

# Becoming indispensable in times of change: Value added services and work place culture

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## Abstract

We face many challenges in our profession as we strive to provide consistent, scientific, and ethical medical services for our clients. We also find ourselves reassessing work schedules and expectations across generations of clients and coworkers. To navigate these obstacles, culture development is essential. Culture development allows us to form dynamic and high-functioning teams. The strong foundation of the team allows us to provide better services to our clients.

Employee development, retention, and management has become more crucial than ever before. In these times of change across our industry, the same principles that allow us to develop culture within our organization can help us become indispensable to our clients. To become indispensable we must adopt a growth-oriented mindset, create intentional culture with our coworkers, create intentional culture with our clients, and build a foundation of trust. This will enable us to market the value that we provide to our clients. In the age of readily available information, we cannot afford to become irrelevant.

**Key words:** employee development, management, business

## Résumé

Nous profession fait face à plusieurs défis alors que nous nous efforçons à fournir des services médicaux constants, scientifiques et éthiques à nos clients. Nous remettons aussi en question l'horaire de travail et les attentes de plusieurs générations de clients et de collègues. Le développement d'une culture est essentiel pour naviguer parmi ces obstacles. Le développement d'une culture nous permet de former des équipes dynamiques à rendement élevé. Une assise solide pour l'équipe nous permet de fournir de meilleurs services à nos clients.

Le développement, le maintien et la gestion des employés sont plus essentiels que jamais. Dans cette ère de changement dans notre industrie, les mêmes principes qui nous permettent de développer une culture dans notre organisation peuvent nous aider à devenir indispensable auprès de nos clients. Afin de devenir indispensable, nous devons adopter un état d'esprit axé sur la croissance, créer une culture intentionnelle avec nos clients et jeter les fondements d'une relation de confiance. Cela nous permettra de miser sur la valeur de nos services à nos clients. Dans une époque

de renseignements facilement accessibles, nous ne pouvons pas nous permettre de devenir inutiles.

## Introduction

As veterinarians, we have a wide variety of tasks that we must master to be successful in the food animal industry, including client communication, marketing, business management, animal welfare issues, client education, education of the public, in addition to practicing medicine. We also live in a time where information (both fact and fiction) is only a Google search away. Team development will allow us to better navigate these challenges while being able to take care of ourselves. As an industry, we underutilize support staff, yet find ourselves competing with many non-professionals for work that either still falls under the oversight of veterinary medicine or that used to and does not anymore. Changing our practice model to a team-oriented approach will help us deliver better services to our clients while imparting inherent value to our services. However, not just any team will do. We need to be able to build vibrant teams that support our objectives and believe in our purpose. This type of team will allow us to improve our function as preventative medicine providers. Let's update the herd health plan.

Important take-home points are:

1. We create culture with our coworkers with every interaction;
2. We create culture with our clients with every interaction;
3. We have to build trust and value into everything that we do to stay relevant.

To create positive culture in any environment, we must adopt a growth-oriented mindset and build rapport with the humans involved. The initial classification that we give people can be important, but also detrimental to team development. For example, I am a millennial. What connotations come to mind here? I am also a mom, "lady vet," sister, boss (my team calls me Big Boss), cow vet, wife, daughter, oldest child, WSU graduate. Above all else, I am a human.

The human piece of the equation is how we bridge and overcome gender bias, generational bias, city folk: country folk bias. This is how we create culture. This is how we retain clients. We must respond to the human in front of us rather than react to our initial classification of them. This is difficult but it is so important.

We have a profession that is full of potential for learning and growth. However, to do so, we must see each other as humans. Just a few weeks ago, I introduced myself and one of my associates to a colleague. He didn't hide the shocked look on his face very well when we said that she and I did the cattle work in our practice. Both of us are less than 5' 5". She's currently 5 months pregnant. It is a little shocking in this day and age to be judged about gender, but it happens all the time. And it goes both ways. I don't like to be judged about being female, and I am sure that the males aren't keen to be judged about being male. We have to respect each other and truly see the other human we are talking to.

