

Veterinary Medicine State of the Union  
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Consolidation, technology and an eroding middle class (Pew Research Center 2015) are reshaping the future of veterinary medicine. The animal health landscape of 2020 and beyond includes very successful, well-managed, private practices; a significant number of publicly-held and corporate practices that focus on affordability; and a dwindling, beleaguered, collection of low margin practices that have failed to plan in the face of obvious warning signs. Veterinary healthcare leaders interested in a long, lucrative and successful career should plan for change now and take a proactive position in leading their hospitals and the profession.

In this paper, we'll look at the most significant factors that will define our future marketplace; what the career of a veterinary manager will look like in such a world; and changes that practice managers can undertake now for themselves and for their practice that will ensure optimum success.

The future of veterinary medicine will be influenced by the following trends:

- Better informed, more devoted pet owners with less money than the pet owners of today
- Consolidated groups of practices, both publicly and privately owned, and an increase in low margin, bare-bones practices
- An increase in fixed and non-fixed business expenses that drives down margin and that most significantly impacts non-consolidated practices
- Increased veterinary management acumen and better leadership in general
- Credentialed technician and talent shortages
- A widening technology gap between large companies and small businesses that puts the latter at a note-worthy disadvantage

#### More Devoted Pet Owners with Less Money

More pet owners consider their pets to be members of their family than ever before. In a 2011 Psychology Today article *Do We Treat Dogs the Same Way As Children In Our Modern Families?* Author Stanley Coren PH.D, F.R.S.C. writes:

*A new online survey by Kelton Research, involving about 1000 people, shows that the status of dogs as family members is changing. It appears that in the minds of the Americans who responded to the survey, dogs are becoming more important as family members, particularly as children. Most recognize that this represents a change in attitude since nearly 60% believe that their dogs are currently more important in their lives than were the dogs that they had during their childhood days.* (Coren 2011)

According to the AVMA, 51% of pet owners allow their pets to sleep in the same bed, another 31% buy their pets holiday presents, and an overall 63% of pet owners think of their pet as family (AVMA 2012). According to a study that was conducted by the Pew

Research Center in 2010, 85% of respondents said that they considered their dog to be a part of their family and 78% considered their cat to be one (Pew Research Center 2015). Wall Street, taking note of the exploding popularity of sites like *LOLcats*, *Corgi tumblrs* and social media outlets alive with pet photos also recognizes an American populace that loves, if not adores their household companions (Or 2014).

However according to the AVMA Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook the number of pet owners taking their pet to the veterinarian decreased by 8% for dogs and 24% for cats in 2012. Between 2007 and 2012 there was a nationwide 13.5% decrease in veterinary cat visits. One reason respondents cited for not going to the veterinarian? Money (AVMA 2012).

Today's American is worth far less than they were in 2003. According to The Atlantic:

*Median net worth has declined steeply in the past generation—down 85.3 percent from 1983 to 2013 for the bottom income quintile, down 63.5 percent for the second-lowest quintile, and down 25.8 percent for the third, or middle, quintile. According to research funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, the inflation-adjusted net worth of the typical household, one at the median point of wealth distribution, was \$87,992 in 2003. By 2013, it had declined to \$54,500, a 38 percent drop. And though the bursting of the housing bubble in 2008 certainly contributed to the drop, the decline for the lower quintiles began long before the recession—as early as the mid-1980s.”* (The Atlantic 2016)

According to the Social Security Administration, as of 2014, 67.2 percent of wage earners had net compensation less than or equal to the \$44,569.20 raw average wage. By definition, 50 percent of wage earners had net compensation less than or equal to the median wage, which is estimated to be \$28,851.21 for 2014. In 2014, 75 percent of Americans earned \$55K a year or less (Social Security Administration 2014). To put all of that in perspective, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services draws the poverty line for a family of four at \$23,850.00 (University of Wisconsin Madison Institute for Research on Poverty n.d.)

If the American public continues to humanize pets in the future, there will be a solid demand for veterinary care, but it must be affordable to a growing population with less money than it has today.

