Critical Competencies: A Guide for Veterinary Practice Management Professionals

We are all aware that successful veterinary practices rely on staff with strong clinical skills to keep the practice competitive. But equally critical to a practice's viability is the quality of staff with non-clinical skills. Staff members with the ability to organize and expertly manage can mean the difference between a practice that treads water or one that thrives.

Recognizing the need to identify the critical non-clinical skills, the VHMA has recently published a guide that outlines the skills necessary to be an effective practice management professional - *Critical Competencies: A Guide for Veterinary Practice Management Professionals*.

One Guide, Many Uses  
If you are an owner or senior veterinarian who is hiring staff to manage a practice, it is essential to understand the skills and qualities that promote effective management. If you are a practice management professional, then it is to your professional advantage to use the information in the guide to evaluate your skills and determine areas that may require attention.

The purpose of this guide is to define the major practice domains and tasks that practice management professionals should be expected to undertake in their positions. Additionally, it identifies the competencies that are critical for fulfilling specific responsibilities. Competencies are defined as demonstrated behaviors, skills, and abilities associated with the successful completion of practice-related responsibilities. Often these personal attributes will differentiate effective employees from ineffective employees. Therefore, owners and supervisors would be wise to look for these attributes when making hiring decisions.

The Science Behind the Competencies  
The practice requirements and competencies in the guide were derived from a scientific practice analysis for the position of veterinary hospital/practice management professional. The goal of a practice analysis is to identify and detail the specific practice duties and requirements of a given practice and evaluate the importance of these duties. The critical requirements are then linked to knowledge, skills, and abilities that contribute to success.
President’s Message

Pressure, Stress and Rock and Roll

In the music world, the theme of pressure gets a lot of attention. Think David Bowie and Billy Joel. Bowie’s "Under Pressure" hit the charts in 1981 and Joel’s "Pressure," hit radios and MTV in 1982.

As veterinary management professionals, pressure and stress in our own lives and offices might not make us rock stars, but they can have positive outcomes. When Rick Silva addressed VHMA at our recent annual conference, he examined ways to transform stress and pressure from a negative to a positive. While he encouraged participants to pinpoint the stressors in their lives, he also focused on the office environment, maintaining that the way in which the office system is organized can impact the health of the entire organization.

Here are some things I learned from Rick that we have tried to implement in practice:

Vision/Goals

Have a written vision for your business that's a clear and compelling statement. Set specific goals each year that serve as the incremental milestones toward achieving your vision.

Organization

Organize everything around your vision and the service you wish to provide. Delineate responsibilities, not tasks; goals, not rules; and standards, not restrictions.

Alignment

Align your vision with that of your business and with the vision of each member of your staff. When individuals see how the business serves their life goals and ambitions, they will be motivated.

Position Agreements

Have position agreements that clearly define the responsibilities (not duties) for each position in the organization. Define what any person holding this position needs to handle, learn and solve, now and in the future.

Staffing (Hiring Process)

Improve changes for hiring the right person the first time by outlining a well-defined hiring process. Focus on competencies and attitude. This month’s article highlights the critical competencies required for effective managers - many of these are applicable to other positions in your practice.

Performance Evaluation Systems

A well-designed performance evaluation system can resolve all your performance issues by being objective, honest, affirming, goal-based, and measurable.

Communication Systems

Incomplete, inaccurate, and imprecise communication is the main source of unnecessary stress. Constantly improving communication is a part of business that routinely gets neglected. It’s the only thing we really do in life and in business. Implement team meetings designed to continue to improve the organizational communication.

Training Systems

Training is an important part of maintaining high performance and avoiding needless stress. Most times a person’s poor performance is simply a lack of awareness compounded by the inability or unwillingness of anyone in the organization to make that person aware.

We all know the toll that stress and pressure can take on our health and well-being. Taking measures to reduce stress in the office will not eliminate all stress in your life, but they can have a noticeable impact. It might also free you up to become a rock star!

Remember to stimulate the mind and enhance your environment!

Tom MacDonald, CVPM
Question:
A gentleman brought in a dog that he said was a patient of ours and now belongs to him. One of our staff members recognized the dog. Apparently, the gentleman and his wife are going through a messy divorce. The pet is under her name alone. His name was never mentioned in her file, except that her last name was changed by a staff member to his last name after her last visit. We received an email from the wife that the judge is to decide who gets the dog. My question to you: Do we have to verify ownership before treating the dog?