This applies whether we are referring to our clients, our staff, or the shocked out-of-towners staring at us when we run into the gas station covered in bovine bodily fluids after a calving call. It applies whether we are referring to a new grad or an old grad. We all have something to learn from one another if we take the time to ask the right questions. We have to develop a culture that allows us to do so.

My practice, the Clark Fork Veterinary Clinic, has been serving our area since 1961. I joined the practice in 2011 and purchased the practice in 2012. I started with 3 staff members and ran it as a solo practitioner for the first year. We have now grown to a 3-doctor (soon to be 4-doctor) practice. I now employ 12 support staff. This is what it takes to get us home on time at the end of the day. Ideally, we have at least a 2:1 support staff to DVM ratio for all in-clinic work. The entire team is vital to allow us to be able to serve our clients, let alone be able to take care of ourselves. We achieve this self-care piece by prioritizing staff meetings, mentor groups, communication training, and annual planning meetings. These are team-wide events. They help keep us connected as humans in addition to setting and achieving our goals.

Support staff allow us to achieve better professional and personal balance in our lives. Burnout is real, present, and affecting our profession negatively. Culture and reasonable boundaries allow us to prevent burnout. As a profession, we can improve this by hiring proficient support staff and working on our efficiency models.

We have experienced significant growth over the last 6 years. This means I have asked my staff to change everything at least 6 times. From the location of our exam rooms and pharmacy, to the check-in process, to the location of every pharmacy item we have ever owned ... We have been constantly evolving to better serve our clients, patients, and each other. People do not inherently like change. It is unsettling. Time and planning are essential to make positive changes. We survive the changes together by problem solving as a team and having developed a culture where all team members can ask questions and are important.

### Challenges of Solo Practice

I knew when I bought the clinic that I did not want to be a solo practitioner forever. I applaud those of you that

are solo practitioners. It has its perks, but I have seen the toll that veterinary medicine can take on people after they are committed to the profession 24/7. I promised my family that I would hire an associate as soon as possible so that I could balance professional and personal time (this is still a work in progress).

I knew I needed more people to achieve my goal. However, in all my naivety about human nature, I assumed that if I hired good people we would naturally have a good team. All I had to do was interview and find nice people who wanted to work. However, this is not so simple. We have had to change the interview process over time to better screen for the correct people. Despite my naivety, I still managed to stumble into a talented group of people that make up my team.

What I did not consider was the structure that was needed to allow the right people to succeed. I did not have the right leadership pieces in place to guide my good, honest, hard-working team to uphold the values that I, the business owner, assumed they inherently knew. This really came to light for me when I woke up one day and realized that I had a negative work environment on my hands. It happened quickly. Thankfully I have a very loyal core crew who have stuck with me through this journey. We refer to this time during management discussions as the "dark days." This time period was a catalyst for growth that would have otherwise not been possible.

At first, I was angry and frustrated with some of the people spreading this culture. Then I realized that I hired them. I was in charge and therefore this ultimately was my responsibility. It was my responsibility despite the fact that I could not control their behavior. Since I could not control their behavior, I knew that I needed to create a work environment that would influence a positive response in behavior. We become more proactive this way, rather than reacting to events after they happen. Sound similar to any preventative medicine discussions you've had with clients recently? We needed a herd health plan!

I set out to ensure that this negative culture would never happen again. A friend recommended the book *Mindset* by Carol Dweck.<sup>2</sup> This was a game changer. In her book, Dr. Dweck describes both a fixed and growth mindset. I will do my best to summarize them:

1. Fixed Mindset: In a fixed mindset you believe that you have basic innate qualities. In a fixed mindset you respond to failure as a personal character flaw. In a fixed mindset we get defensive when anything challenges our beliefs.
2. Growth Mindset: In a growth mindset you believe that you can cultivate your qualities. In a growth mindset you respond to failure as an opportunity for improvement. In a growth mindset when something challenges our beliefs we seek understanding first.