The Opportunity in Consolidation is Dramatically Changing Our Industry

Veterinary consolidation is trending up. According to the 2013 AAHA Pulsepoints, 6.9% of respondents identified themselves as being a part of a multipractice group, three times the percentage reported in 2011 (AAHA 2014). In 2014, Summit Partner's NVA, with a run-rate earnings of 69 million dollars, was purchased by Ares Management for an estimated 920 million dollars or 13.3 times EBITDA (Or 2014) That's more than double the 4-6 times multiple seen in most sole practice sales. In March of 2016, VCA agreed to buy an 80% share in CAPNA (Companion Animal Practices of North America, a group of 56 free

standing veterinary practices) for 344 million dollars or 10.7 times a 2016-projected EBITDA (The Fly 2016).

This is significant. How does a 60-something veterinarian turn away from an offer that's double what he or she would otherwise be offered? Alternatively, how do younger veterinarians, potentially saddled with debt, but eager for a chance at ownership, compete with the prices that buying groups can and are offering? How does acquisition change a practice's culture and its management's autonomy?

Since the sale of NVA and CAPNA, Vetcor Inc. and PetVet Care Centers could be next. With only 5.5% of veterinary revenue being produced by VCA, Wall Street views consolidation of veterinary practices as a big opportunity for private equity investment (or 2014). Consolidation will likely reshape a significant part of the veterinary landscape of the future and while that's not necessarily bad, it's certainly very different from what exists today.

### The Rise of On Demand Veterinary Services

In May of 2016, a congress of professionals met at the University of Michigan to discuss an alarming fact: today's recently graduated veterinarians have a 2-to-1 debt to income ratio (Williamson 2016). Some of these veterinarians, looking for ways to take control of their debt and gain autonomy over their lives, are taking a fast track into business ownership and/or independence. They're hiring a single, on-demand employee and taking their practice mobile (Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine 2014). In some cases, the veterinarians are dispatched by a central office, lowering the veterinarian's time invested in managing client load and scheduling. Central offices, or the young veterinarians themselves, leverage facile digital marketing skills to outcompete brick and mortar vets for premium online visibility. These practices' low-cut pricing structure puts additional competitive pressure on stand-alone practices.

Sites like Petcoach pay veterinarians on a case-by-case basis to answer online veterinary questions. Their aggressive marketing means that Dr. Google just added one more associate to a list of veterinary resources that will outcompete your practice for top search engine results and the next new client. It means that sole practitioners can completely eliminate the need to own a brick and mortar facilities or even the infrastructure to book appointments.

### An Increase in Fixed and Non-fixed Expenses

Comparing practices in the AAHA Pulsepoints 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> editions (2006 and 2014 respectively), 25% of veterinary practices saw an increase of expense-to-gross ratio by 5.1% or greater (AAHA 2014) with decreases in surgery, sedation and anesthesia, hospitalization, euthanasia and other medical income. Additionally average transactions, active clients per veterinarian, and new client numbers were all lower than the 2011 averages (AAHA 2014). Surprisingly Pulsepoints reports that expenses for web presence,

online reputation, and digital communication and marketing account for 1 to 1.5% of a practice's annual gross revenue, roughly the same amount of money we used to spend in the old Yellow Pages days (AAHA 2016), but I can't imagine that that is true and I expect as we get better at calculating the money we're investing for visibility and marketing, including payroll hours, we'll determine that our expense in this area is much higher.

Decreases in revenue may have something to do with the increased expense-to-gross ratio. Online price shopping forces practices to lower margins on what used-to-be more profitable pharmacy and over-the-counter products. The rise of low-cost, spay-neuter clinics and other not-for-profit (and some times publicly funded!) facilities providing low cost veterinary care have impacted our service sales. Additionally, there is the aforementioned decline in veterinary visits.

