

# 5 Steps to the Perfect Team

Building a practice team that works well together is the key to efficiency



This article is the second in a series of four to help build efficiency in your practice. Watch for future articles focusing on efficiency in reaching out to clients and in efficient processes for maintaining inventory and financial records.

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

**The schemer, the thinker, the dreamer—that's you!** You have a dream for an effective and efficient veterinary practice.

What does it take to make that dream come true?

Of course, it takes an effective and efficient team. Building such a team involves five elements: (1) the right people; (2) a unifying vision; (3) team cohesion; (4) a culture of continuous improvement and; (5) effective and efficient communication.

Might of the roaring boiler,  
Force of the engine's thrust,  
Strength of the sweating toiler—  
Greatly in these we trust.  
But back of them stands the Schemer,  
The Thinker who drives things through;  
Back of the job—the Dreamer  
Who's making the dream come true!

BY BERTON BRALEY<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Recruit and hire the right people

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, advised business owners to “get the right people on the bus.”

First, you have to decide what number of people you need and with what skills. Bo Williamson, DVM, who has been buying practices and hiring staff

for over 30 years, points out that the staff needed will vary depending on the type of practice and its location. For example, he says, the average practice, receiving \$150–\$200 per transaction, needs a doctor, a practice manager, a registered technician, a receptionist, and maybe an assistant. If, however, you are receiving \$350–\$600 per transaction, you will need more staff. Also, if your staff members

are young and less experienced, you may need more staff.<sup>2</sup>

Next, you'll need to compose a job description for each team member, whether the position is full- or part-time. That's a big job, but, as said by Katherine Dobbs, RVT, CVPM, PHR, of InterFace Veterinary HR Systems, LLC, "this simple human resource tool will also be important in letting candidates know exactly the job for which they are applying. It can be useful again when creating your training program, your performance evaluation form, and as a reminder to get back on track for good performance."<sup>3</sup>

Whether hiring a kennel assistant or veterinary assistant, the job description should be specific. What is to be done and how is it to be done? What education, training, and skills are needed—including soft skills, such as compassion and cooperation? Are there limitations of responsibility or authority?

Williamson's advice when hiring a receptionist is to look for someone with ample experience with technology. This person should know how to use a cell phone, computer, and applications such as Facebook and Twitter.

When hiring a technician, he says that you want someone who has interest

in gathering an animal's history and who demonstrates technical skills like drawing blood and using lab equipment. This should also be someone who is willing to learn constantly. "It's a bonus," he says, "if that person is someone who is personable in the exam room."

The assistant, says Williamson, is admittedly at the bottom of the staff ladder and must be someone who is willing to help and show interest in learning. "The right attitude is the most important trait," he says.

Chuck Keiser, DVM, who also has been buying hospitals with Williamson and hiring personnel, believes that even more important than skills are character traits and a candidate's work ethic. He stresses the importance of checking references and doing background checks covering the candidate's credit, criminal record, and use of alcohol and drugs. Keiser founded My Veterinary Career to provide this service and claims that practices that hired through this service enjoyed only a 2% turnover in their staff, as compared to the industry rate of 30%.<sup>4</sup>

#### **A team approach to selecting new members**

To increase the likelihood that your existing staff members will embrace the new employee, you will want them to participate in the selection of a new employee. Employees representing a cross-section of your staff can constitute a recruitment committee and interview the candidates as a group.

At the West Ridge Animal Hospital in Greeley, Colo., Hospital Director Marta Wilkinson says that the recruitment committee evaluates the candidates and selects finalists for a so-called

## Hiring—What to Consider:

- The needs of your practice
- A written job description
- Fair and equitable salary and benefits
- Recruitment announcements
- Background checks
- Staff involvement in selection
- Review of letter of application, resume, transcript, and references
- Interview questions and process
- Follow up with finalists

## Resources for Recruiting the "Right" Person:

- Exemplary veterinary practices
- Veterinary schools (especially your alma mater)
- AAHA Career Center ([aahanet.org](http://aahanet.org))
- My Veterinary Career ([myveterinarycareer.com](http://myveterinarycareer.com))
- LinkedIn
- Craigslist
- Journal or Internet ads
- Your fellow professionals
- [WhereTechsConnect.com](http://WhereTechsConnect.com)
- *Job Descriptions and Training Schedules for the Veterinary Team*, by James F. Wilson, DVM, JD, and Karen Gendron, DVM, available from AAHA

shadowing interview. The finalists each, in turn, follow one or two staff members for a few hours. They learn more about the clinic and the job. The staff members become better acquainted with the candidate, the questions he or she asks, information the candidate shares, and the candidate's attitude or personality. The input from these staff members is extremely helpful when making the hiring decision.<sup>5</sup>

Since the staff will eventually have to accept, orient, and train the new member, they have a vested interest in the selection. If they are in a profit-sharing organization, they know that their share will go down unless they hire someone they trust to be the right person.

