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EMBRACING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Building and Keeping Your Dream Team

You’ve created a great hospital. Now, it’s time to fill it
with the right people who will stay for the long haul.

BY PETER WEINSTEIN, DVM, MBA

Opening the doors of a new veterinary hospital is a monumental achievement. You have mastered the financing, finalized the floor plans, and secured your equipment. But as you stand in your pristine treatment area, a sobering reality sets in: A hospital is only as good as the team working inside it.

In today’s competitive labor market, a casual approach to staffing will quickly lead to burn-out, high turnover, and operational chaos. To

build a team that plays together and stays together, you need a repeatable, deliberate system. This process must begin long before the first interview and continue long after the initial onboarding period.

The Pre-Hire Phase

Many new owners make the mistake of hiring for immediate relief rather than long-term cultural alignment. Before placing a job ad, you

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must define the operational and cultural ecosystem of your practice.

Define and Operationalize Your Core Values

Your core values can't be generic placeholders like "excellence" or "compassion." They must be actionable guidelines that dictate daily behavior. Write down three to five core values and define what they look like in practice. For instance, if a core value is psychological safety, the operational definition is: "We address mistakes constructively without public blame, and every team member is encouraged to ask questions."

These values will serve as your hiring filter. If an applicant has impeccable technical skills but scoffs at your core values, they will eventually toxify your workplace culture.

Write Dynamic Job Descriptions

Ditch the uninspiring, bulleted list of chores. Instead, write a job description that sells your vision and clearly outlines what success looks like. Include the purpose and mission of your practice throughout the job description. Your purpose is a huge selling point.

Combine the tasks where skills are required with specific, purpose-driven content that is motivational and aspirational, and include benchmarks for success.

Build Your Digital Footprint

Modern job seekers thoroughly research employers before submitting an application. Ensure your website has a dedicated careers page that highlights your mission, your commitment to work-life balance (such as predictable scheduling and no after-hours emergencies), and your benefits package. If you are an acquisition buyer, update your social media channels to signal a fresh, positive, and supportive chapter under your new leadership.

The Selection Phase

A multi-stage interview process reduces

the risk of making an impulsive hire that could destabilize your entire team.

STEP 1: The Résumé Screen

The résumé will often be your first introduction to a new candidate. Screen for spelling, grammar, and organization. Pay attention to work experience and longevity. If you have a résumé and a job application for each candidate, look for congruity of responses. Does everything jive? Are there any red flags or experiences that make you want to learn more? Does the work experience support the job description for which you are hiring?

STEP 2: The Video Screen

There's nothing like a quick Zoom call to gauge an applicant's personality. Come prepared with a series of questions based on your résumé screen, and a list of get-to-know-you questions that all candidates are asked. I recommend sending the job description beforehand and encouraging them to bring their own questions.

STEP 3: The Behavioral Interview

You can truly gauge the full person when they visit the practice. During this in-person interview, you'll screen for emotional intelligence — something you can't teach. Pro tip: Hire for emotional intelligence and personality. Train the needed technical skills.

Don't ask hypothetical questions, like "What would you do if a client was angry?" Instead, ask for real-world historical examples:

- "Tell me about a time you disagreed with a coworker's approach to a case or situation. How did you handle it?"
- "Describe a day when everything went wrong in the clinic. What did you do to stay positive and support your teammates?"

STEP 4: The Working Interview

A working interview is a mutual

assessment of cultural and functional fit. Always pay candidates a competitive hourly rate for their time.

Watch for initiative and how the candidate speaks to support staff. Do they jump in to help wash bowls or sweep without being asked? Give your team 15 minutes alone with the candidate. Later, ask your staff: "Did this person elevate our energy, or did they drain it?" If your team flags a cultural mismatch, trust their instincts.

The Onboarding Phase

The onboarding process can last anywhere from 90 days to a full year. It's focused on integrating the employee into your culture, workflow, and long-term vision. Onboarding is different from orientation, which is an event that typically lasts one to two days and is focused on paperwork, compliance, and basic logistics.