It's important to point out that when one looks at overall net profit as a percent-to-gross revenue, AAHA Pulsepoints indicates that 25% of practices earned 5% more (or greater) in 2014 than they did in 2006, while 25% of all practices in the same study had a 5% decrease (or greater) in net return between 2006 and 2014. But there is also an indication that overall non-veterinarian staff per FTE veterinarian is down. If practices have reduced the size of the staff in response to the recession or if practices are swapping out hard-to-fill credentialed nurse positions for non-credentialed personnel, (Wu 2015) that could indicate that higher net returns are due to austerity (AAHA 2016).

### Credentialed Technician Shortages

DoveLewis Emergency Animal Hospital, a provider of veterinary professional education (On the Floor @Dove), recently discussed their decision to include non-credentialed employees as members of their professional nursing team as a response to an acute, ongoing shortage of credentialed technicians.

*“The shortage for credentialed and licensed techs is widespread and while some states have not been affected, most have been. The BIG issue – the industry is simply not retaining technicians. Their career span is a short 5 years. We lose them to other careers, commonly they go to human healthcare nursing where they can make significantly more.”* (Maxwell 2016)

Anecdotally, Kenichiro Yagi, BS, RVT, VTS (ECC, SAIM), a familiar face on the speaking circuit, says he frequently hears audience members expressing concern about technician shortages. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, veterinary technicians or technologists with a 2 or 4-year degree respectively, earn a mean pay of \$15.30/hour or 32K a year. That's *at least* 10K dollars per year less than the starting pay of a registered nurse (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016).

Tech shortages mean higher payroll costs to retain credentialed staff, retention issues as valuable team members migrate to practices with better benefits and opportunities (consolidated groups), and/or increased training responsibilities for the practices as they struggle to cobble together nursing teams from non-credentialed team members.

## Increased Veterinary Management Acumen

Our future's successful veterinary practices won't owe their staying power to dumb luck. Though some practices with strong leaders will fail, none will succeed that don't embrace effective, informed leadership as part of their business model. Leaders in these practices can be former client care representatives, assistants or technicians, but they won't be without a passion for leadership or a solid education in veterinary management through organizations like the VHMA.

The days of winging it are through (indeed have been for some time). Tomorrow's practice managers won't be in training wheels. They will be informed, experienced business leaders proactively responding to market pressures.

## A Widening Technology Gap

Today's small business must manage an increasingly large web presence that includes online reputation management (reviews), SERP (Search Engine Rank Position) and an ongoing dialogue with clients on social media. Additionally Google, the web's most popular search engine, primarily ranks websites by original, popular content forcing businesses to regularly update their websites. I think most would agree that those online responsibilities alone are a formidable obligation, yet a new responsibility looms on the horizon: leveraging online user data.

In a NY Times article titled, Facebook Is Using You, the author states:

*'Facebook made \$3.2 billion in advertising revenue last year, 85 percent of its total revenue. Yet Facebook's inventory of data and its revenue from advertising are small potatoes compared to some others. Google took in more than 10 times as much, with an estimated \$36.5 billion in advertising revenue in 2011, by analyzing what people sent over Gmail and what they searched on the Web, and then using that data to sell ads. Hundreds of other companies have also staked claims on people's online data by depositing software called cookies or other tracking mechanisms on people's computers and in their browsers. If you've mentioned anxiety in an e-mail, done a Google search for "stress" or started using an online medical diary that lets you monitor your mood, expect ads for medications and services to treat your anxiety'* (Andrews 2012).

As online users, we have a profile we create, but data-aggregation companies like Google and Facebook are creating one for us based on what we search for, what we write in emails, who are online friends are, what we buy, what we search for, and literally every key stroke we make on the computer, tablet or smart device. This information is used to create the world's most effective marketing tools to be sold to the highest bidder. Not a bad world to live in... *unless* you can't be the highest bidder.

If you thought it was hard to keep up with posting on Facebook, look out. The next wave of marketing options available to you will be the most effective selling tools in the history of the world, but they will cost money and small veterinary practices, already cash-strapped and challenged for time and expertise in this area, will find it hard to both keep up and pay up.