The book describes the mindsets as a choice that we make as we process every situation. Some of us are inherently better at spending our time in one mindset than the other. We can

choose to switch between them at any time by responding rather than reacting.

One of the next books on my reading list was *Influencer* by Joseph Grenny et al.<sup>3</sup> This book is full of examples of influencing and creating behavior change in groups of people—think low-stress cattle handling! One example was about a pre-release facility that combined felons across racial and religious lines and turned them into stellar employees of a reputable furniture moving company. If this team could turn convicted felons into the best moving company employees in the area, then surely, I could create a culture that allowed my employees to flourish and become better versions of themselves in the crazy world of veterinary medicine.

### Culture Development in the Work Place

This applies to both our companies and our clientele—how do we achieve ‘buy-in’? This is what we ask of our clients when we determine a treatment plan or diagnostic plan. This is what we are asked of as employees when we choose to come to work each day. To attain compliance, we have to build trust and a personal connection. I believe the personal connection we make with each client and co-worker is what drives comraderie, trust, and ultimately our business – with our clientele and the general public.

First, we have to be able to respond to the people we work with, rather than react. To do this, we have to be able to see them as humans. We have to assume that we like them as humans and that they are people who like us. This framework allows us to respond because we are not defensive and can lead the conversation. A great book that illustrates this concept is *Adversaries into Allies* by Bob Berg.<sup>1</sup> We often need to take the initiative to lead the interaction or conversation to set up the optimal outcome.

Culture has to evolve with generational shifts in the workplace so that we are able to speak to all generations involved. What do the younger and upcoming generations want? Clearly defined purpose. This is great, because the older generations have a built-in purpose compass. In my opinion, their purpose is deeply held within and fuels their drive and work ethic. Now, we just need to define that purpose by writing it down. Veterinary medicine has an overt purpose that we all ascribed to when we took our oath. We already have a purpose and mission as a profession. It’s our interpretation of how we practice medicine that makes that purpose unique to each of us.

We had to define our organization before we could define our culture. Once the organization was defined, we needed to relay this information in enough ways that our team, clientele, and community understood us. This was achieved through a mission statement, core values, and group goals.

Why is healthy culture in the workplace important? It creates a win-win scenario for both employer and employee. Culture helps improve our quality of life and increases job satisfaction. Increased job satisfaction correlates to better

engagement. This all leads to higher employee retention and productivity.

### Mission Statement

The mission statement is your purpose. All business dealings and staff goals should tie back to this statement. We review this statement annually – in both management meetings and as an entire staff. When we are making our plans and adding services, all of the items must tie back to this. If the plans do not function within the mission statement, then we do not proceed. Ours is as follows:

The Clark Fork Veterinary Clinic is comprised of hard-working, energetic individuals that provide compassionate, high-quality care to our patients and clients in the greater Tri-County area. We strive to better ourselves and our community through the services we provide each day. We bring reasonably priced, accessible veterinary medicine to our community while practicing up-to-date, ethical veterinary medicine. We achieve this by prioritizing constant growth, education, and betterment of staff and encouraging our team members to embrace similar roles in their communities.

### Core Values

Core values define your culture. They have to be incorporated into your organization in an authentic manner. We have a core values presentation that all employees go through with me, as the owner. The goal of this presentation is to discuss the meaning and importance of the core values.

Clark Fork Veterinary Clinic Core Values:

- Growth mindset: we are teachable and accountable
- Compassionate: we develop positive relationships
- Excellence: we choose to be professionals, we choose to teach
- Ethical: we are committed to our clients, our patients, and our team
- Passionate: we care

By embodying our ‘Core Values’ we create a culture that is respectful, rewarding, and empowering. This enables us to grow both individually and as a team, in a fun and safe environment.

