

Are you an Effective Veterinary Administrator?

Thomas E Catanzaro*

American College of Healthcare Executives, CEO, Veterinary Consulting International, Australia

*Corresponding author: Catanzaro TE, American College of Healthcare Executives, CEO, Veterinary Consulting International, Australia, Tel: +610416285975; E-mail: DrTomCat@aol.com

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Introduction

As a veterinary healthcare administrator, are you concerned about your career success or your team's success? Do you look forward to expanding your daily responsibilities, moving to a larger veterinary facility that will let you expand your capabilities, or are you focused on developing the team members to greater levels of participation? Are you an individual who is interested in increasing your own effectiveness right where you are so you can survive another year, or are you working toward a greater team effectiveness? There is probably nothing more interesting to an administrator than to increase your own capabilities and enhance your administrative effectiveness, yet nothing is more rewarding to an administrator than to see their team members grow and prosper. What is effectiveness for a veterinary healthcare professional?

The Prime Thrust

In health care, effectiveness resides in the ability to direct the veterinary practice resources by pinpointing the efforts of the paraprofessional team toward opportunities for significant results. In an administrator's development, this increases their personal leverage, allows the expansion of responsibilities and accountabilities, and makes the practice an effective veterinary healthcare delivery system in his/her community.

An effective administrator primarily focuses on opportunities rather than problems. Crisis management never moved a veterinary practice forward. Secondly, he/she puts effort into areas that have maximum impact on the effectiveness of the practice. Time is not mis-allocated to "process management," but rather, it is used to make the front door swing, the staff increase their pride, or do quality assurance "spot-checks" on cost benefit assessment of income centers. In veterinary practices across the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as elsewhere in the free world, there has been a fundamental confusion between efficiency and effectiveness. A good veterinary healthcare administrator wants to be effective, not just efficient.

Paraphrasing Peter Drucker, "The efficient veterinary practice manager focuses on doing things right for the veterinarian but the effective administrator focuses on doing the right things for the practice." The difference between doing things right and doing the right things is that the right things focus on what can increase the perception of wellness, caring, and service, while increasing the return of investment (time, staff and/or money). There is no need to hang on to sclerotic procedures, habits, or practices because "this is the way we have always done it around this practice." A good veterinary hospital administrator puts effort where there is a real contribution to the practice - not just be satisfied with activity and people being busy, but rather, helping individuals make something happen for the needed practice results.

An effective healthcare administrator is concerned with the wellness outcomes (satisfied clients, proud staff, and net income), continuous quality improvement (CQI) by the staff, and individuals being good rather than just looking good. They understand that the front door must swing for the practice to be a success, that transaction rates are more important than the value of an average transaction, and the "internal processes" must be fluid enough to promote client returns. Changes are made based on outcome evaluations, not input requirements.

How to use "Healthcare" in a Sentence

In the beginning of this article, I have used both "health care" and "healthcare". Are you confused with the modern usage?

I am a Life Fellow member of the American College of Healthcare Executives. Note that as an adjective, "healthcare" is one word.

Yet when care is the noun, health is the adjective, as in "ensuring effective health care stays client-centered while being a patient advocate."

I know of professional proof readers who do not know the difference, so do not worry about the small stuff - it is the actions, not the words, that make a great healthcare administrator.

Earmarks of the Downward Spiral

There are many practice-specific indicators of a failing veterinary hospital administrator, and they vary by practice and the practice owner, but there also a few universal signs to be concerned about:

1. **High turnover of staff** - if the veterinary practice is within 10 percent of the community "average" for turnover, the practice is in trouble. Veterinary practices should have turnover rates far below the community average because of the commitment of our teams to a caring profession.
2. **A reactor profile** - someone who lets occurrences, events, crises, and constant problems dissipate his/her time. Sometimes a reactor is concurrently an actor, and the action is masked. If there is a question about reacting to requests and events, evaluate the level of planning that occurs. Assess who is the one who thinks things through; specifically, who establishes preventive procedures that routinize events which allows other people to handle the issues in due course. A reactor does not plan objectives, does not set standards of performance ahead of time, does not know what good work is until they see it! They have not clearly communicated the practice needs or personal expectations.
3. **Demand for conformity** - a failing administrator needs emotional support for their authority. Often, disagreement is seen by

"managers" as a threat rather than an opportunity, so autocratic controls are established. Control of the environment becomes a primary goal of a panicked manager, rather than to get a return on the human assets invested. The old traditional "manager" is not after performance, they only want conformity; administrators look at the outcomes, not the process conformity. The manager delegates specific task processes, while the administrator clearly defines the expected outcome and lets the team members doing the job decide the process (within limits and operational expectations). Open communication is based on the degree of agreement, disagreement, or opposing viewpoints; some neophyte managers label this communication exchange as disturbing or counterproductive, while administrators call it using the resources of the group. The manager is a person who always shares the blame by assigning it someone else; the leader accepts accountability for the misadventures and nurtures the team.

4. **Lack of mistakes** - one of the worst signs for a veterinary practice administrator is maintaining the status quo. This is often caused by the veterinarian, but the practice reality is that it decreases initiative, avoids risk, and avoids confrontation. No one is willing to risk telling the manager anything. This person makes all the decisions and does not want new ideas. The staff waits for signals and signs from the manager before taking "safe" action. It is often manifested by people being really good at "whatever they are told to do" but never volunteering or taking initiative to make improvements.