The Practice Leader in 2020 and beyond

Scenario 1: Success

Five years from now you will be directly responsible for a practice that is consistently growing and financially healthy. You will have achieved this by reviewing the internal and external forces at work on your business and on the market and made successful, confident, proactive business decisions. You will have grown the business to keep pace with your growing talent and your increased salary demands. You will have built a vertical pathway for yourself and many members of your team.

*Yes*, your clients will have less money, but you will have put together some payment strategies for them that put great care within reach. After all isn't that what these people who think of their pets as 'family members' want?

*Yes*, you will have higher expenses, but your leadership skills will have honed a team that puts forth its best effort. Clients will pay the additional money; they'll wait the additional time; they will elude the online ads of your corporate competitors because you matter when it matters most: face-to-face, in the lobby, in the exam room, and on social media (Wu 2015). As one veterinarian recently said to me at a conference, "No one can compete with what I do for my clients in the room". You will be successful because you will have actualized your team to be a walking, talking billboard of your mission statement. Technology is all well and good, but no future, however bleak, will dethrone client connection as reigning supreme.

You'll be known in the community through your presence online, through your practice owner's (and your own!) charismatic leadership. You'll be thought about, talked about, and connected with as a *personality*, not a practice.

You'll be happy. So will your team members. In general, happy people are a magnet. Happy people in a *business* are a *business* magnet. As a leader, you'll pay attention to your workplace culture.

*In a highly competitive world, the need to constantly inspire employees will change the perception of what inspires. Leaders will realize that fresh, changing environments with powerful, authentic stories on the walls is more inspiring than expensive art collections. In the future, more attention will be paid to marketing and branding internally to connect employees to the company's mission and the impact employees have on their customers. Including individual employees in the brand story and allowing them to become a part of history in the making will be*

*an effective employee engagement strategy.* (Roby 2015)

You'll be on a constant look out for opportunity. You'll have hooks in the stream to catch the best employees, the best new clients, the best deals, the best opportunities for your team to learn. When people ask you what an entrepreneur is, you'll tell them that it's a business person that trusts their gut and takes big risks and you'll reference a few stories from your own practice and your own career as a way to expand upon that definition.

It is likely that your practice will be part of a loose union of similar practices that share proprietary management strategies and pricing information, broker buying deals, and potentially collude on exit strategies for some if not all of the members of the group. A portion, if not all, of your future practice management continuing education will come from within the group or from outside parties that structure education (and its cost) to specifically meet your group's demands. Your group will scratch the backs of preferred vendors and they'll scratch yours, but because of your group's size, your 'scratch' will cover more 'back'. The future education for you and your team will be more effective, specific to your needs, and in part bank rolled by vendors eager to do business with you and your group.

#### Scenario 2: Your Practice Will Have Been Purchased And You'll Come With the Package

You may be one practice in a group of a dozen or so, or part of a larger company that includes 50 or more practices. Your practice's owner may or may not have shared his intent to sell with you and on the day of the transition you may have been completely caught off guard. Don't hold a grudge against your former boss. This was his or her chance at retirement and a way to ease him or herself out of the veterinary work schedule over a few years.

Your salary was sustainable so the new owners kept you in place. Besides, the new owners wanted to make sure that the transition went smoothly and there was as little disruption to business as possible.

You may be asked to focus more closely on things like payroll and inventory costs and asked to take more aggressive measures to reduce both. In this new world, decision-making will likely be more collaborative and time consuming.

You may have easy access to hard-to-come-by resources like HR and legal advice, marketing materials, and the support of other managers of your caliber and experience level. As a part of a larger group of practices, you will attend regional or district meetings where you'll find inspiration and reaffirmation of the company's goals. Such meetings will provide you a chance to shine and grow in entirely new ways and be the first step to a larger, more influential position within the company.

#### Scenario 3: Fading Into the Sunset

Another scenario is that we wake up in 2020 and find you growing transparent. Waiting for the future to happen to you, then reacting to it, will put you and your company in a constant position of catch up. Choosing to focus on the day-to-day without ever proactively planning and leading towards a better future is an abdication of your real role and a PTS pathway for your practice. Choose to coast along as though it is business as usual means that both you and your practice will fade off into the sunset, will mean that hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of business value will spill through your fingers, means that you will have donated your market share to your competitors.

