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When street dogs, cats bring the office closer

Some professionals and companies are actively looking after animals outside their offices. In the process, they are strengthening team spirit

Reem Khokhar

Preeti Khanna takes care of 35 dogs around the export house she works in Gurugram. The marketing professional, 54, brings food for them each morning, feeding them as soon as she gets into the office. She started the practice during covid, in an individual capacity, feeding, vaccinating and sterilising the canines. Watching her every day, some colleagues started contributing funds towards Khanna's caretaking expenses. The organisation's chairperson has even set up an emergency fund for the canines. When Khanna is away, she has two team members who take on the feeding duties.

The corporate world is filled with more stories of competition than compassion. But there are working professionals and companies across the country who ensure that the dogs and cats around their workplaces are well taken care of. They coexist peacefully. Some companies also contribute to animal welfare organisations, build shelters, and have adoption drives and community animals as their mascots. This sense of purpose and compassion often permeates organisational culture, building tolerance, strengthening work relationships, fostering inclusivity, and offering another strong reason to come to work.

While it is usually individual employees like Khanna who initiate and sustain caretaking, some organisations have community animal welfare as a key focus with related policies and initiatives.

Ratan Tata, for instance, was known for his compassion for animals. In fact, the Tata Group's Bombay House headquarters has a designated area for their community dogs.

Others like Lemon Tree Hotels have a "Pooch Policy". It was initiated by the group's founder Patu Keswani 23 years ago, when a community dog walked into the Lemon Tree Hotel's Gurugram premises and was adopted. "Called Sparky Keswani, she trailed Patu everywhere—into his office, boardrooms, other departments—and was part of many meetings and discussions," says Niket Sood, vice president (commercial strategy). "Patu loved having her around so much that he decided that all Lemon Tree Hotels would adopt a stray dog."

Under this policy, many of the group's hotels in over 70 cities have adopted at least one community dog. Typically, pups are adopted from the street, fed, vaccinated and sterilised and live on the premises as a part of the hotel family. They have designations—Sparky was the vice-chair dog, mascot, and senior food critic. She even had a four-legged "executive assistant", Street Arthur. The dogs are cared for primarily by the security personnel.

"Though there is a dog shelter built within the hotel premises, the dogs are free to pick their favourite spots," adds Sood.

Mars Petcare India's work with community animals goes back to 2002, when the American brand entered the country. It has since run initiatives like adoption drives, animal shelter volunteering opportunities for Mars associates, and hosting an annual "Love My



Goa-based Anupama Mehra with her community dogs; and (below) from a Mars Petcare India drive to install mobile shelters for street canines.



Indie" dog show in partnership with Hyderabad's The Blue Cross.

Such initiatives give the associates "a shared sense of meaning," says managing director Salil Murthy.

"There have been several instances where people who were afraid of dogs, after joining the company, went on to adopt canines," says Sood.

Even for those who prefer to keep their distance, familiarity and comfort grow over time, he adds. "While they might not take part in caring for the animal, they do not mind having them around."

Not everyone at the workplace is comfortable around community animals, though.

When Anupama Mehra, 52, noticed the dogs wandering in and around the Goa-based school of which she's the principal, she took on the responsibility of feeding, vaccinating and sterilising them. Observing her, some of her colleagues joined in, forming a "dog squad" for collective caretaking.

However, with children around, the management was not initially encouraging.

So, Mehra and her squad got an area cordoned off within the premises where the pooches stayed leash-free during school hours and later roamed the rest of the campus.

She also started awareness sessions for children, and colleagues and parents, who were not attuned to dog behaviour.

Even if colleagues do not participate, often just quiet observation can lead to better understanding and awareness of animals.

Aditya Natarajan, 26, takes care of cats around the office of the e-commerce business he runs in Mumbai, feeding, vaccinating and sterilising them.

"While the workers at my production unit do not have the bandwidth or funds to adopt a cat or support these efforts, they are tolerant of them," says Natarajan. Some neighbouring offices also help Natarajan, one of them leaving their windows open for the cats to come in and take shelter.

Such compassion extends towards building stronger work relationships and organisational culture. "This shared passion creates a deeply engaged culture which is reflected in our consistently high internal engagement scores and external recognition of our workplace," says Murthy. "Additionally, our care for community dogs and cats strengthens team spirit, builds resilience under pressure, and encourages inclusivity."

Mehra and her colleagues have bonded over this shared purpose and the fulfilment of seeing the children's growing comfort with animals and interest in animal welfare. This has led to stronger relationships and better collaboration at work with these coworkers, bridging the gap that usually exists in a boss and subordinate relationship. Checking in on each other at work is a regular part of their day now.

The "dog squad" has paved the way for Mehra to get to know her colleagues beyond their professional and compassionate sides, and discover them as well-rounded people with various skills and interests.

"I used to know them as teachers who reported to me. Through this I've got to know them more closely and discover an entirely different side to them."

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