## 2. Ensure buy-in from all team members to embrace the practice's vision

An efficient clinic is one in which everyone is pulling together. It's one in which all of the staff members have the skills to accomplish the goals of the practice and commitment to the vision of what the practice will become.

Goals and vision will vary. For example, Williamson purchased a small-animal practice in which his goal was to expand the practice by adding services specific to large animals. That goal was quite different from that of a struggling practice that he bought, in which the goal was to make the practice more financially sound.

Maybe your practice wants to provide the most up-to-date, state-of-the-art medical care. Maybe you want to be known as the most economical provider in the area. Maybe you want

## Informal Team Building Ideas:

- Celebrate birthdays, awards, new arrivals, and departures from your staff—any excuse for a party.
- Gather lore about your practice, and share the history and stories about the founder, a specialist who served you, or an unforgettable pet owner.
- Play games to get better acquainted. Ask all staff members to say one thing about themselves that may not already be known by the other staff members.
- Take time to go offsite for a half-day, day, or weekend.
- Read more in *Trends magazine*: “Put Steam in Your Team,” September, 2012

to be known for prompt and friendly service. Perhaps your vision is to be known for lifelong care of pets with a focus on prevention.

If your vision was in place and well-articulated when everyone was hired, your job is relatively easy. If, on the other hand, you inherited staff members through a buyout or merger, you will have to start at the beginning to enlist all team members in defining your goal and the vision for your practice. As future staff members are hired, there will be an opportunity to ensure that he or she buys in when hired and witnesses the implementation of the goal and vision when coming on board.

To put the struggling practice on a sound financial footing, Williamson reduced the number of staff members and then leveraged his snappiest workers to train those who did not work as fast. He coupled this strategy with ongoing training. He would eventually bring in new hires with efficient work skills.

To be known for lifelong care, you want staff members who understand the difference between what Lowell J. Ackerman, DVM, DACVD, MBA, MPA, refers to as the transactional/retail

model and a health-driven model. In the latter, it is important for your staff to be proactive instead of reactive and to know how to recognize problems early, even in their subclinical stage.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the vision, it should be revealed on your website and in blogs or handouts. Staff and clients will talk about it on social media sites. Internally, protocols will ensure consistency. As the vision is implemented, you will examine what each staff member says or does, starting with the receptionist and ending with the senior veterinarian, and you will regularly assess staff compliance with your standards of care. An analysis of the clinic will find that the vision is at work from the moment a potential client calls or visits to the time a pet dies.

## 3. Build a smoothly operating, cohesive team

When things go smoothly, a lot gets done. When time is spent fixing things, resolving conflicts, or reiterating policies that have not been understood or honored, time is wasted and efficiency suffers.

One veterinarian tells of the time she discovered that a pet owner had been given a prescription with the

wrong dosage due to an improper entry into the medical record. She got the proper prescription and drove to the pet owner's house to apologize and correct the matter. That was a wonderful way to right a wrong and showed care and compassion for the pet owner, but it wasn't efficient.

How does your clinic avoid mistakes and needless rework? Aside from getting the right people on the bus, you want to build a staff of people committed to helping each other to learn and serve together.

Building a team out of disparate individuals isn't automatic. It takes work and requires establishing a collaborative climate—one that does not blame people for mistakes but, instead, rewards them for reporting mistakes.

Given the many demands placed on team members each day, it's difficult to find time for anything but the essentials. However, Ackerman says, "Take the time to build staff alignment."

Establish a workplace in which staff members look forward to coming to work and are eager to assist their colleagues in getting things done. This means finding ways to enhance good relationships and remembering that whenever a new person comes into the practice, the dynamic of the group changes and it's necessary to build anew and reinforce the cultural norms of cooperation and trust.

Staff meetings and open discussions about your vision and procedures go a long way toward building a cohesive team. Regular training, through staff meetings or special workshops, also helps to keep everyone up to speed. And don't overlook the importance of

an employee handbook, well-written and well-enforced across the staff.

It's also wise to take time for informal activities that are unrelated to the business of veterinary care but designed to build a team spirit. Williamson says that he spends the first 30 minutes of each weekly 90-minute staff meeting on personal sharing like: "Talk about your first date," or "Describe your favorite car and why it's your favorite," or "What do you remember from your third-grade year?"

