

GET THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: THINKING LIKE A MANAGER

Megan Brashear, BS, RVT, VTS (ECC)

Purdue University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, West Lafayette, Indiana

Most technicians in the industry more than a few years are probably thinking about management opportunities or have already been approached to join the management team. The biggest problems seen with technician management in particular start with the fact that they are rarely properly trained to be managers. Technicians are promoted through the ranks and end up as managers because they've been there longer than anyone else or that they know the policies and protocols better than anyone so they default to being in charge. Just because someone is a good medical technician doesn't necessarily mean they will be a good manager, but that is the assumption of many clinic owners or managers.

That assumption does not have to be wrong, great technician managers are working hard both on the hospital floor and behind the scenes in management. To be one of these great managers takes a shift in thinking so that one is thinking like a manager as opposed to thinking like an employee. This shift in thinking begins with communication. As a manager, you need to understand how you communicate with the world, and how you process information. Then, look at all of your employees. Some of them will be similar to you. Some will be opposite. If possible, have your team take either the DISC personality assessment or the MBTI to really understand how each person communicates with the world around them. Then, take that information and tailor your communications. Does this person need a heads up before you talk with them so they can think through your questions? Does this person tend to be misunderstood through emails? Is this person going to be bowled over if they work with that person? You cannot hope to solve every communication issue between employees, but you can work to improve yours.

Do not allow yourself to get sucked into petty arguments between employees. Many employees feel it is their manager's responsibility to "fix" problems between coworkers. If an employee comes to you with a minor issue, encourage them to go back to their coworker and attempt to work it out themselves. It is difficult and sometimes scary to have that type of conversation, but we are all adults. Give them some communication tips, and let them work it out. If they cannot after trying, then the manager can step in and mediate.

Communication, especially corrective communication, needs to happen as soon as possible. While these difficult conversations are tough, if you let them sit they get even worse. Your team will appreciate honest feedback, even if it is negative; it shows them that you are invested in their success. If you get in the habit of meeting with them often they won't assume that every time you have to talk with them they are 'in trouble'. Remember to document any sort of corrective action or improvement plan not only for your records, but to ensure that your expectations have been laid out to the employee. Follow up any verbal discussion with a written summary or email so that everyone remembers the same conversation and action items.

Managers also must learn to think globally. As an employee, one is used to thinking of their own team. Managers must be able to look at the bigger picture and see how decisions will affect everyone. Advocate for your team, make sure they are taken care of, but also be able to see and explain how and why decisions are made. Transparency is important, make sure your team understands how decisions are made and information disseminated. If you are not meeting with other managers and your hospital owner or medical director, work to make that a possibility. The managers need to be viewed as their own team, communicating about their concerns, supporting decisions, and knowing what is happening with each group so they can then

communicate decisions in a timely manner. Being surrounded by those in a similar position to you will help you start that global thinking and begin to see how seemingly small decisions of policy and paperwork affect everyone.

An example of this global thinking is the staffing schedule. Easily the biggest headache of technician managers is the schedule. Finding a schedule that covers the hospital floor, fair to all employees, gives everyone weekends off, and fits into the hospital budget is impossible. Make a schedule that works for the hospital. You know when the most people are needed at what times and where and can build the schedule around that. People will need accommodations, but don't make promises, and remember that for every change you make, you will get a request for three more. Create the schedule that the hospital needs and then put people into their spot on the schedule. Once that is full, allow the staff to create rotations and swaps that will give them some more flexibility and the time off they may need. Don't let anyone get too crazy, however, each shift needs to be something that a new hire could potentially work. Do not create a shift that is 8a-12p and 4p-8p every day because someone has a mid-day class, because if that person leaves you will have a tough time finding someone else to work that. If employees want to do crazy swaps and they are both happy with it, meet with them and set the expectation that it works until it doesn't, and both parties need to understand that if one leaves, the schedule goes back to basic.

If your computer software has the ability, create check-in and hospital reports so that you can map trends for patient admit times and days of the week. No schedule will ever be perfect for every situation, but plan for the average. When you have a busy week, the staff will cry unfair in regards to staffing – they never seem to do that during the slow week! Explain your process for creating the schedule, remaining transparent will help them realize that you are being as fair as possible. Do not be afraid to get creative, especially in 24-hr facilities. Check with your state labor laws and your hospital owner/manager, some rotations can be created to rotate weekends or other days.

Managers also need to be able to interpret the world around them as “management” would. In some cases this is a leap – to be able view seemingly small infractions as how they affect the team. For example, an employee who is consistently late may not seem like a big deal, you know that she has children and a tight schedule, but she is impacting the team and the manager needs to be fair to all employees. Or the social media posting that is venting frustration. As a coworker you may be tempted to join in, but as a manager understand how that post is representing the entire hospital and should be taken down. This transition in thinking does not occur immediately and will take focus, but needs to happen for a successful manager.