#### Scenario 4: New Horizons

There's also a chance that you will be pressured to retire or that you will work yourself out of a job. Practices of the future will be pinched between a universe of online price shopping that stymies price increases and growing expenses. Businesses are trending towards the lean in mean. In an article published in the Seattle Times, the author writes, *"A decade ago, (new businesses) in Washington (State) employed five or more people. Now, they're hiring only about three workers, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data."* (Martinez 2014) Your future employer may love you, but they may not be able to afford you. With your tremendous experience, knowledge base, and education, a position with a larger private or corporately-owned veterinary practice may be possible, but competition for the salary that comes along with such a job is likely to be stiff, not only from within the ranks of organizations like the VHMA, but from outside our industry, as young talented MBA graduates scour the job scene for work.

#### Possible Career Options. Where Else If Not In A Veterinary Practice?

I know of many individuals who have graduated from private practice to gone onto veterinary business ownership, financial management, veterinary business acquisition, 'consulting', bookkeeping, website design, online support, team training, and sales for veterinary supply, communication, equipment, and pharmacy companies.

But graduating, or perhaps better put, shifting into fields adjacent to veterinary management will not be an option for everyone. If the salary for such jobs is high, it's likely that the applicant pool will be very competitive and the screening process extensive (Wolfe 2016). In America, those with advanced educational degrees earn more than Americans without advanced degrees. Older men and women without advanced degrees are more likely to be challenged to find well paying work and are more likely to withdraw from the employment pool altogether (Strause 2012). It's not entirely necessary to know what line of work you will be in five years from now should your practice management position go away, but you can still prepare for a potential new career by completing your college degree, earning a more advanced one, or finding ways to assist practices with their online presence, marketing, online security, recruiting, training and work culture needs (Uzialko 2016).

There's very good chance that you will cobble together a workweek as an on-demand laborer. Successful businesses of the future, small and large, will adopt the 'Hollywood

model' of getting work done. They'll assemble smart, expert teams around a short list of goals, and then when the work is finished, disband the group (The Economist 2015).

Businesses of the future will need to take advantage of the wealth of competitive advantages that lie in analytics, collaboration, marketing and online presence (including cyber security, cloud-based services, mobile responsiveness), but their 'lean and mean' models will look to on-demand outside resources for help in this area; a boon for the skilled manager that not only understands how to make adaptations and updates in these areas, but who can do so in the context of the specific needs of the veterinary practice.

(Uzialko 2016)

You may be part of America's vast number of sole proprietors numbering in the millions. You'll be your own boss, helping practices here there and everywhere with things like bookkeeping, financial oversight, software support, marketing, training, inventory and so forth all by way of the Internet. You'll work from home with a load of laundry turning in a nearby room or a chicken roasting in the oven for when the kids get back from soccer. You'll also be responsible for constantly looking for work, paying all of your education and business expenses out of pocket, and forced to face the same small business pressures you once had as a practice manager.

### The Impact On Professional Organizations

Organizations like the AVMA, State VMAs, the American Animal Hospital Association, and the VHMA exist to bring lobbying efforts, consistency, camaraderie, and high standards to the profession. Up to this point, these organizations have been clear leaders of the industry.

However, if the future includes more consolidated groups of practices that are self-determining, with their own thoughts on standards, their own lobbying efforts, and their own tracks of continuing education pointed specifically at internal goals, do the membership demographics of professional organizations change? If consolidated groups of practices leverage their size to capture hard-to-come-by sponsorship dollars for their own purposes, does that impact how professional groups are funded? Today's professional organizations have tight budgets and are staffed with small crews. Will these organizations be able to meet the demands of their future members or will their efforts be eclipsed by the support and training that comes from within consolidated practice groups?

Will large vendors, eager to hold the attention and loyalty of their clients, develop their own manager groups, continuing education, and on-demand medical and management resources? Will there be other certificate programs for practice management, leadership and so forth that come, not from our Industry's standby organizations, but from veterinary, for-profit companies?