#### 4. Instill a culture of continuous improvement

There is much to know in the veterinary business. To work efficiently, it is imperative that everyone is on the same page with the latest and greatest knowledge and skills. This means offering ongoing opportunities for training and development and a strong mentoring program—covering medical information and implementation, efficient procedures and protocol, and soft skills.

"My passion for animal care has flourished here at West Ridge." That is a comment by one of the staff members at the West Ridge Animal Hospital, where such a large number of the employees learned so much at West Ridge that they were motivated to leave to attend veterinary school. The hospital has become known for enabling and encouraging its employees to grow in the profession. The hospital director admits that this means frequently having to replace staff members and orient new ones.

Aside from an orientation week, when new staff members shadow someone in each of the hospital's areas, the new hires watch various Avimark

videos—maybe about restraint or vaccinations. In addition, new staff members, along with existing staff, engage in a homework assignment every 2 weeks. Each employee has a three-ring binder in which he or she keeps the assignments. For example: Report on the hospital's standard operating procedures related to surgical appointments and summarize some experience you have had with the SOP. Designed by the area managers, these assignments keep everyone learning or reviewing.

Ongoing training must be central to your practice to ensure that your staff can provide the kind of hospital service you want your clients to enjoy. The types and frequency of training will depend on your goals and vision, the size of your staff, and your budget.

Effective training programs can be offsite at conferences and training schools. Or they can be onsite, tailored to your needs with invited trainers and consultants or the use of videos and webinars.

Many times your own staff can provide the expertise to inform or update their colleagues. Wendy Hauser, DVM, explains how this has worked for her. Having experienced practice ownership and now working with practice owners to facilitate their success, she describes how she has often identified a staff member doing something exceptionally well and asked that person to describe his or her expertise. It might be the way the staff member explained a treatment plan to a client or a procedure that others need to understand.<sup>7</sup>

Williamson makes this a regular part of his weekly staff meetings. "The staff member researches a procedure

## Training Resources:

### Offsite:

- The annual AAHA Conference
- Courses offered by AAHA's education division
- Courses given by board-certified specialists, such as the veterinary dental classes offered by Tony Woodward, DVM, AVDC, at the Colorado Pet Central Training Center

### Onsite:

- AAHA books
- Graduates of the American College of Veterinary Anesthesia and Analgesia
- Board-certified specialists
- Consultants such as:
  - Frankie Williams, MAOM, Williams Consulting and Coaching Group, [FrankieWilliams.com](http://FrankieWilliams.com)
  - Debbie Boone, BS, CCS, CVPM, 2ManageVets, [www.dboone2managevets.com](http://www.dboone2managevets.com)
  - Wendy Hauser, DVM, member of AAHA Board of Directors, faculty of the AAHA ExCEllence Series, clinical communication practice coach at CSU. [Wendyhauser@msn.com](mailto:Wendyhauser@msn.com)
  - Cindy Hauser, former veterinary practice manager, currently consulting with Beacon Strategic [Chauser75@gmail.com](mailto:Chauser75@gmail.com)
- Video training:
  - AVImark, [AVImark.net](http://AVImark.net)
  - Animal Care Technologies, [site4ACT.com](http://site4ACT.com)
  - AAHA's videos, such as "How We Do Things Here: Developing and Teaching Office-Wide Protocols," by Nan Boss, DVM
  - AAHA's periodic webinars, such as "Vector-Borne Diseases: What Tests to Run and What to Do With the Results," with Adam Birkenheuer, DVM, PhD, DACVIM

## Communication Training Resources:

### Offsite:

- FRANK Communication Series, [www.zoetisus.com/services&programs](http://www.zoetisus.com/services&programs)

### Onsite:

- Jep Enck ([enckresources.com](http://enckresources.com)), who trains in the Argus Institute at Colorado State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital
- Carolyn Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD, with Interpersonal Communication Services, Inc., using cases and providing skill-building workshops that center upon reflective listening, I-messages, and collaborative conflict resolution, [www.ICSinco.info](http://www.ICSinco.info)
- Wendy Myers, Communication Solutions for Veterinarians, [csvets.com](http://csvets.com)

### Books:

- *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality*, by Danny Meyer. Published by HarperCollins, 2006.
- *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service*, by Performance Research Associates, Inc. Published by AMACOM, 2012.
- *Communication Case Studies: Building Interpersonal Skills in the Veterinary Practice*, by Carolyn Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD. Published by AAHA, 2011.

The types and frequency of training will depend on your goals and vision, the size of your staff, and your budget.