Assumed understanding between manager and staff can quickly lead to disappointment. Make sure that your team knows what you expect of them, and allow them to express their expectations of you. If they expect their manager will cover 100% of the open shifts, everyone is in for disappointment! Meeting with your team either 1:1 or as a group will give you an opportunity to lay out your expectations and ask your team how you are doing. Remember that a manager works to serve the needs of the hospital and employees, and you can only do that by communicating frequently with your team.

Perhaps the largest mind shift with management is becoming a true leader. Anyone can “manage”, that is simply making sure work is getting done, people are getting paid, and boxes are getting checked. Leaders are able to not only get the boxes checked, but also to inspire

their team to greater heights. Leaders make people want to do better. Leaders are supportive of their employees and are willing to coach them to be better employees – not condone bullying and fear employees reaching greater heights. Leaders exist to make everyone better, and will make themselves better in the process. Do not ask someone to do something that you are not willing to do yourself, make sure that you understand the job of the people who you manage. Even if you are made into an administrative as opposed to working manager, spend time on the hospital floor with your team so that you can properly advocate for their needs during management meetings.

A leader does not necessarily have to be the actual manager; there are great leaders on the hospital floor who everyone looks to and they may not have any management responsibilities. Identify these people and work to keep them on your 'team'. Make sure they understand that the staff looks to them, and use that your advantage when making any changes. If you are not currently a manager but looking in that direction, becoming one of these leaders is sure to grab attention.

Many new managers face the difficulty of work friendships. It is difficult to remain close friends with those you manage. Even if everything is kept fair and transparent, the manager may be accused of showing favoritism. Managers need to represent their position and their company at all times, and this includes during off times. Socializing with coworkers may become awkward if those employees want to vent about work. Friendships may become strained if work behavior becomes lax. Managers need to be proactive about communicating issues, and work to keep professional and personal relationships separate. Being liked and being respected are different. Your team (and your former friends) may not like every decision that you make, but they need to respect you for making those decisions. Those lines are easier to draw without personal relationships getting in the way. Be tactful and communicate often.

Management is a tough role, but not too tough for amazing veterinary technicians! Successful managers are successful because they retain their roots in working the hospital floor, they advocate for and support their team, but they are able to think with a global perspective and put the needs of the team and the hospital before their own.

The shift to identifying with management is evident when new or existing managers are required to create protocols. Protocols will allow hospital staff, patient, and client consistency in care and in messaging. Patients will get the same level of care regardless of the staff treating them on any particular day and staff changes will not greatly impact continuity of care. Protocols will also help with training consistency; new staff members will quickly gain the trust of their coworkers and will know what to expect from each other.

When creating medical protocols, it is important to do the homework to ensure that the protocols created are evidence based. Utilizing medical journals for this task will help not only practice the best medicine, but also help with staff training and buy in. Veterinary teams want to provide the best patient care and if improved patient care is the basis for making changes in the hospital, managers will have a better chance of full cooperation.

Getting started can feel overwhelming, but start big and then focus down to specific procedures. List any special forms that need to be created, where those forms are stored, the people involved with each visit, and the places both the animal and the owner will be at any time during the visit. Identify any gaps in your current system, where there is confusion, and start from there. Guideline is the key word here. If a protocol is made too specific, staff members will have

trouble because it is too difficult to remember every step, cumbersome to complete, or is not fluid enough to fit into different situations. A protocol gets the staff moving in the right direction, supplies them talking points but is not a script to be followed to the letter.

Once the research is completed, the committee has discussed the protocol, it has gone through the proper revisions, and is ready to be implemented make sure it is formatted to fit the rest of your protocols and lives in a central location. This makes it simple for all staff member to have access and to use the protocols in training new employees.

Change can be difficult for any practice to implement, and some staff members may make change even more difficult. Encourage all staff to participate in changes and be sure to communicate with the team often. Even in doing all of this a practice still may encounter barriers to change. If there are some staff members actively recruiting other coworkers against the efforts to change, those people may need one on one time with a manager to work through any issues. If possible, figure out the issue with the change and act to fix that issue so everyone can move forward as a team. Change can be intimidating but each team member deserves the opportunity to voice their complaints.

Even if there are a large number of protocols that need to be implemented, it is important to prioritize and move slowly. Allow the staff to get comfortable with one thing before changing another. The instinct may be to make all changes at once, but that can quickly overwhelm the staff. Make any software updates and price changes at the same time.

Communication with the entire team is vital for staff buy in. Let everyone know the plan as everyone needs to be on board in order to succeed. Let the team know the goals and the plan to go about achieving them. Let the staff participate on some level – talk to them in small teams and solicit feedback so they feel valued. Warn them of changes to come so they know how they will be affected. Set dates for changes so the staff knows what to expect and are not living in fear of the next bombshell.

Managers need to admit mistakes; if something is not working, change it! Figure out what part does not work, which team is having problems, where the gaps are, and solicit feedback for changes. Allow the staff to continue to actively participate in the process to make changes that will benefit everyone.

Use competitors and colleagues as resources. Visit other practices to see what works for them. Talk to others at conferences and ask them how they faced similar challenges. Talk to staff about what they have done at other practices. Ask clients what works and does not work for them. Change is a continual process and can be challenging, but it can also help staff provide top notch client and patient service.