

"One...two...three little doctors making a big impact!"

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Abstract

"Becoming Indispensable" is the question that is posed to you as a veterinarian. For most this would be finding a niche that would make them profitable or that niche unique thinking outside of the box. To me "Becoming Indispensable" is so much more. It is becoming a public mentor for my community as a steward of veterinary medicine. It is creating a family type work environment that is approachable by anyone and everyone contributes to knowledge provided. It is starting with nothing and working hard to create that system overall. My main goal is to provide a story type depiction of how you can start with something, a run down and outdated veterinary practice, and make it a highly successful rapidly growing integral part of the community we serve all while maintaining a work life balance with a successful family. "Becoming Indispensable" it is a lifestyle not a service provided to a client.

Key words: veterinary, practice management

"Making yourself indispensable" is the initiative of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners. Such an initiative encompasses so much more than just practicing veterinary medicine. For myself, such an initiative has taken a whole different perspective beyond medicine. In 2012, I was blessed to graduate from Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine. My journey had me return to Rising Sun, Indiana, which was my hometown. The older gentleman I had shadowed for so many years was ready to semi-retire and potentially sell his practice. I accepted the challenge to move home and start practice in a run-down, old-school clinic with absolutely no technology or up-to-date equipment. From this point is where my journey to building a successful and rapidly expanding mixed animal veterinary practice began.

Upon arrival at the Rising Sun Veterinary Clinic in June 2012, I knew things were far behind the times, but I was blindsided by just how bad things had become while I was away at school. Here is what I walked into. Allow me to set the stage: the clinic was mixed animal, seeing walk-in appointments from 9 to 11 am daily, Monday through Saturday, and more appointments from 5 to 6 pm Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Small animal surgery was done based on a schedule scribbled in a schedule book Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Farm visits were typically done Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons and sometimes on Saturday afternoons. The clinic was run by 1 full-time employee with a bad attitude if it was not done their way, a part-time evening employee who

was still in high school, and a single veterinarian. When the phone would ring, the employee would leave the exam room, answer the phone, and come back to help or help someone in the front. So many times, exams were performed by the veterinarian with the owner holding the pet. The most up-to-date piece of equipment was the Ford pickup used to get farm calls completed. Typically, in a day of walk-ins about 10 to 12 people would be seen, with about 2 to 4 farm calls weekly. Surgeries were the busy part of the day and we were doing about 10 surgeries a week. Most clients would only come see "Doc" for vaccinations or "cheap" medicine and treatments. Staples of treatments were Depomedrol, gentamicin, penicillin and vitamin B, with the occasional sub-Q fluid. As you can see, things were in a rut and going nowhere.

And the hits just kept coming. About 3 months into practice, the owning doctor had to have a 4-way bypass surgery for heart blockage. This left me, a rookie, wet behind the ears veterinarian all by himself with no mentor to run a practice. We moved on while the doctor was away. Another aspect lacking with the practice was medical records. The only records were triplicate invoices showing the prices based on a client's attitude and a general description of what was given, not the ailment. I was so frustrated with the current system, I began with a piece of printer paper, put lines on it, and began noting physical exam findings as well as treatments and what clients noted in the exam as my records. I purchased a banker box and kept my records filed. By the time the doctor returned 6 weeks later, I had a 4-drawer filing cabinet filling up with records. This made it so much easier to follow patient progress and record accurately what treatment worked or what failed. The old doctor still refused to do records, but my notes were tailored to me *and state laws*. Along with my comfort level rising with current medical records, clients began to see the difference in the clinic and medicine practiced. They began to request Dr. Walton and the other veterinarian, or they would quietly ask if they could see the "young guy". This was nerve-racking and comforting at the same time.

Time continued to tick along. As we approached fall, herd calls rapidly picked up as clients talked about the "new guy" and how he explained things and would help the producers become better at what they do. We became very busy, but money was disappearing from the clinic as it was coming in to the old doctor. Unfortunately, things got so bad no pay checks were made and unfortunately the older veterinarian faced a difficult talk brought on by myself. I had started recording client information in my own records along with client contact information since I had not signed any contract or non-compete. I brought this forward with the fact pay was not coming in as promised and he decided I should buy the

practice. I approached a local bank with the sketchy financials provided from the older vet, a business plan, and absolutely no money in my bank account. The bank took a chance on my business plan and saw the potential there to finance my purchase of my veterinary practice in January 2014.

At the time of purchasing the practice we had completely turned around. We were seeing about 20 clients a day on a walk-in basis, with about 10 to 15 farm calls weekly and roughly 20 to 25 surgeries weekly. This was wild to see the growth. It also made it very challenging to maintain a life outside of medicine and still keep up with patients. I was eager to change so much, but I knew change would scare clients and employees. I took on the 2 employees I had with the old vet. Throughout the first year, I had to make difficult choices to part ways with a 20-plus-year employee of the clinic that was just running off clients. I also hired new employees that would keep my work ethic in mind and my goals in mind. We made the decision to go from walk-ins to all appointments. This allowed us to flow much better and for me as the doctor to get onto farms quicker without delay. We quickly brought our clinic up to standards of care from Indiana law so we were legal. These were mostly behind the scenes changes, but clients took note and fell in love with our clinic again.