### Problems For Corporations

It is also not inevitable that corporations, merely because they have more money and a growing portion of the market share will emerge as the winners in veterinary medicine. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, according to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, “A group of 95 workers at VCA-San Francisco Veterinary Specialists made history by becoming the first large group of private-sector veterinary workers in America to form their own union and affiliate with the ILWU.” While unionization of our industry is likely a long way off, if in the future at all, pockets of unionized works could lower larger companies’ profit and monkey-wrench otherwise straightforward planned operating procedures.

Also, the future of technology, what it will be able to do and how it will be employed, is just as murky for corporations as it is for the private practice owner. Corporations, like private practices, will have to adjust, but the private practices, because of their size may be in a position to be more nimble and quick in their response.

### The Way Forward

It’s not all Sturm and Drang. Nimble, smart, privately owned, well-managed practices will always be a part of our future veterinary landscape. Why? Because great service and genuine care will never go out of style and people who consider their pets to be family will do whatever it takes to make sure that they are well. These gifted practices have already begun to structure tomorrow’s success. Here is a list of what they are doing today.

### Identity and Goals

Success begins with a clear idea of what you want to be and how you’re going to be it. Future, privately owned practices won’t be run-of-the-mill; they’ll stand out. They will exemplify great service, overt caring, and expertise. The teams of these practices will be smart, engaged and engaging. Leaders of these practices will ask one question and answer it thoughtfully, ‘What are the defining and distinguishing elements of our practice?’ This question is often explored, but too-often incompletely answered in the mission statements we have written for our businesses.

As a business owner, your job is to inspire your team members to think and act like owners. Practice owners take on ownership because they believe they have an untapped potential for care, for work, and for success. Teach your team members to think and act like owners by grabbing at the same potential that lies dormant within them and inviting it to be displayed in your work setting. Give them a picture of the future that you see and a picture of themselves living and working within it.

Don’t look into the sky for inspiration to write your Mission Statement, look at the things you and your team members do daily in your practice that fulfill you most. If you’re going to be in business in the future, you won’t be a practice, you’ll be a personality; not a cliché, but a business entity with a heart and a mind. For future practices, work won’t

be endured; it will be completed and celebrated as another step in the ongoing maintenance and creation of something amazing.

I have a theory that sports teams perform better than business teams because sports teams have a short list of clear goals and business teams have sprawling, murky, nuanced goals. What are you trying to accomplish? What are the services and products that your practice offers of which you are most proud? Which are the ones that provide the best care to your patients? Who should know about such services? How should your clients find out about them? ‘What are you trying to accomplish and how are you going to accomplish it?’ should be a question that you ask yourself and your practice team on a regular basis. Focusing on a short list of goals provides leaders a chance to hone coaching skills within narrow confines; a chance to crawl, and then walk before breaking into a full run. It brings specificity to celebration, to winning, and to achievement. A written list of goals that succeeds at moving your practice in the direction of the mission is essential to your future success and value.

## Plan

Once you have a short list of clear goals, work with all members of your team to develop a written plan for how you will achieve it. Practice owners and leaders shortchange themselves when they assume that strategic planning is onerous or unnecessary. Emphatically, it is neither. A short list of what is vitally important to work towards is freeing for a taxed management staff and liberating for a team that can often feel pulled in too many directions. Use the strategic planning tools at [www.halowtassava.com](http://www.halowtassava.com) for more help in undertaking the straightforward and enjoyable task of planning.

## Build a Team

As a child, I was scrawny and picked upon. One summer’s eve our neighborhood’s favorite dad called together a game of flag football and much to my complete delight, he not only singled me out to be on his team, but called me into a private huddle where he uploaded me on a strategy of how we were going to win. Before each scrimmage, he directed me to go to a particular place in the field where he threw the football to me and I, to my sheer amazement, caught it. Subsequent to that, I was tackled merciless, but I got up from the dirt smiling more broadly than I had in my entire life. That man had given me a chance to noticeably and successfully contribute to the efforts of a winning team.

