

Transitions: From Technician to Manager, What you need to know.

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Introduction

Growing veterinary practices will ultimately find themselves in need of a practice manager. The veterinarian(s) who own the practice want to spend their time practicing veterinary medicine and they would like to find someone to take over management.

Technicians can see practice management as an area to grow their skill sets and take on additional responsibilities increasing their value to the practice. This in turn raises their value as an employee.

So why does promoting technicians to practice managers run into problems? What can be done to avoid these problems and make the transition a success?

Overview of the Issues

In creating the position of practice manager, often for the first time, the veterinarian has expectations about how this will work out. Some of these are realistic others are not. Many times the doctor hopes that they will never have to deal with management issues again. This is not a realistic expectation and one that needs to be adjusted. The reality is they will have far fewer management issues to deal with but they still need to pay attention to some aspects of management.

The expectation issues are compounded by an uncertainty of exactly what the practice manager is supposed to do. Too often, the veterinarian selects a very able technician and says, now you the practice manager and gives no further guidance.

As a technician you may be looking forward to the increased responsibilities and learning a new aspect of the veterinary world. What you may find in the new role is little or no guidance on how to get started and not knowing exactly what to do.

Practice Manager Responsibilities

A list of tasks for the practice manager might look something like this. Bookkeeping, accounts payable, receivable, budget development and payroll. Human Resources, hiring, firing, reviews, team building, staff meetings, documentation and files. Marketing, implementing plans and tracking results, social media and the digital presence of the practice. Regulatory compliance, state board, state and federal employment laws. Work with attorneys and accountants on routine issues. Measuring practice growth against benchmarks both internal and external and

submitting reports on the health of the practice. Inventory management and purchasing and operations all fall to the practice manager.

Human resources is high on the list of things that will demand your attention. Hiring, firing, creating valid job descriptions, keeping employee files, OSHA forms, training programs, reviewing, conflict management, staff meeting organization, payroll, benefits management etc. and all the compliance issues that go with these activities are all part of human resources. This is a long list but it doesn't need to be daunting. You may have already been doing some of this work such as training new employees and reviewing new hires.

Handy Hint: A surprising and easy way to get up to date on federal employment laws is Wikipedia. Federal law does not change often or dramatically so Wikipedia is reliable source to quickly look up regulations.

Accounts payable and receivable are other areas that may go to the practice manager if you do not already have a dedicated bookkeeper. This could include using the company credit card in a manner to maximize reward points.

Handy Hint: Accounts Payable. Create a set of file folders for bills to be paid. Label them: due the 1st, due the 10th, due the 15th, due the 20th and due the 30th. When the mail is opened place each bill in the correct folder according to it's due date. When you sit down to pay bills over the month you grab the correct file for the time of the month and you know you have everything that is due to be paid in front of you.

Handy Hint: Accounts Receivable. Offer a variety of payment options to increase client compliance. Examples include Care Credit, Scratchpay and Vetbilling.

Getting a handle on inventory is often the bane of a practice. There are those in the world who like to count things and then there is the rest of the world. Poorly managed inventory affects so many aspects of a practice that control is essential to good financial health. Cash flow and practice value can take a serious hit with inventory problems.

Handy Hint: Use Vetcove for price comparisons and ease of ordering.

In most practices marketing falls to the practice manager. The Facebook page, the Google+ page and your website all need to be maintained These three areas are your first impression to the world. This is high priority work to keep new clients coming in the door. Reviews should be monitored and should have responses posted. There are others areas to consider as well, Youtube, Instagram, Yelp to name just a few. The practice manager should be proactive in all these areas. Community programs or events should be developed as well.

When looking at the marketing the marketing budget throw what you can at the website. This is the first impression potential new clients have of the practice and it needs to stand out in a good way. If the practice can possibly afford it, a website made for your practice that reflects who you are is the best way to spend your marketing dollars. The purchase of a pre-fab “customizable” website is the choice of last resort for many reasons that have to do with how high up your page appears on a Google search.

Here is a quick list of the things that will raise your website to the top of a google search:

- Large number of positive reviews
- Claim your Google business page
- Fresh content (400 words or more) at least once a month
- Maintain your Google+ page
- No content duplication
- Current SSL certificate
- Responsive design

Handy Hint: To measure the effectiveness of your marketing program, keep track of new client numbers per month.

Facebook should be used to primarily bond clients to your practice. Using it as a direct marketing tool can be off putting to clients and backfire. A strong Facebook presence will also help attract new clients but it's primary function is to bond existing clients to your practice.

Handy Hint: Ask reps to like your Facebook page and interact with your posts. This will help the organic reach of your posts.

Consider offering a loyalty program. People love to earn rewards and it will help keep those hard won clients in your practice. Loyalty programs come in all shapes and sizes. They can come in a package with other services such as an app. They can come as part of the package from a marketing company or they can be purchased as a stand alone service. They can be free to the client or they can be purchased by the client.