Legal Advice:
“This fact situation is all too common and provides a good example of the absolute need to confirm the ownership of the animal. Sometimes, such as the scenario you’ve recited, ascertaining the ownership can be awkward; however, its critical that you do so. For example, only the “owner” can provide informed consent to treatment. To this end, each time you’re faced with a situation like this, you need to merely ask “Are you the owner?” If the person confirms ownership, then, unless there are circumstances where you are doubting the veracity of the response, you have done all that you need to do. As a matter of effective practice management, you should review your “new client intake” forms and not only have a place for the name of the owner(s) but also a question about whether there are any other owners and an area where they can designate someone else to provide instructions in the absence of the owner.”

Douglas C. Jack, Esq.

VHMA Legal Matters is a collection of legal advice posts that relate to common cases or situations that many practice managers encounter daily. Advice presented here is not intended to replace the need for your own attorney, but simply to help provide general advice as guidance. VHMA does not accept liability due to errors or omissions.

Critical Competencies: A Guide for Veterinary Practice Management Professionals

(Continued from page 1)

The practice analysis study identified five core practice management domains for the typical hospital/practice. The five practice domains are: human resources, law and ethics, marketing and client relations, organization of the practice, and financial management. A total of 13 competencies emerged. These competencies were then applied to the five practice domains to offer a practical and comprehensive template. See the whitepaper for the detailed competencies per domain. For the purposes of this brief article we will just review the 13 competencies that emerged.

Wedding Competencies with Practice Domain
These essential and highly important competencies include:

Decision-Making. The ability to make good decisions, solve problems and decide on important matters, gather and analyze data, choose among alternatives, and implement decisions is a critical skill required of practice management professionals. Whether the decision pertains to personnel matters, financial options, a marketing strategy, inventory programs, or hospital protocols, a practice management professional must be able to evaluate information to decide on the best course of action.

Integrity. Upholding high standards of ethical conduct by ensuring compliance with laws, regulations, and standards is at the heart of being an effective professional. Being trustworthy with financial accounts and banking responsibilities and showing discretion when handling confidential and sensitive personnel issues are just some examples of how a practice management professional is expected to demonstrate integrity while performing practice requirements.

Critical and Strategic Thinking. Strategic thinking and planning are essential components of ensuring the long-term plans for growth of the practice. Practice management professionals must have the ability to identify questions, problems, and arguments relevant to planning for the future and to use logic and critical reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions or approaches to problems.

Planning and Prioritizing. The practice management professional has many practice responsibilities, several of which relate to accomplishing these tasks effectively. A manager must be organized and capable of setting priorities to efficiently and effectively achieve goals and meet deadlines.

Oral Communication and Comprehension. Practice management professionals must be effective communicators, expressing their thoughts clearly. They must also be good listeners and be willing to hear what others have to say. Much of what a manager does is dealing with groups, whether employees, peers, or clients. Therefore, feeling comfortable speaking publicly is essential.

Writing and Verbal Skills. So much of communications is written. Whether writing or updating protocols, interpreting technical information, or getting a point across, the ability to write in a way that is clear, concise, and tailored to the audience will assist in ensuring the target audience comprehends what is being transmitted. At times the information can be challenging, whether it has to do with contracts, insurance forms, or other materials, but the practice management professional must have the interest to move through it.
Analytical Skills. Many of the tasks in the financial, personnel, and marketing practice domains require quantitative reasoning and analytical skills. Practice management professionals must accurately grasp complex information and concepts and make correct inferences from their analysis of the data.

Compliance. Managers are responsible for office management and compliance with federal, state, and professional regulations. They must be thorough and conscientious in addressing these assignments.

Resourcefulness. The multifaceted nature of the practice requires practice management professionals to be resourceful and to take the initiative and figure out how to get a practice done. They must be capable of applying knowledge, skills, and expertise to perform tasks quickly and efficiently and make effective use of resources and technology when required.

Continuous Learning. Best practices in management are evolving. Practice management professionals must keep up with these changes.

Resilience. Veterinary hospitals can be stressful workplaces. Coping effectively with pressure and setbacks, crises, obstacles, and failures while remaining calm and in control is essential.

Adaptability. Uncertainty and unpredictability in the workplace require that managers be receptive and comfortable with change and ambiguity.

Leadership. Practice management professionals should demonstrate talent for influencing and motivating others, taking the initiative, and organizing and coordinating.

For a more detailed look at the competencies, please go to www.vhma.org (look for the report under Products and Services).