

Career Challenges



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So You've Been Promoted to Management... Now What?

Twenty-five years ago, the concept of having a supervisor in every department or a practice manager was new to veterinary practices. Practice owners wanted some level of management support but often did not know how to go about achieving that goal. Veterinary practice management continuing education (CE) opportunities were just emerging and frequently involved travel. Therefore, new veterinary practice managers were limited to general management seminars on customer service and communication that were marginally beneficial. The lack of veterinary management training and resources meant that we had to learn from our mistakes—and we made a lot!

The practice manager profession has come a long way. Today, many practices have multiple levels of supervision and management. Robust veterinary practice management groups, management resources, associations, and an abundance of CE offerings are available. However, for those who did not consciously set out to be practice managers, the transition into a management role can still be a rocky one. If you have been promoted to a management role within your practice and are still wondering how to tackle your new position—or if you think you might be



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THE BEST MANAGERS AND LEADERS see themselves as capable of bringing positive change and energy to the practice as a whole. They accomplish goals and drive the practice in the right direction, not on their own, but with the combined efforts of their team.

● TECHPOINT ●

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on that path—don't panic! Know that there are many resources to help you learn management skills, and even your mistakes can be opportunities to improve.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

What is it that motivates one to want a management role in a veterinary practice? Most of us never considered it as an option when we entered the profession as a veterinary technician, a receptionist, a pet care attendant, or even a doctor. So how does it happen? Sometimes, it is simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time to consider the offer. Although outside candidates can bring great experience with them, many practice owners look to their current team when selecting managers and supervisors. Promoting from within allows for upward movement and growth within the practice, and practice leadership can be the appropriate progression for many who have worked their way through multiple positions in the practice, have earned more responsibility, and have a desire to manage.

Perhaps, if you are a newly promoted manager, you have served in another role in the practice for a long time—a role you were probably very good at. You have a lot of experience, but not in your new field of management. Maybe you're asking yourself: What exactly is my new role? What does "management" really mean?

As a manager, you are now a practice leader. Practice leaders have a high level of responsibility: achieving the goals and vision of the practice. The practice owner may be the one setting the goals and vision, but the manager and leadership team are the ones leading the effort.

SO YOU'VE BEEN PROMOTED...NOW WHAT?

Learn the Ropes

Training, guidance, authority, and support are necessary for any manager to succeed. Unfortunately, these tools are not always automatically included with promotion. If you've been given the job without the background, you may need to take charge of educating yourself and asking for help from your supervisor. **BOX 1** lists some useful resources to get you started, and **BOX 2** provides several tips that you can put into practice immediately.

Show Your Integrity

It can be difficult to transition into a role where you are managing peers and coworkers with whom you already have personal relationships. You now have a responsibility to hold them accountable, making sure their performance, attendance, and conduct meet the expectations of the practice owner. To succeed, you need to gain their trust and respect, not just for your veterinary knowledge, but as a person and a leader. Respect is something you earn, and it takes time.

Gaining the respect of a team is an issue every new manager faces, but in your case, it may be complicated by the challenge of changing your existing bonds with team members and the way they perceive you. Perception goes a long way in shaping your success when managing people. The team's perception of you as a person may be even more important than your skills and technical knowledge when it comes to respect. Honesty, ethics, and integrity are important characteristics for anyone in a leadership role. Even more importantly, they must be seen in action.

Be Firm, Fair, and Consistent

Favoritism, whether perceived or real, can be a challenge for any manager. Especially as someone who has worked in the practice before becoming a manager, you are likely to relate to some employees better than others—those with whom you have connected on a personal level. You need to be aware of how you address and treat your friends and make sure that you deal with all the people you manage consistently. Even the fairest of managers can

BOX 1 Resources for New Practice Managers

- Ackerman L. *Blackwell's Five-Minute Veterinary Practice Management Consult*. Wiley-Blackwell; 2013.
- Heinke M. *Practice Made Perfect: A Complete Guide to Veterinary Practice Management*. AAHA Press; 2012.
- Opperman M, Grosdidier S. *The Art of Veterinary Practice Management*. Advanstar Communications; 2014.
- Veterinary Hospital Managers Association. VHMA.org.

BOX 2 Tips to Help New Managers Adjust and Succeed

- **Ask for a complete and comprehensive job description.** It should detail your roles and responsibilities as well as the expectations of the practice owners. Clearly defined authority and autonomy are required to do your job effectively.
- **Master the practice management software** as soon as possible. You need to be fully proficient in every aspect.
- **Learn the job of every employee** in every department you manage. You will have a better understanding of the challenges in each department, get to know each employee, and be able to step in and help out when needed.
- **Carve out uninterrupted management time.** It is very difficult to fulfill all of the duties of a manager when you are a full-time veterinary technician. Your clients and patients will always come first while important management duties are neglected. If you have to split your time, schedule yourself appropriately. You don't want to have the feeling that wherever you are that day, you should be somewhere else.
- **Lead by example.** Put yourself on the schedule and show up on time. Don't be a "do as I say, not as I do" manager.
- **Dress the part.** Don't wear scrubs to work when you are not scheduled to be on the floor. Doctors and coworkers will be less likely to pull you away from your management duties if you are dressed in a "business professional" manner.
- **Acknowledge your team.** Make sure to give credit where credit is due.
- **Learn to delegate.** You can't do it all. Identify those on the team who are willing and capable. You will never feel comfortable taking time off if you feel like you are the only one who can get the job done.
- **Don't overdo it.** Except in cases of a true emergency, go home at the end of your shift. Learn to prioritize, and remember that everything will be there when you get back the following day. Working excessive hours week after week will lead straight to burnout.
- **Establish ground rules** regarding phone calls at home after hours. If it is a true emergency, staff can call you at any time. If it can wait until the next day, or if there is nothing you can do about the situation at that time, a call is likely not appropriate. Train your team to know the difference.
- **Take advantage** of veterinary practice management and leadership CE opportunities whenever possible. National, state, and local conferences and meetings, webinars, and online courses and programs are all options.
- **Read** as many veterinary practice management articles, journals, and books as you can get your hands on.
- **Get involved** with your local practice managers' group and national associations such as the Veterinary Hospital Managers Association.

be perceived as "playing favorites." Do your best to keep your work and personal lives separate.

On the other side of the coin, it is important to be friendly with the people you work with, but you don't have to be everyone's friend. Inevitably, you will be called on to resolve an employee conflict. Depending on your personal relationship with individual employees, you may be tempted to avoid the conflict or confrontation in the hope that it will resolve with time. This generally doesn't happen, and as the manager, it is your responsibility to address the issue head on. The longer you wait, the more difficult the solution will be. Although it can be difficult to hold coworkers accountable, especially those with whom you have a good relationship, you cannot ignore problem employee performance or behavior, no matter who the employee is. You need to be firm, fair, and consistent in upholding the values and rules of the practice to achieve its goals and vision.

Be a Leader, Not "the Boss"

Good managers take a genuine interest in the people in their organization. Without that interest, you will have a difficult time keeping people and their performance in perspective. The best managers and leaders see themselves as capable of bringing positive change and energy to the practice as a whole. They accomplish goals and drive the practice in the right direction, not on their own, but with the combined efforts of their team. Ultimately, your success as a manager shows in the team's performance. Don't think of yourself as "the boss," but rather as the leader of a cohesive team.

CONCLUSION

Management is not for the faint of heart. It will likely be the hardest—and, potentially, the most rewarding—job you have ever had. Be the type of manager you would respect and follow, and you will find success in your new and exciting role within the practice. ■