in the audience, watching

their kindergartner-turned-vet-student step into the role I'd been chasing since childhood. My mom had made my first vet coat out of a button-down. Now, here I was, wearing the real thing.

On the surface, it should have been a perfect moment — one step closer to fulfilling my dream, honoring the family who believed in me, vindicating the little boy who'd never wavered.

But as applause filled the auditorium, I heard only the voices from earlier that week, looping in my head: *Your path wasn't winding enough. Your struggle wasn't hard enough. You don't deserve to be here. You haven't righteously earned your place.*

As I sat there in a coat intended to represent professionalism, integrity, and commitment to patient care, the garment felt like a costume. A prop for a performance designed to make us *feel* like we belonged, even when the undercurrent told a different story.

But I knew the truth — I had earned my place to be here. And as my peers made it clear that in their eyes, I hadn't "suffered enough" to deserve acceptance, I made a choice. I pushed the part of me — the young boy who always knew his calling — into hiding.

I wasn't quitting my dream. This was about self-preservation. In an environment where showing genuine enthusiasm invited mockery, the smartest move was to keep that fire to myself and show it only to those who deserved to see it.

Looking back, that was the first moment I experienced how quickly a system can teach people to dim their own light. And once you're taught that lesson, it takes real work — and sometimes decades — to bring back what you hid.

The Systemic Truth

But what was even more apparent was that these professionals, my peers, were already disenfranchised. Confronted with inefficient processes and unnecessary conflict, the veterinary industry purposefully creates dysfunction. And now, the academic system had failed **them**. Rather than celebrating a shared calling, they had chosen to tear each other down before they even began.

It was disheartening that the people who should have been allies were perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. Yes, my fellow students were responsible for their actions, but this wasn't about individual personalities, it was about conditioning. The veterinary education system didn't stumble into dysfunction, it was built for it. From day one, it pits students against one another in a relentless pursuit of success. The fight doesn't end once you're accepted; it only amplifies once you're a student.

This system doesn't break people by accident. It breaks them by design — not by intention, but by consequence:

- Rewarding scarcity thinking and penalizing collaboration
- Pitting colleagues against each other in the name of professionalism

- Teaching people that knowledge is power to gatekeep and suppress, rather than a responsibility that must be shared
- Punishing enthusiasm and rewarding struggle

When put into practice, these patterns create exactly what veterinary education has become: a monolithic system that prioritizes personal gain over collective growth.

Byproducts of an Evil System

Honestly, those classmates weren't evil. They were byproducts of the same system that was trying to break me.

The tragedy isn't that I was labeled "one of those." The real tragedy is that any professional could be so brainwashed by the educational system that they genuinely believed destroying my enthusiasm was a sanctioned act of service, a necessary and useful rite of passage.

This is how broken systems perpetuate themselves. They turn potential colleagues into enemies. By teaching us to police each other, they make people complicit in their own oppression.

The academic system I entered wasn't designed to nurture collaborative healers. It was designed to produce competitors, then isolate them — never unifying or challenging the status quo. When we're divided amongst ourselves, we're easier to control.

Mission accomplished.

If you've ever felt like you don't belong in your life, your role, or industry, if you've ever been made to feel that your passion makes you an outcast, understand this: the system designed it that way. Academic environments don't create collaboration — they create competition. They don't build communities — they build hierarchies. And they sure as hell don't celebrate authentic calling — they punish it.

That orientation humiliation? Child's play. The real systematic destruction was waiting for me in clinical rotations. There, I'd learn that the system doesn't just pit students against each other — it trains leaders to cannibalize the next generation.

REFLECTIONS

Hopefully, some of the Reality Checks at the beginning of the chapter came to mind as you read about my journey, and now think about your own. With that, below are some Reflections.

Remember, these are designed to do two things:

1. Help you process what you've just learned
2. Connect it to the world you're living in now

So before moving to the next chapter, take a moment, reflect on your own journey, and then read these Reflections. If something resonates or guides your thinking in a new direction, that's great! You can always write down your thoughts (including any questions!) and come back to them later, or spoiler alert: reflect on them now.

Reflection 1: Embrace Your Authentic Strengths

Recognize that your inherent enthusiasm, authentic calling, and genuine desire to help others are powerful strengths, not weaknesses, no matter the limitations a dysfunctional system may impose. Safeguarding these fundamental qualities is crucial for maintaining your authentic self and ensuring your effectiveness and well-being within your profession.

Reflection 2: Break Dysfunctional System Cycles

Dysfunctional systems perpetuate themselves by turning their victims into enforcers. People conditioned by these systems inadvertently undermine potential allies — fragmenting community, blocking growth, and reinforcing the status quo.

Reflection 3: Academic Systems: Failure to Thrive

Academic systems frequently fail students by teaching them to view success as a scarce resource, leading them to perceive others' achievements as a threat to their own. This competitive mindset ultimately compels individuals to defend the very dysfunction that gradually erodes the vitality of their profession.

Reflection 4: For Community, Don't Compete, Collaborate!

When you actively refuse to participate in the "know your place" hazing ritual — when you consciously choose to uplift others rather than tear them down — you break a destructive cycle. Your decision to collaborate instead of compete

empowers others to do the same, cultivating the supportive community your current or younger self needed to truly thrive, rather than merely survive.

Your Move

If any of what you've read so far feels familiar — the isolation, the broken promises, the realization that no one's coming to save you — then you already know the old way doesn't work.

So stop waiting for permission. I did — and I built a place for the rest of us.

The TCP Community is where the work continues — videos, live conversations, battles with TCP CoPilot, and a space built for those of us who are done being patient, polite, and obedient.

No cavalry. No fairytales. Just people building what comes next.

I'm in!