Signs of a Winner

As with a failing administrator, successful administrators are those who exceed the expectations of the veterinarian/owner. The requirements are highly variable, but again, as with earmarks of the downward spiral, there are some common traits of winners:

1. **Accountability** - this is not accepting responsibility and authority for delegated tasks but rather it is a skillful veterinary practice administrator who looks beyond the task and process. This winner assigns outcome-oriented accountabilities that allow every team member to take ownership of some element of practice success. This continuous quality improvement (CQI) concept allows pride to become the individual's input while the client's perception of quality becomes the output.
2. **Commitment** - a winner commits to excellence; performance competency is equated with doing the best job possible. Some believe performance appraisals are based on a single standard of achievement for competency; gone are the days of fair-good-very good-excellent-outstanding. In fact, quarterly performance planning replaces performance appraisals in a team-centered culture. Sure, a single standard of performance is established for the task, not the individual. The veterinary practice's administrator accepts the commitment to ensure each team member is offered the opportunity to 1) train to a level of competency that sets the standard for the profession, 2) accept accountability for outcomes, and 3) establishes a culture of trust and mentoring for new horizons.
3. **Time management** - the effective veterinary facility administrator allocates time by investing it rather than spending it. They know what an hour of time is worth, to the veterinarian, to themselves, and even to staff members. They accept the fact that time does not stretch or shrink, and the skilled administrator sees time

management as simply scheduling events in a more effective manner. Overtime is well controlled and space is utilized by plan, not by tradition or chance. When time becomes dissipated by process, poor planning, inadequate space utilization, or crisis management, the performance of the administrator and staff is also dissipated. The skilled administrator understands there is a fourfold payback for training/planning time; one hour of planning saves at least four hours of mistakes and corrections.

4. **Guts to cut** - a competent and confident veterinary practice administrator should have the courage to amputate those activities, non-contributing projects and processes that dissipate time, waste resources, or frustrate the clients. There is nothing that will kill a career or personal effectiveness more than practice appendages that sap their strength. This is the role of the administrative surgeon, to cut wide, deep, and early to remove the cancer that can eat the practice from the inside. To stop people from doing things they are attached to, whether it be veterinarian or staff, requires a calculated and caring process of information sharing, negotiating slowly to form a discomfort with the habit, then to offer the alternative(s) that could solve the habit-based problem. These are the traits of an effective veterinary practice administrator.

Application Concepts

By definition, a leader gets things done through people and a manager does things right to get a project completed. A modern healthcare administrator promotes quality healthcare delivery, while ensuring adequate remuneration for the facility, and concurrently establishing a clear market niche in the community. To the administrator, it means letting people do more than the job they were hired for; let them solve problems rather than just spend time doing their job. It means giving the staff members the freedom and logistical support required to put pride into their daily efforts. If the people on the payroll are to be the ones to make things happen, then they must become the problem solvers by believing they have the accountability for the solutions. A good healthcare administrator just keeps the impeding habits out of the way. A great administrator makes change and innovation the expectations for each staff member.

The basic operational questions which effective veterinary practice administrators ask themselves each day include:

- Today, what projects, what objectives, what needs to be accomplished in this facility?
- What will I facilitate by removing obstacles from the path of our team?
- How can I further my transition from the person with the great answers to all problems to an administrator who asks great questions of staff members that empower their solution-finding capabilities? What are the good questions I need to ask today?
- Since I am the steward of administrative talents for this practice, which staff members need my help to develop their skills and success rates further today?
- What is the practice standard that is being established? Do we want a team of people who don't stumble when they walk through their daily duties, or do we want to develop a team of runners who are marathon quality when attacking problems?
- When staff members walk through my door with a problem on their back, how can I ensure they leave with both the problem and some alternatives still on their back?

The effective administrator does not solve the problems of the staff members. He/she is a sounding board who helps the staff member think through the problem and discover alternatives themselves. The best administrator validates the thought process often enough that every staff member learns to solve problems and make the practice better without asking permission and before the problem occurs. They make their environment for user (staff and client) friendly on a daily basis.

In applying leadership skills within the practice's healthcare delivery team, the effective veterinary practice administrator follows the three Bs. Team members are given a chance to be; to be a recognized somebody rather than a nobody that is taken for granted. The second is to belong; to be part of the practice success system rather than just a pair of hands. The third is to become capable of doing greater things as an individual and as a member of the practice team; to be able to stretch their necks out without fear of injury. A person, who has captured and embraced all three Bs, as they were provided in their

environment by the administrator, may develop as a replacement or backup to that administrator. They have had their well-being nurtured and they know they can enrich themselves and their lives through work and practice progress rather than just off the job education opportunities.

The human resources are the only practice asset that can be appreciated rather than depreciated. The human resources are clients as well as staff, and the savvy administrator treats both as valuable assets. The effective veterinary practice administrator becomes a significant other to each team member, not just a boss of the employees. We all need to remember that staff members were hired because someone in the practice liked their skills and attitude. A staff member with a bad attitude is one who has been depreciated by the practice rather than appreciated. In short, the veterinary administrator is a people person while the manager is a project person. What do you want to be when you grow up?