As we continued to grow we brought in technology to include practice management software, radiology, blood analysis both in-house and using established relationships with outside labs, as well as many other items. This drew more clients that had gone "up the road" back to the clinic, as they did not want to leave town to have their pets seen. We also took the time to greet every client like they were family and treat pets like they were our very own, even if it were a farm animal causing clients to come from all over just by word of mouth recommendations. As we continued to grow, it became a problem that I had no life outside of the clinic. I asked around and researched. In the literature everyone would say you had to make so many dollars gross revenue to hire another veterinarian. However, I had one mentor who said "If you're asking if you can afford to hire an associate, most likely you can hire 1 without any issue." I took the leap of faith based on my mentor and brought on a second veterinarian in 2016. The choice to bring on the other vet was a relief. It allowed me time to get business items caught up and also be a veterinarian again with a home life. It did make things slightly tight financially, but the mental sanity was well worth the risk as we continued to grow.

As we progressed in our growth we continued to bring on 2 to 3 new clients a day for small animal with about 2 to 3 new clients a week for large animal. We quickly outgrew our single exam room clinic and had to build a new 3,500 sq ft small animal clinic that increased efficiency along with allowing multiple doctors to work side by side seeing more patients. Our staff grew to 10 employees by this point. This growth posed a completely new set of challenges. Now with so many employees, disagreements had to be settled, schedules had to be made and kept, payroll had to be kept straight,

and most importantly training had to be done throughout so everyone knew their job and how to do it well while keeping the client in mind. This is about where we are now. We have moved 2 employees to split the tasks of an office manager away from my time. This has allowed me to become a veterinarian again. We are continuing to have to send clients to other clinics or work long hours to keep up with demand. We are actually in the process of hiring a new veterinarian so we can continue to grow, especially the large animal segment of our practice. With all this history, I would like to focus back on some key growth points.

The number 1 way to grow a practice is treat clients the way you would expect to be treated in life. Respect all clients even if you do not agree with them. If a client is insistent on doing something their way, proceed with caution and try to sway them. Suggest they maybe try something 1 item at a time. All it will take is 1 time, and if all goes well they will be hooked and think, "wow, why have I not done this all along?" If you want to get a client to listen, you must listen first. Then after listening and making an assessment, make suggestions. Lay out a plan or plans allowing the client to make decisions. If the client is involved in making decisions, they are more likely to pursue treatment or try new things. Large-animal clients can sometimes be the hardest. However, I can tell you from a lot of experience if you show them new ways to do things, and things go well or make things easier, they will continue. Also, do not be afraid to learn from clients. They can teach you a lot as well, especially with large-animal handling or tricks to make things easier.

The second way to grow a practice is to never stop learning. Talk to mentors, attend seminars, get involved in the veterinary field. The best way to think of this aspect is, "If you stop learning you'd better be ready to retire." Becoming a life-long learner will keep things interesting and make getting going each day easier. Simple ways to stay up-to-date and learn is participate in local veterinary medical associations. Another great example is the AABP providing unique learning experiences, like the recent graduate conferences or the practice analysis workshops just to name a few. Additional learning opportunities come from local extension agencies, maybe not about veterinary medicine, but about animal handling advice or another example, forage updates that may benefit your producers. These are just a handful of learning experiences along with those from your own clients. We can learn a lot from them as well.

The third aspect of successful growth is to set boundaries. Do not be afraid to talk to a client about acceptable methods to contact you. Additionally, set the limits for your family so you spend quality time with them. Most clients will understand and respect you more for being up-front and not making excuses. Many clients will even help make sure you get home to your family in some cases. Attempt to leave work at work. At first that is not easy, but it will get easier with time. Your efficiency will be a key in leaving work behind when you get home.

The most important aspect is get out there and talk to clients. Always have business cards with you to hand out. Take on the dreaded speaking gigs and talk to producers. It is scary at first, but just remember you do it in the exam room all the time, and this is just a room full of clients. Speak on topics you are comfortable about, even if it is simple. As you go to clients and do quality work in the veterinary world, people will talk and recommend you. There is no need to advertise or waste money on ads. Do well and people will talk and get you business while you get the benefit of charging for your time with advertising attached. Another example of outreach I personally like is working with local 4-H groups. The youth are willing to learn, and in most cases are eager to learn. Get the local 4-H kids in your clinic or set up workshop seminars where they can learn and take new ideas home to their families. This has been an amazing program for my clinic and helps us market our mission to keep animals safe and healthy. And the community loves when the local veterinarian supports their kids.

There are so many aspects to acquiring, maintaining or expanding a veterinary practice. These are in some cases the easy parts of owning a veterinary practice. The key is making it successful. Success fits right into the initiative set forth by

the AABP, "Making yourself indispensable." Success is not just being wealthy or having money. Success is being healthy emotionally, financially, mentally, and physically. Growing a practice is a very humbling experience and it will take a family and team to make it work. Do not be afraid to ask for help from mentors, accountants, other business owners and most of all, family. Let's face it, you're a veterinarian and were trained as such. We were not trained as business owner, so having people to make a team is what will make you a successful veterinarian that can take a veterinary practice from ruins and turn it into an affluent practice again.

There are so many aspects to growing a practice that every practice is unique. There is no single thing that will make you successful. "Making yourself indispensable" means putting yourself out there and loving what you do for your career. We are role models for the general public, and while we are not respected on the same level as human doctors yet, in some ways most respect us so much more. As you grow a practice you become indispensable as the head of a larger body that will fail if you stop believing or learning throughout life.