



Accelerate Practice Growth with a Strong Mentorship Program

Denise L. Tumblin, CPA

WTA Veterinary Consultants

3200 Riverside Drive, Columbus, OH 43221-1725

Phone: (614) 486-9700

E-mail: dtumblin@wellmp.com

A formal mentorship program is crucial to growing your practice by attracting motivated employees and improving retention. Mentees are more productive sooner and job satisfaction increases. According to the 2014 Benchmarks Survey of Well-Managed Practices only 34% of associates report having a mentorship program at the practice where they work. Many practices are missing a great opportunity to improve associate knowledge, improve medical standards of care, and groom a potential buyer. Now is the time to institute a formal mentorship program! See figure 1 – 9 Things Great Mentorship Programs Do.

There are four general types of mentorship programs, although a blending of these methods is often very effective.

- Informal mentoring within the practice. Some practices describe their mentorship program as an orientation and training program. A true mentorship program goes much further than getting a new employee competent in day-to-day activities. It focuses on the professional development of the mentee. The informal mentoring process alone is insufficient as it often ignores a focus on opportunities for long-range development.
- Informal mentoring outside of the practice. Outside mentors provide a view of the practice from a different angle. They can be from within or outside the profession.
- Formal mentoring outside of the practice. This is a contractual arrangement between the practice mentor and the mentee. Items such as the term of the engagement, frequency of contact, services provided, and dispute resolution need to be included in the contract.

- Formal mentoring within the practice. This is an ideal mentorship method. The availability of mentor and mentee makes communication easy. Face-to-face meetings are scheduled and impromptu opportunities of learning enrich the relationship. The creation and review of formal goals is completed in-person. Coupling the in-practice mentoring program with outside mentors provides a wide and thorough mentoring experience.

Successful mentoring programs require planning and have the following characteristics:

- Commitment. Mentors and mentees know and respect the practice goals. Everyone promotes pride in work and respect for practice values. Successful mentorship programs require time and effort on the part of the mentor and the mentee. However, the time commitment may be less than you realize. The 2014 Benchmarks Study reports 56% of associates are looking for three hours or less per week of a mentor's time.
- Targeted skills. The mentee must know what goals he or she wants to reach in several years, and the mentorship program will identify the skills necessary to reach those goals.
- Transparency. The mentee must identify his or her strengths and weaknesses and discuss expected time commitments.
- Proper match. There must be a discussion of values and relationship boundaries. Each party must be on the same page. The mentee has to be comfortable that the mentor can teach the skills he or she needs. The mentor must be comfortable that he or she can work with the mentee.
- Tolerance for errors. We are all human, and mistakes will happen. A strong mentorship relationship allows for discussion of the mistakes and identifies methods to avoid making mistakes.
- Structure. Schedule dates and times to meet, establish measurable goals, and assess progress.
- Mutual benefit. The benefits of a mentoring program to a mentee include reducing their learning curve and speeding their efficiency and productivity. The mentor also gains from the relationship through shared insights and the satisfaction of making a positive contribution.
- Initiative. The mentee follows the guidance and recommendations of the mentor, and shows great interest in learning.

Once you establish the mentor/mentee relationship and set goals and boundaries, identify the meeting topics you'll cover for the next 12 months. The 2014 Benchmarks Study reports associates most value training in medical standards of care, leadership skills, and financial management. Below is a sample 12-month plan.

- Month 1. Medical standards and protocols.
- Month 2. Financial management. Practice finance and budgeting.
- Month 3. Leadership skills.
- Month 4. Practice culture, and how to make changes if necessary.
- Month 5. Staff. Methods to encourage ideal behaviors.
- Month 6. Strategy. Where do we see the practice in several years?
- Month 7. Clients. Why they come and how can we keep them returning?
- Month 8. Marketing. Methods and new ideas.
- Month 9. Community. How can the practice be a good citizen of the community?
- Month 10. Continuing education of doctors and staff.
- Month 11. Personal development. How to keep energy and enthusiasm high over the long-term.
- Month 12. Physical plant. Practice location and renovations that lead to improved efficiency.

There are multiple resources for gaining mentorship knowledge. The Career Development Special Interest Group in VetPartners, the professional association for consultants and advisors to the veterinary profession, developed a variety of valuable tools. They can be found at www.vetpartners.org. VetPartners and AAHA collaborated in the creation of a free mentorship toolkit found at www.mentorship.aahanet.org. Finally, an excellent mentorship opportunity for current and future practice owners is joining a WMP Management Group. These groups of 20 high-quality practices meet semi-annually to discuss all topics relating to a veterinary practice, including analyzing profitability and practice value to human resource issues and everything in between. The open sharing of success stories and best practices leads to mutual benefits. Additional information about the WMP Management Groups can be found at www.wellmp.com.

Mentorship benefits all who participate. Mentors and mentees are energized and engaged. If you already have a mentorship program, congratulations! If you haven't begun yet, use these guidelines to get started.

Figure 1: 9 Things Great Veterinary Mentorship Programs do:

1. Maintain clear, concise instructions with consistent attention from the mentor.

2. Create step-by-step programs to share crucial lessons and information with new associates.
3. Fill knowledge gaps left behind from university programs.
4. Use progressively intensifying caseloads in complexity and number.
5. Carve regular, consistent, flexible times for meetings between mentors and mentees.
6. Task mentees with identifying gaps in their skill-set and knowledge base.
7. Drive mentees to take control of their career growth.
8. Recognize the five traits of a well-rounded, successful veterinarian – communication, leadership, medical knowledge, surgical skill, and compassion and empathy.
9. Contain identifiable goals and a timetable to complete the goals and the mentorship program.

Source: Benchmarks 2014: A Study of Well-Managed Practices®