

Getting the Team Aligned to Lift the Practice

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Alignment is often described as a motivational ideal, yet in veterinary medicine, it is far more than that. It is an operational necessity. Misalignment is not subtle; it is visible in inconsistent client messaging, duplicated work, unresolved workplace tension, staff turnover, and eventual burnout. It appears when team members work diligently but move in slightly different directions. Over time, even minor inconsistencies compound, creating cultural fatigue and operational inefficiency.

In contrast, alignment generates lift. When teams are aligned, communication flows more seamlessly, decisions are clearer, conflict diminishes, and the client experience becomes more cohesive. Efficiency improves not because individuals work harder, but because they work in concert. Perhaps most importantly, alignment fosters a sense of shared purpose. Team members no longer feel merely busy; they feel connected to a unified objective.

Alignment does not occur organically. It must be intentionally built and consistently reinforced through structure, conversation, and leadership behavior.

Mission, Vision, and Values as Operational Anchors

Most veterinary practices have a mission statement. Many display values prominently on their websites or lobby walls. Some have articulated a compelling vision for the future. However, when these elements are not integrated into daily behavior, they become decorative rather than directional.

Mission clarifies why the practice exists. Vision defines where it is heading. Values articulate how the team behaves along the way.

Without consistent reinforcement of these foundational principles, decision-making becomes fragmented. One team member may prioritize efficiency, while another may prioritize thoroughness. One may emphasize financial sensitivity, another gold-standard care. While none of these perspectives are inherently incorrect, the absence of shared understanding creates friction. Alignment begins when leadership consistently connects daily operations back to purpose.

For example, if compassionate care is central to the mission, then discussions about wait times, financial explanations, and tone of communication must reflect that commitment. If teamwork is a stated value, gossip, siloed decision-making, and passive-aggressive communication directly undermine it. Alignment requires congruence between declared values and observable behavior.

Clarity reduces ambiguity, and ambiguity is a significant driver of workplace frustration. When individuals understand what the organization stands for and how they are expected to contribute, tension decreases and confidence increases.

Role Clarity and Structural Alignment

Alignment is not purely cultural; it is structural. Job descriptions and clearly defined roles are powerful tools for reducing conflict and improving efficiency. Too often, job descriptions are treated as static hiring documents rather than dynamic alignment instruments. When responsibilities lack clarity, assumptions fill the gaps. Assumptions frequently lead to resentment.



Effective alignment requires clarity regarding who makes decisions, who executes tasks, who communicates updates, and who follows through. This structure is not intended to create rigidity but to prevent unnecessary overlap, duplication, or avoidance. When reception understands communication authority, technicians understand workflow expectations, and doctors understand delegation standards, operational flow improves significantly.

Clear roles also strengthen accountability. Feedback becomes more objective when expectations are defined. Performance conversations are less emotionally charged when responsibilities are transparent. Structural clarity supports onboarding, evaluation, and professional development, reinforcing alignment at every level.

Huddles as Daily Realignment

Even the strongest systems drift without reinforcement. Short, intentional huddles function as daily alignment resets. A well-structured huddle synchronizes the team around the day's caseload, anticipated bottlenecks, staffing realities, emotionally sensitive appointments, and operational adjustments. Without huddles, teams operate reactively. With them, they operate proactively.

The purpose of a huddle is not to revisit past frustrations or introduce complex policy changes. Its purpose is synchronization. When teams invest a few minutes in aligning expectations before the day begins, downstream communication improves, and frustration decreases. Clients perceive greater coordination, and staff experience reduced ambiguity. Alignment thrives on rhythm; huddles create that rhythm.

Team Meetings as Cultural Reinforcement

While huddles manage short-term coordination, structured team meetings maintain long-term alignment. When meetings become complaint forums or exist only to address problems, they inadvertently erode cohesion. Effective meetings reinforce progress toward goals, clarify behavioral expectations, provide operational updates, celebrate cultural wins, and address areas requiring refinement.

Critically, meetings should connect individual roles to broader practice objectives. When staff understand how their daily actions influence retention, revenue, compliance, and client trust, engagement increases. People are more motivated when they perceive impact. Alignment strengthens when purpose is repeated and contextualized. Consistency in messaging ensures that the organization's direction remains visible rather than assumed.

Coaching as a Vehicle for Alignment

Alignment cannot be mandated; it must be cultivated. Coaching plays a central role in this process. Correction addresses specific errors, but coaching develops professional judgment. In aligned practices, leaders engage team members through inquiry rather than command.

Questions such as, "What outcome were you aiming for?" or "How do you think that interaction was received?" invite reflection and ownership. This approach shifts conversations from blame to growth. Open-ended dialogue demonstrates respect and reinforces psychological safety while maintaining accountability.

Directive leadership may secure short-term compliance. Coaching fosters long-term commitment. When team members participate in problem-solving, they are more invested in the solutions.

Open-Ended Questions as Alignment Accelerators

Open-ended questions serve as powerful tools for uncovering hidden misalignment. Closed questions often confirm surface compliance. Open-ended questions reveal interpretation, understanding, and perspective. For example, asking, "What part of the protocol felt unclear?" yields far more insight than simply asking whether the protocol was followed.

In meetings, performance reviews, and informal discussions, open-ended dialogue surfaces discrepancies in understanding before they solidify into patterns. Misalignment often begins subtly. Questions illuminate those gaps early, allowing for timely course correction.

Alignment requires visibility, and visibility is created through thoughtful inquiry.

The Cost of Misalignment

It is tempting to consider alignment a "soft" leadership topic. In reality, its impact is measurable. Misalignment increases turnover, reduces efficiency, weakens client experience, drains emotional energy, and fuels unnecessary conflict. Teams operating without alignment often describe the environment as exhausting.

Exhaustion is rarely caused solely by workload; it is frequently the result of unclear expectations and inconsistent direction.

Practices that prioritize alignment consistently outperform those that rely on talent alone. Talent without alignment creates friction. Alignment multiplies talent by ensuring individual strengths are coordinated rather than competing.

Lifting the Practice Together

Ultimately, alignment creates lift. When mission and values are integrated into daily decisions, when roles are clearly defined, when communication rhythms are maintained, and when coaching conversations reinforce growth, the practice operates with greater coherence. Clients experience smoother visits. Staff experience clearer expectations. Leaders experience reduced chaos.

Alignment does not eliminate stress; veterinary medicine will always demand resilience. However, alignment reduces unnecessary strain and internal friction. That distinction profoundly affects culture, retention, and performance.

When teams move in the same direction—guided by shared purpose and reinforced through intentional structure—they lift the practice together.