

Human resources lessons learned

Brandon Scharping, DVM

Lena Veterinary Clinic
Lena, IL 61048

Abstract

Human resources may not be the most enjoyable topic for bovine veterinarians. However, human resource knowledge is important for building a cohesive team of veterinarians, veterinary technicians and office staff members who can work together effectively. The goal of this presentation is to share some lessons learned as a new practice owner in our clinic that can hopefully be beneficial to other practice owners, as well as to future practice owners. People management is difficult, and it is even more difficult if there is no structure, mentorship or effective communication.

Key words: culture, personality assessment, communication, teamwork, conflict

Introduction

The fast-paced chaos of veterinary practice can burn out team members if there is no business structure in place. Having a business structure and vision for where the business is going can assist all veterinary practice team members in having purpose in every-day tasks. Employee onboarding can assist in setting new associate veterinarians as well as new employees up for success. Maintaining a positive clinic culture is much more enjoyable for every team member to work in, compared to a toxic work environment. Positive clinic culture fosters teamwork, and good teamwork improves efficiency and therefore improves profitability. Despite having an overall good culture in a veterinary practice, conflict still arises. Preventing and mitigating conflict is essential to maintaining a positive clinic culture.

Business structure

A veterinary practice is still a business just like any other business. Therefore, a veterinary practice requires an ownership structure, management structure, a clearly communicated business vision, and a written employee manual.

Who is the boss?

The Lena Veterinary Clinic has 8 partners in total. In the past, employees did not know who to report to in a chain of command. If an employee wanted a request granted, such as a vacation request, they would just ask their “favorite” owner who would always say “yes” no matter the situation. With no formal management structure, the veterinarian who automatically granted a request might not know the staff schedule implications of the decision. Is that employee already over on vacation time? Is there enough employee coverage for that employee to be gone that day? Is there already another employee who was granted vacation time on that day? It is much smoother to have one of the owners manage the vacation requests and work with the lead technician that makes the schedule to adjust the schedule accordingly. Not all veterinarians are plumbers, contractors, or electricians either. However, water heaters stop working, light bulbs need changing, and haul-in facilities need repairs. When there is a bystander effect, everyone thinks one of the other owners will take care of these maintenance repairs.

After an AABP Building Excellence in Rural Veterinary Practice workshop, our clinic developed an ownership and leadership flowchart. The formal structure of this flowchart clearly shows which business partner is responsible for business operations, associate veterinarian management, staff management, facilities and maintenance needs, and management at a satellite small animal clinic. The flowchart also clearly displays the chain of command for veterinary technicians and office staff on who they need to report to when they need to discuss a human resource issue. The formal structure of the flowchart has assisted in removing bias, and allowing more consistent follow through to make sure issues are addressed in a timely manner.

What are we doing?

It is easy to get in the grind of herd health checks, surgeries, client phone calls, emergency calls, etc. and not even take the time to think about why everyone in the clinic is doing all this work. If veterinarians and employees do not know the vision for where the clinic is going, all the repetitive labor can become mundane. A clear mission statement for the clinic can set clear expectations for everyone on what customer service goals are expected, in addition to what the clinic values regarding ethics. Posting the mission statement around the clinic for employees to see can give them meaning in their work, and remind them of the clinic’s vision. It is also beneficial to have the mission statement posted on the clinic website and in the clinic where clients can see it. Clients can then understand what sets your veterinary practice apart from other practices. Having scheduled veterinarian and staff meetings can keep everyone on the same page with clear and timely communication. A printed agenda ahead of time can help everyone remain focused on the topics that need to be covered. To keep discussion productive and to accomplish meetings efficiently, each topic on the agenda should have a time limit. Each topic on the agenda should also have an action point on what needs to be accomplished, who is assigned to complete that task, and when it needs to be completed. Clear action points assist with follow through immensely.

