

TAKE CHARGE

It's Time to 'Skill-Up'

The best retention strategy isn't a raise. It's growth.

BY HEATHER PRENDERGAST, RVT, CVPM



Redefining Internal Mobility

The phrase internal mobility has become popular in large corporations, where employees move between departments, take on new responsibilities, and follow clearly defined career paths. Veterinary medicine, however, looks very different. Most practices don't have multiple management levels or a variety of positions to fill. There simply aren't enough titles to promote everyone. Fortunately, growth doesn't require a promotion.

One of the biggest mistakes we make as leaders is equating career growth with job titles. Promotion is only one form of development. Skill development can occur every day, regardless of whether an employee ever becomes a supervisor or manager. Employees don't simply want a paycheck; they want momentum. They want to know they are becoming more capable, more confident, and more valuable than they were six months ago. When that happens, they become more engaged because they recognize that the practice is investing in them, not simply benefiting from their work.

Think about your highest-performing employees. Chances are they weren't born with exceptional skills. Someone invested in teaching them, trusted them with new responsibilities, and believed they were capable of more before they believed it themselves. That investment often changed the trajectory of their careers, and the same opportunity should exist for every member of the veterinary team.

The 'Skill-Up' Opportunity

Skill-Up is about intentionally creating those growth opportunities. Clinical skills are often the first area we think about, and for good reason. Veterinary medicine continues to evolve with new diagnostics, treatment options, anesthesia protocols, technology, and equipment. A veterinary assistant who

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learns anesthesia monitoring, a technician who masters dentistry, or a client service representative who becomes highly skilled at presenting treatment plans all become significantly more valuable — not only to the practice, but to themselves. Every new skill expands their confidence and reinforces their progress in their profession.

Clinical development, however, is only one part of the equation. The greatest opportunities for long-term growth often involve the human skills that technology can't replace:

- Communication
- Critical thinking
- Emotional intelligence
- Leadership
- Judgment
- Conflict resolution
- Learning agility

These skills are becoming increasingly valuable as artificial intelligence and automation continue to reshape administrative work. Software can send reminders, summarize medical records, and automate repetitive tasks, but it can't replace empathy during a euthanasia appointment, build trust with a worried client, or coach a teammate through a difficult conversation.

Nurturing Future Leaders

Unfortunately, in veterinary medicine, we often wait until someone receives a leadership title before teaching leadership. We promote a technician into a lead position or a CSR into practice management and then expect them to suddenly know how to coach employees, provide feedback, navigate conflict, and inspire accountability. Leadership, however, is not a position. It is a skill that should be intentionally developed long before someone receives a new title.

One of my favorite questions to ask during one-on-one conversations is, "What do you want to be able to do six months from now that you can't

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confidently do today?” The answers are rarely about titles. They’re about becoming more confident presenting treatment plans, mentoring new assistants, understanding inventory management, learning anesthesia, or handling difficult client conversations. Those responses immediately shift the discussion away from promotions and toward professional growth.

Empowering the Team

One of the greatest retention strategies available to veterinary leaders isn’t asking employees to work harder. It’s helping them perform more meaningful work. When doctors fully utilize credentialed technicians, technicians fully utilize assistants, assistants fully utilize CSRs, and every team member practices at the top of their abilities, everyone benefits. Doctors spend more time diagnosing and treating patients, technicians use the education they worked hard to obtain, assistants gain new competencies, and CSRs develop stronger communication and client service skills. Employees become energized when they are trusted to contribute in meaningful ways, and confidence naturally grows through repetition, coaching, and opportunity.

Creating that environment requires intentional leadership. Practices committed to Skill-Up don’t wait until annual performance reviews to discuss development. Instead, they weave growth into everyday conversations by identifying strengths, encouraging curiosity, providing mentorship, and creating safe opportunities for employees to practice new skills. Just as importantly, leaders must be willing to let go.

One of the biggest barriers to employee development is a leader who unintentionally becomes the bottleneck. Whether it is the practice manager who insists on making every decision or the lead technician who struggles to delegate responsibilities, organizations stop growing when leaders hold onto work instead of developing others to perform it. Great leaders don’t measure their success by how indispensable they become; they measure it by how capable the people around them become.



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BY THE NUMBERS

- According to Gallup, organizations that invest in employee development report **11% greater profitability** and are **twice as likely to retain their employees**.
- Survey data from the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America found that **only 36% of veterinary technicians said they were fully utilized in their roles, and 25% identified “underutilized skills” as the most significant issue affecting them**.
- The 2025 LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report found that **88% of organizations are concerned about employee retention, and providing learning opportunities is their top retention strategy**.

That mindset has the power to transform an entire hospital culture.

Imagine two veterinary hospitals:

- **Hospital 1:** Employees perform the same responsibilities year after year. They become highly competent but are rarely challenged, and each day looks much like the day before it.
- **Hospital 2:** Employees regularly learn new skills, participate in projects, mentor teammates, attend continuing education, receive coaching, and are encouraged to stretch beyond their comfort zones. Every few months, they can identify something new they have learned or accomplished.

Which hospital would you choose? Most of us would choose the second environment because people don’t necessarily need constant promotions. Instead, they need continuous progress.

A Bright Future

Veterinary medicine has spent years discussing burnout, staffing shortages, and employee retention. Those conversations are important, but perhaps we should also ask ourselves a different question: “What am I doing every month that makes someone better simply because they work here?” When employees become more capable, confident, and valuable, they begin to see a future for themselves within the organization. And people who can clearly see a future rarely spend their energy searching for one somewhere else.

The practices that will win the talent battle over the next decade won’t necessarily be those that pay the highest wages or offer the most impressive benefits. They’ll intentionally invest in their team’s growth every single day. In veterinary medicine, the strongest retention strategy isn’t another job title or another dollar per hour. It’s creating an environment where people continually learn, develop, and become the best version of themselves. **TVB**