PRACTICE SMARTER

Lead Better, Lose Fewer

These practical strategies can help you build the kind of workplace that veterinary professionals won't want to leave.

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For decades, employment relationships looked different from what they do today. Until the 1980s, many people spent much of their careers with one employer. Long-term employment was often tied to pensions and predictable career paths. Stability and security were prioritized, and remaining with one organization for years was often viewed as a sign of reliability and success.

Late in the 20th century, corporate restructuring, layoffs, globalization, mergers, and the decline of pension plans changed how people viewed employers. Workers realized that companies could no longer guarantee lifelong stability, and the "free agent" mindset was born. Technology accelerated this shift. Online job boards, LinkedIn, recruiter outreach, and remote opportunities made changing jobs easier than ever before. In many industries, employees discovered that switching companies every few years often led to faster salary growth.

Then came COVID-19, which fundamentally reshaped the relationship between employees and work. Millions of people reassessed their priorities, values, and lifestyles. Burnout, stress, childcare challenges, mental health concerns, toxic workplace cultures, and a desire for flexibility contributed to what became known as the "Great Resignation."

In 2021 alone, approximately 47 million Americans voluntarily left their jobs. The healthcare industry, including veterinary medicine, was hit particularly hard. Teams became smaller while workloads became heavier. Emotional demands and uncertainty increased. Patience decreased. Burnout skyrocketed.

As employee expectations, priorities, and loyalty evolve, leaders should confront a fundamental question: What are we doing — or not doing — that causes people to leave our organization? Below are a few strategies to help you get started.

Show Appreciation

A common leadership misconception is that employees leave primarily because of pay. Compensation matters, but studies show people often leave because of poor management, a lack of appreciation, a lack of growth, and burnout.

Your employees are your greatest asset. Even with top-of-the-line equipment, branding, medicine, and doctors, a practice cannot grow or sustain itself without a truly committed, healthy team.

Gallup research shows that employees who receive recognition are 90% more engaged than those who do not. While praising isn't rocket science, it takes time and practice for many of us. Recognition isn't a box you check by saying thank you.

When praising employees, be authentic, consistent, and fair. Recognize that different people prefer different types of praise, so make it personal. While some crave public praise, others appreciate a handwritten card or small gift. Check out "The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace: Empowering Organizations by Encouraging People," by Gary Chapman and Paul White, to learn more about customizing praise.

Get Educated

One of the greatest challenges in veterinary medicine is that many leaders were never formally taught how to lead. Veterinarians dedicate years to clinical training but less time to leadership, communication, and coaching. The same is true for practice managers, who often become practice managers because they were great technicians or client service representatives.

Leadership is about developing people, creating clarity, and building an environment where individuals can succeed. Learning how to do these things is key. Many courses, certifications, and books can help. Here are some books you can start with:

- "Crucial Conversations" by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler
- "Oops, I Became a Manager" by Amy Newfield
- "Dare to Lead" by Brené Brown

Understand What They Want

Every generation is different:

- Baby boomers often value stability, structure, and loyalty.
- Generation X tends to appreciate independence and efficiency.
- Millennials frequently seek purpose-driven work, development opportunities, flexibility, and collaborative leadership.
- Generation Z places particular emphasis on mental health, transparency, inclusivity, work-life balance, and personal fulfillment.

However, every individual is also different, so pay attention and ask questions.

Compensation alone rarely creates long-term loyalty. Employees want to feel respected, appreciated, and connected to a larger mission. They want opportunities to grow. They want leadership that communicates clearly, provides feedback, recognizes effort, and genuinely cares about their well-being. They want flexibility, which creates autonomy, and autonomy often increases ownership and engagement.

One of the biggest assumptions many leaders still hold is that remote employees are less engaged. However, according to Gallup's recent State of the Global Workplace research, fully remote employees reported the highest levels of engagement globally, followed by hybrid and on-site employees.

Practice leaders can learn from broader workforce trends. For example, the person answering phones doesn't have to be physically in the practice. Flexibility may look different in veterinary medicine, such as more predictable schedules, reduced overtime, protected lunch breaks, hybrid administrative roles, or mental health support.

Strengthen the Employee Cycle

Employee turnover can be a vicious cycle. What gets measured gets improved, so an important first step is to determine your turnover by position. Then, take a closer look at your hiring process to avoid hiring candidates who do not fit your culture or the intended role. Once someone is hired, regardless of their skill level, there needs to be dedicated onboarding and training to avoid misunderstandings and disappointments.

Invest time up front to help everyone succeed:

- Create a clear mission and vision that employees can believe in.
- Conduct stay interviews to learn more about what each employee wants.
- Provide consistent communication and feedback.
- Offer mentorship and growth opportunities.
- Recognize accomplishments and celebrate wins.
- Support work-life balance and well-being.
- Create psychologically safe environments.
- Provide fair and transparent compensation structures.
- Encourage autonomy, ownership, and accountability.
- Think about flexibility, remote work, and a schedule that supports your team.

What's in It for Them?

Employees stay where they feel appreciated and valued. They stay where leadership is intentional and communicates well. And, let's be honest, they stay if they get what they want. Consider looking at your team from their "what's-in-it-for-me" perspective. Incorporating a mindset that considers the personal benefits one will receive from a particular situation could help reduce turnover.

Over the next decade, practices that truly thrive will not be those that incorporate the flashiest technology or biggest spaces. Instead, success will always belong to those who lead people well. Because at the end of the day, veterinary medicine is still a people business. TVB

STORY ARCHIVE

Check out Dr. Karen Felsted's Today's Veterinary Business article "Why Exit and Stay Interviews Matter" for more information.

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