Employee handbook

Every veterinary practice should have a written employee handbook that has been put together or at least reviewed by an attorney. It is recommended to have the employee handbook reviewed by an attorney once a year.¹ An employee handbook should have job descriptions and objective employee expectations. Important policies to include in the employee handbook include a sexual harassment policy, maternity leave and disability policy, as well as grounds for termination. Timekeeping, overtime, paid time off, unpaid time off, and bereavement policies are also necessary policies to include in an employee handbook. Employees and their supervisors should sign and date the employee handbook once a year and keep it on file. Having an unbiased employee handbook with an employee signature is beneficial to have when addressing an issue with that employee.

New employee onboarding

The most critical human resource responsibility is giving new employees a foundation to become successful in the veterinary practice, and bringing in new people that fit the clinic culture.

Hiring process

The people working in a practice determine the culture. Spending time upfront to hire team players who will meet performance expectations can save time and prevent a toxic culture in the future. Always check with employee references during the hiring process. The information gained in talking with references can be just as productive, if not more informational, than the job interview itself. It is important to have open-ended interview questions already prepared for the job interview. Use the same interview questions for all job candidates interviewing for the same job opening to eliminate bias. Candidates who do well with the interview and have good input from references should come in for a skills assessment. It is important to call it a skills assessment instead of a working interview, because in some states, candidates are required to be paid for a working interview.² Communicate with job candidates in a timely manner so they are not left hanging. If a really good job candidate is left without communication for too long, they will most likely have taken another position by the time correspondence occurs. When making a job offer, make sure to make a competitive offer with added employee benefits in addition to a fair wage. When hiring associate veterinarians, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) website has a salary calculator to determine a competitive salary.³ The AVMA salary calculator takes into account year of graduation, geographic location, practice type, if a residency was completed, board certification status, and whether or not the candidate is a practice owner.

Timely feedback

It is imperative to always give honest feedback in the moment, but especially with new employees and new veterinarians. New veterinarians are on a steep learning curve, and timely feedback in the moment can help mold them for their entire career. Feedback does not need to consist entirely of constructive criticism, it can include positive remarks to strengthen the confidence of the new veterinarian as well.

New employees should have a 30-day and 90-day review in which their supervisor takes the time to sit down with them for a formal review. Every employee should have a formal annual review. An annual review is more effective if continuous feedback is given in the moment throughout the year. It is beneficial to incorporate open ended stay interview questions into annual reviews. For example:

- What is the most difficult part of your job right now?
- How can we make your job easier?
- What is your biggest concern about your job right now?
- What do you like best about your job?

If an employee does decide to quit, it is a good opportunity to learn why the employee does not want to work at the clinic anymore with an exit interview. The information gained in an exit interview can potentially improve clinic culture and prevent future employees from leaving. An exit interview is comparable to performing a necropsy to evaluate what caused an animal to die, and evaluate if it is a herd level problem that can be addressed to save other animals.

Mentorship

According to the AVMA, mentorship is the most important decision in choosing to work at a clinic; even more important than location, compensation or benefits. In the AVMA's annual survey of graduating seniors, 84% of 2022 graduates indicated that a desire for mentorship played a role in their job decision.⁴ As a practice owner, or even as a more experienced associate veterinarian, help out the new employees whenever possible! Be approachable and do not be condescending when giving feedback or constructive criticism. Answer the phone when a new associate is calling with a question or if they are calling because they need help with a situation. It is mutually beneficial for new veterinarians and for the service provided to clients when a more experienced veterinarian is a back-up on call for a recent graduate veterinarian. It is difficult to get experience with certain emergencies such as a uterine prolapse or a difficult dystocia until they actually occur when a new associate is on call. Certain emergencies are difficult for even the most seasoned practitioner. Having a more experienced back-up gives the new associate a sense of security that someone can come help with a difficult situation if they are unable to complete the task with the skillset they currently have. In addition to a back-up on call, go to surgeries such as a left sided displaced abomasum with a new associate until the associate is comfortable and proficient at the surgery. New veterinarians need to push themselves through the uncomfortable growing pains as they learn at a fast pace in their first few years of practice. However, having the support and proper mentorship will make the learning process more productive, and allow the new veterinarian to learn the proper way on how to complete procedures instead of establishing bad habits without any mentor oversight. Set recent graduate associates up for success with clients by getting them proficient in their work so clients can have confidence in them. In addition, if a new veterinarian does make a mistake, stand up and defend the new veterinarian. If a senior veterinarian in a practice does not have confidence in a new veterinarian in front of clients, then the clients will not have confidence in the new veterinarian either. It is challenging to retain an associate in a practice if clients do not trust them or have confidence in them. Proper mentorship goes a long way.