### Staff Development

We have a variety of ways that we work on intentional growth as individuals and as an organization. The first of which is “Kickoff” which is an annual goal setting and planning meeting. We close the clinic, travel off-site, and devote an entire day to reviewing individual goals, team goals, and team development. This event is a vital piece to starting our year. We have also developed a mentorship program, communication training program, and certified veterinary assistant training program.

## Client Culture Development

Why is culture development important with our clientele? It can be used to deliver a consistent message, deliver transparency, and therefore can build trust. Trust is key in bonding with clients, achieving high compliance rates, and therefore achieving the best treatment plans for our patients. Without trust, there is no buy-in or compliance. Will our clients choose to ask Dr. DVM or Dr. Google?

We want to be on a responsive team rather than a reactionary team – preventative medicine is where we are most valuable for our clients. However, we have to market this. Information is everywhere! Why choose us when they can find YouTube videos depicting procedures? Why choose us when they can call their local salesman and get free advice on products? Why choose us when they can buy medical instruments online? We need to provide services in a way that imparts both trust and professionalism. People choose to work with people that they like. Be likeable. Don't yell at your clients. Set expectations and boundaries, but do so kindly.

We understand the value in our services, but we are in a position where we need to market our abilities. Marketing is not typically listed as a core skill set among veterinarians. However, if we want to impart value to our clients, we need to start explaining our value. This is marketing and our patient treatment plans depend on it.

With our culture we can discuss creating a win-win scenario. We need to provide services that clients want in addition to what we think they need. We need to make sure the cost of our services both supports us and the client. Will clients see a return on their investment by using our services? If not, then why are we offering them? We have chosen to impart value and build client culture by implementing producer letters and producer meetings while promoting professional service and value-added services.

Our producer letters began as a way to open up lines of communication with clients after I bought the practice. I asked for feedback regarding our strengths and weaknesses and discussed changes that we were implementing. This is now an annual event and includes updates on staffing, maternity leave, scheduling, VFDs, and VCPRs. We include information about regulatory changes and long-term objectives so that our clients can start to ponder some of the changes ahead. People don't like change, especially when it is thrust upon them. We need to condition our clients in a way that builds trust and keeps the lines of communication open.

## Value-added Services

The goal at the end of the appointment is for our clients to be more than satisfied with their services. This establishes inherent value and sets us apart from both the lay competition and the internet. To achieve this, a team is often required and always recommended. The veterinarian alone cannot be all things. We need to better use our support staff to deliver

value-added services. We underutilize skilled support staff and burn out our veterinarians. Two areas where we strive to provide value-added services are with our pregnancy diagnosis and herd health planning appointments.

I bring a technician with me for every pregnancy diagnosis appointment to take records and help with chute work as needed. I do not charge more for this service. It is just part of our fee structure. The data collection serves to protect me and adds value to our service. For our records we track data known on each patient: ID, BCS, age, fetal age, fetal sex, any additional notes, any markings that we placed on the cow (bleach). At the conclusion of the appointment we email the Excel file and PDF of the records.

Now that we have collected data, we can quickly analyze it to evaluate our work for the day. Pivot tables are set up to graph trends in any given group or by age. Then we can better see where the problem areas are and discuss how to fix them. If the data elicits a longer discussion, then we roll this into our annual herd health planning meeting.

In order to achieve true annual meetings that seemed reasonable to our beef producers, we looked at the following parameters: packaged services, convenience, and developing a tangible product to hand out after the meeting. During this meeting we discuss the production flow of the herd, goals for the year, areas of improvement, and areas of success.

## Conclusion

We need to be proactive in the culture that we establish within our organizations and profession. By developing a culture that supports healthy staff development and retention, we are able to provide more comprehensive services for our clients. By elevating our services, we can provide clients with exceptional experiences that keep them choosing us as veterinarians rather than other avenues of information. We achieve this culture by choosing to respond rather than react and selecting a growth-oriented mindset. These 2 choices will allow us to become nimbler as a profession. We create culture with every interaction. Let it be the one you envision.

## Acknowledgements

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