Client communications should be overseen by the practice manager. This includes newsletters, emails, promotional materials, texts and other forms of electronic or paper communication. Also, a telephone training program should be in place for anyone who might pick up the phone. The first phone contact is often a make or break opportunity to get a new client, so a training program here is critical for keeping new client numbers up.

Handy Hint: Use a texting program such as Zipwhip for client communications and telemedicine.

Operations are all about keeping the practice efficient. This is where experience as a technician can really make a person shine as a practice manager. Developing protocols for everything

from restocking the truck to preparing for an ophthalmic exam will maximize efficiency and therefore cut costs and raise revenues.

Auditing is another part of the practice manager's job. Auditing is like creating a health report card for various systems of the practice. Things that you will want to audit include your databases (clients and patients), medical records, personnel, inventory, and of course the one people are most familiar with, financial.

Databases should be up to date and searchable for the data you need. Medical records should be audited for completeness and missed billable charges. Personnel should be audited to see if they are comfortable with their supervisors and if they feel welcome to bring new ideas forward. Inventory should be audited for turnover rates, shrinkage and ordering and restocking efficiency. Financial auditing can determine if the financial goals of the business are being met.

Financial auditing is also the main checkpoint for embezzlement. Embezzlers can be anyone from associate veterinarians to kennel staff. There are the standard checks that should be done, daily and random reconciliation of the cash drawer and inventory control are the obvious protocols to have in place. Embezzlement protection is another topic all on its own but a red flag to always follow up on is when a client is sure they have paid a bill and the practice does not have a record of it. Sometimes the client is wrong about this, other times it is a random bookkeeping error. But occasionally, this type of comment is the tip of the iceberg that uncovers embezzlement. The practice manager should personally investigate these types of issues whenever they occur.

Keeping track of the health of the business is the responsibility of the practice manager as well. Metric, tracking meaningful numbers gives the picture of the health of the business. It will also point out areas of the business that need attention. Here is a list of numbers, that tracked monthly will help you see how the business is doing.

- Number of new clients
- Total money in (can be broken out by service and inventory)
- Total number of invoices for the practice (also break this number out by doctor)
- Average invoice total (also break this out by doctor)
- Percentage change in revenue for the month compared to the same month for the previous year

There are many publications of benchmarks that may be helpful. These benchmarks have been established to determine what percentage of gross income should go to various expenses. For example various publications cite that non doctor compensation (including payroll taxes and excluding benefits) should run somewhere between 22-25%. The figure is not set in stone but it gives an idea of where the practice should be. It will alert you to a problem if the number is far outside this range. If your non-doctor compensation is running around 30% your practice has a problem that needs to be addressed promptly in order to stay profitable.

Reports should be created monthly containing information on the tracked numbers and what they mean. These reports should be reviewed with the doctor/owner.

Veterinarian/Owner Responsibilities

A practice manager does not take all the burden of practice ownership off the owner's shoulders. Having a practice manager should streamline the veterinarians decision making. There are some decisions that only the owner can make. The practice manager job is to present the relevant information so the decision can be made on available facts.

The practice manager may have to push the owner a bit to engage in these decision making processes and to review practice health reports. Schedule a monthly meeting with the doctor/owner as an appointment. Try to make the reports as concise as possible. The fewer the number of pages, the greater the chance the doctor will look at them.

Some owners have trouble delegating management responsibilities. Others don't know what the practice manager should be doing. A job description for the practice manager should be created to avoid these kinds of problems. There are many

Resources

There are some wonderful resources available to practice managers. The Veterinary Hospital Managers Association is a place where you can find almost anything you might need to help you succeed as a manager. They have an open forum where you can ask any question from what washing machine holds up to hospital use to what to do if you suspect an employee of substance abuse. They have free webinars on topics from inventory control to using metrics. They also have a large library of articles and documents.

If you are looking for a go to book *The Art of Veterinary Practice Management* by Opperman & Grosdidier is the one to have on the shelf. This book has forms, job descriptions, review forms, training protocols and more. An excellent reference it is available on Amazon.

The world is populated with internet trolls, cyberbullies and just plain cranky people who love nothing more than writing nasty, untrue reviews. The AVMA offers a free cyberbullying management service. If you find your practice in an ugly internet situation, the AVMA is there to help you through it. Additionally the AVMA Practice management section of their website is a wealth of information on all aspects of practice management.

Another handy resource are the magazines put out every month by distributors. Publications by Midwest Veterinary Supply, Henry Schein Animal Health, Patterson Veterinary and M.W.I all contain helpful, concise practice management articles. You can quickly broaden your knowledge base reading these articles.

Here are links to additional resources:

<https://www.avma.org/PracticeManagement>

<https://www.carecredit.com/providercenter/>

<https://www.vetcove.com/>

<https://www.zipwhip.com/>

<https://scratchpay.com/clinics>

<https://vetbilling.com/>

<https://www.vhma.org/>

<https://www.shrm.org/>

Conclusion

Veterinary Practice management is highly rewarding field. It is an area for broad personal and professional development. Helping a business to succeed is a professionally very satisfying endeavor. When a practice is well managed and profitable the quality of life for everyone involved in the practice is improved.