Don't throw a new hire onto the floor on their first day because you are short-staffed. This common practice creates immediate anxiety and leads to early attrition. Instead, design a highly structured introduction to your hospital.

DAY 1: A Soft Landing

The new hire should have no clinical duties on day one. Focus on administrative onboarding, a relaxed hospital tour, introductions, and a welcome lunch with the entire team. Provide a written copy of the training schedule so they know what to expect. Make this a joyous occasion, with welcome signs and hospital swag. This first impression sets the tone for the future relationship.

DAYS 2-3: Systems and Philosophy Orientation

Introduce your practice management software, safety protocols, and standard operating procedures. Have the new hire shadow a veteran team member without the pressure of performing tasks independently.

DAYS 4-5: Supervised Integration

Allow the employee to begin performing basic tasks under the direct supervision of a designated trainer or mentor. End the week with a 15-minute check-in to clear up any early confusion.

Ongoing Training

A successful training program relies on objective, clear competencies rather than a vague "see one, do one, teach one" approach. To keep your team aligned, use a formal 30-60-90-day roadmap that outlines explicit milestones for every role in the clinic.

- **The first 30 days:** Focus on culture, safety, and basic software navigation.
- **The 60-day mark:** Focus on efficiency, accuracy, and working without constant supervision.
- **The 90-day mark:** Focus on advanced skills, cross-training, and contributing to overall team harmony.

Ongoing Check-Ins

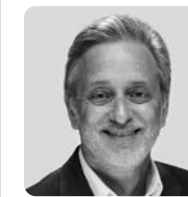
To ensure new hires stay on track, establish a consistent schedule of brief reviews throughout the first three months:

- **Weekly (weeks 1-4):** A casual, 10-minute Friday conversation centered on two questions: "What went well this week?" and "Where did you feel stuck?"
- **Days 30 and 60:** A formal, 30-minute review to evaluate their progress against the training matrix and adjust support if they are struggling with specific skills
- **Day 90:** A comprehensive look at cultural fit and technical growth that marks their official transition from a probationary new hire to an autonomous team member

Retention Strategies

Hiring and training a stellar team requires a significant investment of time and capital. Protecting that investment means building a culture where people

Routine stay interviews give team members a chance to talk about how things are going, their hopes and aspirations, and areas where things could improve.



PETER WEINSTEIN

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genuinely want to stay long-term. Here are some tips for retaining your team:

- **Practice radical communication and psychological safety:** High-retention clinics run on trust, not fear. If a team member makes a mistake, the culture must dictate that they report it immediately without fear of humiliation. Use regular, brief team huddles and monthly all-staff meetings to maintain open lines of communication.
- **Design clear career pathways:** Vague promises of future raises don't satisfy today's veterinary professionals. Employees stay when they see a clear, structured path for vertical or horizontal growth within your business. Create explicit tier systems within your roles — such as Tech I, Tech II, and Tech III — where moving up a level is tied directly to acquiring specific skill certifications, taking on clear leadership duties, and earning automatic, predetermined pay increases.
- **Provide modern, tailored benefits:** Competitive pay is the baseline requirement to get candidates through your door. Long-term retention is driven by a comprehensive benefits strategy that addresses the unique stressors of the profession. Provide a robust employee assistance program for mental health counseling, an annual stipend for high-quality uniforms and personal medical equipment, substantial discounts on personal pet care, and paid time off for continuing education.
- **Conduct stay interviews:** Exit interviews are too late, because the team member has already decided to leave. Routine stay interviews give team members a chance to talk about how things are going, their hopes and aspirations, and areas where things could improve. The goal is to proactively uncover what keeps the employee engaged, what motivates them, and what issues might cause them to leave.

By building a structured, predictable system that supports your staff from their very first day, you create an environment where top talent can thrive. When you invest heavily in clear processes, robust onboarding, and psychological safety, you aren't just filling open shifts; you're building a resilient, close-knit team that will grow alongside your practice for years to come. **TVB**

STORY ARCHIVE

Learn more in Kellie Olah's recent *Today's Veterinary Business* article, "Is Your Veterinary Practice Hiring Right?"

