

MONEY MATTERS

Who's Your Go-to Person?

A manager is an excellent solution for a do-everything practice owner hoping to spend more time on patient care.

BY LESLIE A. MAMALIS, MBA, MSIT, CVA

Lately, many great conversations center on utilizing veterinary nurses to their full potential. I wholeheartedly support encouraging these capable individuals to put their education to maximum use. But now, let's talk about practice managers. Do you have one? If so, do you make the most of this leader's strengths to help advance your goals?

Every week, I talk with overburdened practice owners who "just want to be a doctor." A good hospital manager can make it happen to the point that remaining both a practice owner and clinician is a workable option. Talented practice managers optimize the owner-veterinarian's time by running the business side of the operations.

Managers have diverse responsibilities and qualifications. Finding one person who embodies every quality and skill needed to manage the business can be challenging. The good news is you don't need a single person. Instead, you can take a team approach to practice management. The team will consist of people inside the hospital and perhaps outside experts like a bookkeeper or accountant, a marketing firm, and an IT management company.

What Needs Solving?

If you, the practice owner, don't have a manager, where do you start? First, identify the issues that keep you up at night and prevent you from being a productive veterinarian. Is it managing people? Tracking the financials? Marketing? Delegate the responsibilities to someone (or more than one person) who can give the issues the appropriate time and attention. For example, you might appoint a great human resources manager who isn't great at inventory management. No problem. Someone else on the team can be the inventory manager, handle the bills and payroll, or serve as the social media expert. You can outsource specific responsibilities to vendors.



Just remember that delegation is not the same as abdication. You still play an active role in running the business, and you have the ultimate authority but less responsibility.

Some practices have informal managers but don't know it. For example, has one employee become your go-to person, someone who is always nearby when you need something done and who completes projects with little oversight? Does someone pitch in without being asked, soothe angry or distraught clients, and raise the team's spirits? This person could be your de facto manager if you would just grant the pay raise along with the responsibilities.

Managers Are Versatile

If you hire a manager from the outside, don't limit your search to someone with veterinary experience. While knowing veterinary terminology is helpful, someone who has proven inventory management experience, people skills and financial acumen is more important.

Regardless of where you find a manager, provide a continuing education allowance to support growth and professionalism. The more your manager learns, the better equipped the person is to promote the practice, ensure staff development and maintain profitability.

Absent a human resources department,

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managers can be the ultimate resource for the staff on compensation and benefits. They can take the lead on hiring, performance reviews, team motivation and discipline. Give them latitude in firing employees, too.

Managers act as a buffer between you and the rest of your staff. They resolve disputes between team members and provide direction on projects and tasks. They have a great sense of how the staff functions and can identify potential problems. Together, the two of you can decide how to address complicated issues and present a cohesive solution to the team.

Managers also ensure that the building and equipment are maintained, communicate with your accountant, payroll company and retirement plan agents, update employee and procedures manuals, oversee inventory, and guide social media and website updates. And what are you doing during all this? Seeing patients and “just” practicing veterinary medicine.

Maintain Oversight

Owner-veterinarians who micromanage their practices have trouble giving up control. Their tight hold on the reins keeps them unproductive and embroiled in day-to-day drama. Instead, learn to let go of “how things are done” and focus on the fact that things do get done.



LESLIE A. MAMALIS

The Money Matters columnist is the owner and senior consultant at Summit Veterinary Advisors. She is co-chair of the VetPartners Valuation Council. Learn more at summitveterinaryadvisors.com.

That will save you and your manager a lot of time and headaches.

Also, never publicly overrule your manager. You might not agree with every decision, but you can discuss the differences in private. You’ll undercut a manager’s authority if team members know that they can run to you when the manager says something they don’t like.

The two fatal mistakes that owners make with practice managers are:

- ▶ Not giving them your attention.
- ▶ Not having sufficient internal controls.

First, carve out time to meet with your manager. The two of you should work as a team that embodies the hospital’s core values and goals. You can’t accomplish that when you don’t talk regularly with the manager to discuss employee concerns, hospital priorities, the budget and everything else. Schedule meetings at least monthly — weekly is ideal — and stick to the schedule. If other things take precedence over spending time with your manager, you’ll undermine the person’s authority with the staff and trust in you.

Second, set up checks and balances to protect the practice’s finances. The more responsibility you place in the manager’s hands, the greater the need for internal controls. Yes, a manager who knows your bank and credit card logins makes work easier for you, but the manager is in a difficult position. If fraud is ever discovered, the manager will be an initial suspect because of the unrestricted access to your accounts.

Just as veterinary nurses are sometimes underutilized, managers should be encouraged to put their hard-earned skills to work. These talented people can rally the team, exemplify core values, manage the budget, and keep costs down and revenues up. With a good management team in place, the practice will see improvement in employee morale and team cohesiveness, increased client satisfaction and retention, and better business practices.

If you aren’t getting great results from your manager, discuss your expectations and invest in the person’s education. Then, leverage your manager to help you reduce the burden of owning your clinic. **TVB**