Maintaining positive culture

Teamwork

To maintain a positive culture in a clinic, the people in the clinic need to work as a team. As the saying goes, teamwork makes the dream work. An excellent book on teamwork is *The Ideal Team Player* by Patrick Lencioni.⁵ This book discusses the ideal team player in a business as humble, hungry and smart. Coworkers do not want to work with someone who is arrogant or condescending. If all the team members in a clinic are hungry with a strong work ethic, the service provided to clients is outstanding. In addition, people are more willing to help out a team member that is working as hard as they are. Smart team members with adequate communication skills and emotional intelligence can avoid a lot of misunderstandings. It is critical to have empathy, and evaluate situations from another person's perspective. Possible ways to work as a team include trading on-call shifts when someone needs a switch, or sharing undesirable calls evenly. For example, the same veterinarian should not have to do every lame cow or dystocia that gets called into the clinic. Share the non-appealing work evenly. Many employees and veterinarians have children, and creating a family friendly environment

within the clinic also fosters positive culture. Non-traditional schedule flexibility is an example on how to work with employees or veterinarians who have childcare requirements.

Employee appreciation

An employee who feels valued is more productive as well as more loyal to the business. A simple “good morning” or “how is it going” goes a long way. Frequent communication touch points with employees displays that their upper management is engaged and truly cares about them. Unanticipated acts of appreciation such as randomly providing lunch or sweets for the team can boost morale. Handwritten thank you notes are a genuine way to express gratitude to team members. Team building activities outside of work such as a clinic Christmas party or summer cookout is another way to exhibit employee appreciation and build comradery. If an employee is going above and beyond their expected job performance, recognize it and reward the extra effort.

DISC personality assessment

Understanding that different team members have different personalities can set realistic expectations on what to expect from team members as far as directness, openness, pace and priority. It is advantageous to clinic culture to have every team member take a DISC personality assessment. The 4 main types of personality groups are dominance (D), influence (I), steadiness (S) and conscientious (C).⁶ Every person has a main personality type, but can have a combination of all 4 personality types and fall on the assessment between the various personality types. Directness is the amount of control and forcefulness a person attempts to exercise over situations or others' thoughts and emotions. Openness is the readiness and willingness with which a person outwardly shows emotions or feelings and develops interpersonal relationships. Pace is the speed at which people tend to proceed in their communications and in their relationships. Priority is the priority that a person places between completing the task at hand and building or maintaining relationships with others. Regarding priority, people are either more task-oriented or more people-oriented.

Below is the summary of the 4 main types of personalities:

- D = faster paced and task-oriented team members that express direct and guarded behaviors
- I = faster paced and people-oriented team members that express direct and open behaviors
- S = slower paced and people-oriented team members that express indirect and open behaviors
- C = slower paced and task-oriented team members that express indirect and guarded behaviors

Different personality types interacting together can be a point of contention and lead to conflict. However, understanding which personality type a team member possesses can be helpful with conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution

The longer a disagreement or resentment smolders, the worse the conflict explosion that eventually results. It may be uncomfortable, but to maintain positive culture in the workplace, one must run toward conflict and address it head-on. There are 2 fundamental ways to prevent and resolve conflict. The first, promote openness and honesty in communications. Speak the truth, even when it is difficult or awkward. The second, set clear expectations. People cannot read minds, be clear on what performance is expected from a team member.

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