

Effective Leadership For The Time Challenged Bash Halow, CVPM, LVT

Several factors contribute to your inability to stay on top of your workload and your life. Let's explore possible reasons why you can't seem to get ahead and what you can do to remedy things.

They Handed You a Bad Job Description

While practice managers ideally should manage, they are rarely given the chance. Most are relied upon to fix things when they break; fill in here and there when employees callout; and start, stop, and then start again side projects as the chaotic business of veterinary medicine pulls them in every direction.

Practice managers are the owner's backup plan when someone wants to cry and the owner doesn't feel like getting her shoulder wet; they're the person you ask, 'When you have time, can you please...', and the person that drags out the garden hose to water the backyard shrubbery when leaves are looking limp. Practice managers have been asked to paint the parking lines in the driveway, run to Costco to buy paper towels, and put a picture of the stray kittens online so someone will adopt them. This isn't a professional job description; it's a list for a handyman with a weird fetish for fur on his shirt.

Multitasker or Enabler?

We have a tradition of celebrating multitasking in our practices and most managers boast that multitasking is a skill of theirs, yet research clearly shows that we make more mistakes when multitasking than we do when we are able to focus and complete one job at a time. I have this theory that the reason we celebrate multitaskers is that they make our broken workflow and business model functional. Multitaskers (read managers) are the ones that continually run around our practices helping to gloss over the fact that our team isn't fully trained, our hospital not fully staffed, and part of our business model has never been figured out. If we're strapped for time, is it because we're rushing around keeping our broken business operational?

No Plan

A big reason why you have no time is because you have no plan. With no clear direction or big goals, you have no way of assigning relevancy and importance to your tasks. Sit down as a leadership team and listen to an audiobook on strategic planning and then work out a six-month list of goals for your practice. Taking a day to discuss the 'big rocks' you need to address in order to be profitable, happy, and productive is one of the most uplifting and cost effective things you can do as a leader. Leaders that take time to plan emerge with renewed energy and focus.

Office? Really?

Who else do you know that goes to an office where a cat walks across their computer keyboard and erases their last hour of work? Who else shares an office space with a washer and drier and five 10 pound bags of food that are waiting to be returned to Royal Canin? Maybe we're not the best managers of our time, but part of the problem is that our office set up isn't necessarily primed for quiet reflection.

A Minefield of Distractions

You want to know where your time goes? I'll tell you. Two hours every day goes out the window chitchatting with coworkers, and another 30 minutes gets poured into the takeout menu as it circulates through the office. Now, top that 30 minutes with another 30 while everyone tries to figure out why Dr. John didn't get his miso soup. At least 45 minutes of your day goes up in smoke when a 5 minute meeting with the owner digresses into whether you should or should not repaint the lobby; and then kiss another hour goodbye when you walk out front to get the mail, but discover that your favorite client is waiting in a lobby chair. Lastly, before you know it, it's Judy's birthday. Again. That was fast. Now you can say adios to another afternoon of your life as you step into your car and drive to the ShopRite for a cake, candles and card. You don't have a working day; you have a day filled with time-wasting detours with your real job crammed in between.

Eliminate this Chinese Water Torture of distraction by working a day from home. You'll get 3 times more work done, provided you can resist the temptation to do laundry and the dishes instead. Looking to finish the inventory? Clock out early on Friday and reschedule yourself to work on Sunday when no one is in the building. With no one around to bother you, you'll be able to focus and get the work done without interruption.

You're Depressed

Happy people like to live; they like to work; and they like to move forward. Unhappy people find it harder to start tasks, harder to complete them, and get dragged down by their joylessness. Look at your office. Is it full of clutter? Is it dirty? Are there piles of unfinished work lying around? That kind of slop isn't a sign of a busy manager; it's a billboard-sized banner that says you're stagnating and depressed. Insurance covers therapy. Try a few sessions and see if you can't be reunited with your love for life and your work.

Rethink Your To-Do List

Practice managers are best utilized as managers, not gal Fridays. In my opinion, the role of practice manager should focus on these goals:

- Grow a team that engages clients and promotes the sale of high quality veterinary medical services and products;
- Ensure even and efficient workflow throughout the practice;

- Provide team members a work environment in which they can acquire a sense of ownership and pride in their work;
- Grow revenue, reduce expenses and increase profit.

Job descriptions for managers that include things like back up the computer systems, make the schedule, or market the practice on Facebook, are ones that accumulate more and more tasks over the years and ultimately swamp the manager in a sea of undone work and despair. Challenge the tasks you are asked to do. If they are not directly tied to fundamentally important goals like service, care, revenue, growth, and team health, put them at the bottom of your pile. If today's goals aren't directly lashed to the pillars of your Mission, let them go. It's easy and cheap to find someone to go to Costco. It's equally easy to find someone who can do a schedule or to do data entry in QuickBooks. What's hard is finding someone who can mobilize a team, who can inspire employees to work their hardest, and who can create a business that truly stands out from all the rest. I appreciate that you're willing to shovel the sidewalk after it snows, but you tell me if that's the best way for you to make our practice profitable, our clients happy, and our employees fulfilled. Go ahead. Make your case.

Additional Tips

- Turn the schedule over to the staff.
- Lock the hospital cat out of your office.
- Ditto, the dog.
- Clean up the clutter. It's subliminally bogging down your mind.
- Hire a local bookkeeper, trained in accounting to do your books and help you to keep an eye on expenses. She'll pay for herself in simple financial oversight.
- Create a new rule: If team members want to talk to you, they have to write out the reason they need to talk before they enter the meeting. Writing out their concerns will help them to organize their thoughts, or better still, will help them figure things out for themselves.
- Work from home one day a week.
- Schedule yourself on the floor in the morning and in the evening. Seeing what goes on and fixing things in real time will do wonders to eliminate larger issues that later will consume your time.
- Start each day with a checklist.

Conclusion

I hear a lot of excuses in my line of work. I patiently listen, but make it clear that at the end of the day there's only one person in my practice that can see to it that I have a healthy team, great care, great service, and healthy profit: my manager. If you have yet to figure out how to spend more time doing the job I believe you should be doing, you should reach out to me for additional input at the conference. It's critical to your practice that you get out of the weeds and into your work.