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and writes it out for everyone. It's wonderful to see how people step up when they are asked to do so." One of the best ways to learn something is to teach it to another.

Reviewing or reading a text together can also be a useful and inexpensive training process. If you're looking for a text related to medical care, try *Chronic Pain in Small Animal Medicine*, by Steven M. Fox, MS, DVM, MBA, PhD.

Another excellent training process is mentoring. "Mentoring is a method to improve hospital culture, productivity, and efficiency," wrote John Tait, DVM, MBA, MS, CFP, Frances "Frankie" Williams, MAOM, and others. There are many types of relationships between mentor and mentee: formal, informal, virtual, face-to-face, or peer-to-peer, some involving extra compensation and some not. In any case, success is most likely when both parties have an agreement

(written or verbal) outlining their clear understanding of expectations.<sup>8</sup>

According to Tait, who advises mentoring, not as a peripheral function but a core one, for new vets in particular, "the return on investment is a new grad's ability to integrate into the practice, be more confident, and [be] better at coping and responding."<sup>9</sup>

The clinic with a culture and reputation for providing continuing education not only builds an effective and efficient team but also may have a competitive edge in attracting new employees.

## 5. Ensure positive and effective communication among staff members

Can your staff members make suggestions without sounding bossy? Can they listen to others' points of view without being defensive? When they explain a procedure, do they spray what they know as if through a fire hose, or can they pause to see if others understand? Can your staff members confront other team members who aren't pulling their weight without offending?

We all communicate—verbally and nonverbally—every day, but taking time to explore the impact of our words and our body language should be an important part of your staff training and development. Improved skills related to how to communicate so that others will listen, and awareness of how to listen (instead of simply to hear), will enhance not only staff relationships but also relationships with clients and potential clients.

Offsite communication training is available, notably the FRANK Veterinarian-Client Communication Initiative training offered through the

Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital. The focus of this program is helping veterinary staff to build collaborative relationships, to be frank in their dealings, even when it's not easy, and to listen empathically.

Training can also be done onsite. Numerous resources are available from Communication Solutions for Veterinarians, owned by Wendy Myers. In addition to seminars, webinars, and books, her organization offers onsite training in phone skills and other vet-client communication. Another resource for onsite training is *Communication Case Studies: Improving Interpersonal Skills in the Veterinary Practice*, by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD, (also the authors of this article) published by AAHA Press. With this resource, staff can read and discuss cases that mirror common practice conflicts or mishaps, or they can have fun role-playing. These realistic, but fictional, cases highlight communication skills that are needed.

Various outside trainers are available to assist with communication skill-building. The staff will then be prepared to discuss real clinic situations and how to better handle them.

Other inspiring resources marry communication training with a focus on customer service. Since each staff member is the customer to each other staff member, and clients are all customers, many veterinary practices have found insights from *Setting the Table*, by Danny Meyer, to be useful.

Meyer's book describes what it means to listen and put the customer first and is based on the author's experience in the restaurant business. Debbie Boone, BS, CCS, DVPM, who



learned customer service from her family's restaurant business, now trains veterinary staff and recommends reading *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service*, which is an update of the well-known series by the late Ron Zemke.

Whatever your vision, your staff is in the business of service, and your communication training will facilitate that. John Sheridan, owner and publisher of Veterinary Practice, says that veterinary practices "can be confident about the future... If they are run as efficient and effective businesses with emphasis on service."<sup>10</sup>

You'll have that efficient practice when you (1) hire the right people, (2) unify your staff around your vision, (3)

build a cohesive team, (4) develop a culture of continuous improvement, and (5) practice effective and efficient communication.

Reach your dream. ✨

**Footnotes:**

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2. Williamson, B. *Ventures in Veterinary Acquisitions (vivavetpractice.com)* (telephone interview 4/7/14).
3. "Veterinary Human Resources" newsletter, March 23, 2014.
4. Keiser, C. *Ventures in Veterinary Acquisitions (vivavetpractice.com)*; telephone interview 4/7/14.
5. Wilkinson, M. West Ridge Animal Hospital, Greeley, Colo., telephone interview, 4/4/14.

6. Ackerman, L.J. board-certified veterinarian.
7. Hauser, W. Email, 2/8/14.
8. AAHA Mentoring Guidelines," *Trends magazine*, May/June 2008, research by A. Roark and J. Wilson in "The real value and cost of mentorship", *dvm360.com, DVM News Magazine*, October 1, 2005, pp 22-26.
9. Email from John Tait, 4/3/14.
10. VetPartners online blog, 3/23/14.



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