That’s a dynamic that exists in all teams in which members work with their heart and soul and it’s one that will exist, on some level, in your successful practice of the future.

Team building is straightforward. Hire people you want to see succeed and then provide them training, individual attention, and caring oversight to help them shine. The problem is that that responsibility is time consuming, emotionally draining and sometimes a trial of one’s patience. Nonetheless, there is no way around it. Build into your plan for the future a methodology by which you accomplish the above, not by which you search for an easier, but ultimately unsuccessful, workaround.

## Learn and Leverage the Online World

The online world provides small businesses an unprecedented, cheap, extremely effective way of engaging existing clients and capturing new ones (Dugas 2012), but it requires an investment of time and skill. It's very likely that leaders will have to outsource this responsibility to someone in the future, but that will not absolve them of understanding enough about how effective online marketing works to oversee the process. Future practices will have tighter budgets, so it's essential that their online marketing dollars be efficiently spent. To that end, all practice managers should hold their breath and take a plunge into learning how to build an effective online presence.

Practices should shift the way they search for new team members to best connect with affordable, young talented people almost all of who can be found online. Find ways to celebrate and highlight your team's efforts through social media. Consider buying help-wanted ad space on social media sites. Film short videos of your practice team in action as a way to inspire young people to join your force.

## Clear Patient and Client Care Standards

Your team members' job isn't client education; it's client connection. Education is secondary to stopping, listening, empathetically reacting, and then making a straightforward recommendation to the client based on your standards of care. Your future practice will distinguish itself because each of your team members, in their own, individual way, will be a caring mouthpiece of your practice's expertise, organization and experience; but most importantly each member of your team will be a source of connection, an extension of the kind of relationship every practice owner wants to cultivate with his or her clients. When you train, make sure your team members know what you want them to do, but emphasize that they are to do it within the context of being present and open to client needs.

## Boots on the Ground

It is said that George Washington returned from some battles with more than 17 bullet holes in his waistcoat. One of our greatest leaders in American history didn't bark out orders from his office in Mount Vernon, but mounted his horse, rode amidst the troops, and fought alongside all of his men. Get out of your manager's chair and onto your feet. There is work to be done at your desk, but the more important work is happening in the lobby, and exam, treatment, surgery and kennel rooms. Get to it.

## Look in the Mirror

On some level, you're a contributing reason why your practice growth efforts stall. Insight into how you may be holding your team (and yourself) back are critical to your practice's (and your) long term success. Find a way to gain insight into who you are and why you do what you do. In all seriousness, you might try a therapist. They're trained to

help people 'see' themselves and to figure out why they do what they do. That kind of knowledge is essential if you are going to improve.

### Face Facts

You may have problems as a leader, but you're not the only reason why your team's efforts stall. Many of you know of one, two or several members of your hospital that drag the entire place down. You're not crazy. Those individuals really are a wrong fit. Terminate them.

### Act

Your story and the story of the business that you run is an unfinished manuscript the last page of which has today's date on it. Take up your pen and decide where this story is going to go, which characters you'll introduce and which ones you'll kill off; how you'll behave and where you'll be in this brave new world of tomorrow.

Success in the movies follows a familiar pathway: the main character loses everything; a defining moment when the same character commits to change, a montage of images showing the character's short-term triumphs, and finally the last five minutes of the film where the character lives happily ever after. Real life seems much different.

Your future success is inevitable if you stop gauging it by material accomplishments. Think of adversity and failure, not as setbacks, but as part of a path forward and upward, because, indeed, they really are. You can be the weakest person on the team and still catch the football; you can eat a mouthful of dirt and still stand and smile. Even stumbles launch you forward.

Real life is better than the movies. In real life, we have the lead role, we understand everything that the main character thinks and feels, the photography is amazing and the audio is in Sensurround. Best of all, the popcorn and soda are much, much cheaper.

Just do the part where you choose to change. Commit. Choose a path. Act. The future doesn't have to happen to you. You can happen to the future.