

TAKE CHARGE

The Compliance Mindset

In a busy practice, adherence to procedures too often shows up only when something goes wrong. Here's how to change that.

BY HEATHER PRENDERGAST, RVT, CVPM



The client service representative steps into the practice manager's office with a look that stops everything. The Drug Enforcement Administration is here. No appointment, no warning. A wave of panic moves through the team before anyone says another word. That panic is worth examining. It rarely comes from knowing something is wrong. More often, it comes from not being sure, from the quiet uncertainty of a team that has been moving fast, doing their best, and hoping the pieces are in place. That uncertainty is the real problem, and it often exists long before any inspector walks through the door.

When Compliance Shows Up

In many veterinary practices, compliance only shows up when something goes wrong. It surfaces in the middle of a board complaint, during an audit, or after a mistake. In those moments, teams scramble to reconstruct records, double-check logs, and piece together what should have been done all along. The urgency is real, but it is also revealing.

Too often, compliance is treated as a reaction rather than a standard. That pattern shows up not only in medical records and controlled substances but also in the everyday decisions that impact patient care and team safety. Whether it's incomplete documentation, inconsistent protocols, or repeated exposure to preventable risks, such as radiation, anesthetic gases, or improper lifting, the pattern is the same. Compliance is recognized after the fact, rather than being part of the work as it happens.

For many teams, compliance has become synonymous with consequences. It's tied to the fear of fines, citations, or disciplinary action. Leaders may unintentionally reinforce this mindset by framing expectations in terms of avoiding trouble instead of following standards that make safe, consistent care possible in the first place. The message becomes "Do this so we don't get in trouble" instead of "This is how we protect our patients, support each other, and do the work well."

Fear can drive short-term behavior, but it rarely builds long-term consistency. Over time, it leads to workarounds, uneven follow-through, and a gradual lowering of standards. People focus on not getting caught or not being blamed rather than understanding what good practice actually requires.

Treat Compliance as a Value

There is a more effective and sustainable way to approach compliance. When treated as a lived value rather than a

looming consequence, compliance becomes a foundation for how a practice operates every day. It supports the kind of consistency that enables teams to deliver reliable care, communicate clearly, and move through the day with confidence rather than uncertainty. It also reinforces something easy to lose in the busy practice of life: Safety is not optional or situational. It should be built into how the work is done.

Compliance is about protection. It protects patients by ensuring that medical records are complete, accurate, and usable for continuity of care. It protects teams by creating clarity around expectations, reducing friction from ambiguity or missed steps, and reinforcing habits that prevent injury and long-term health risks. The same mindset that ensures a controlled drug log is accurate should also ensure that radiographs are taken with appropriate personal protective equipment, that anesthetic exposure is minimized, and that team members are not putting themselves at risk through improper lifting.

These are not separate conversations. They are all part of the same standard. When compliance is fully understood, it stops feeling like a disconnected set of rules and starts looking like a system that protects the people and patients the practice depends on.

Leadership's Role

Leadership plays a central role in whether compliance holds or breaks down. When standards vary from one doctor to another or from one shift to the next, the team is left to navigate conflicting expectations. Even when leaders address issues privately, a lack of visible consistency can signal that standards are flexible. Over time, this creates an environment where compliance feels optional rather than essential. A team cannot reliably maintain strong medical records, accurate logs, or safe habits consistently if the standard changes daily.

TIME TRAP

Time is a common barrier to compliance. In a busy practice, it can feel faster to skip a step, delay documentation, take a radiograph without full protection, or move a patient without assistance. While these decisions may seem minor in the moment, they accumulate quickly. What begins as a time-saving shortcut becomes a habit and lowers the standard in your practice.



HEATHER PRENDERGAST

The Take Charge columnist is the CEO of Synergie Consulting and the author of "Practice Management for the Veterinary Team, 4th Edition."

Addressing these challenges requires a shift in how leaders approach compliance. It starts with specifically defining what "right" looks like. When everyone understands the expectation, it becomes easier to meet it consistently across various roles and situations.

Communication is a key element in shifting the culture around compliance. When compliance is framed solely as a way to avoid negative outcomes, it can feel burdensome. When consistently tied to patient safety, team protection, and quality of care, it aligns with the values that brought people into the profession in the first place.

Leadership should address compliance gaps quickly and constructively. When feedback is delivered clearly, respectfully, and with a focus on improvement, it reinforces the standard without creating tension. Over time, that kind of accountability becomes normalized and allows team members to support one another more effectively.

Equally important is the role of leadership in modeling the practice's standards. Teams take their cues from what they see, not just what they are told. When leaders consistently follow through on documentation, adhere to protocols, and prioritize accuracy and safety even during busy moments, they send a powerful message about what matters. This kind of modeling reinforces the idea that compliance is not an extra task but an integral part of care.

Making Compliance a Habit

Compliance becomes easier to sustain when built into the everyday workflow of the hospital. Teams are not guessing what "right" looks like, nor are they relying on memory or individual preference to guide critical steps. Instead, there is a shared standard of how things are done, regardless of who is on shift. This consistency reduces rework, miscommunication, and preventable risk. It also creates more predictable workflows, where patient care and team safety are protected without constant second-guessing.

The practices that are most successful in terms of compliance are not necessarily those with the most detailed policies or the strictest oversight. They have woven compliance into their practice culture. Their team members understand what is expected and why it matters. They see the connection between their daily actions and the larger goals of patient care, team well-being, and practice stability.

Taking charge of compliance means stepping into an ownership mindset. It means recognizing that compliance is not a separate initiative, but a reflection of how a practice chooses to operate. When leaders embrace this perspective, they create a practice in which standards are not enforced only under pressure but lived consistently as part of the work itself. **TVB**