



Breaking the “Sink or Swim” Mentality
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Often in veterinary medicine, the tried and true training method is trial by fire. New employees are expected, and desperately needed, to immediately begin working on the floor. They usually have a varied training plan of shadowing, helping, and (if they are lucky) they might have a training manual to review.

This training method is common and it works. . .for some. Employees who need more structure are often left feeling overwhelmed, inadequate, and frustrated. The result of this training method for your clinic is frequently wider spread issues. Often there are inconsistencies in how employees follow and interpret policies and protocols. New staff feels immense pressure from their colleagues to “guess” the right way to do things. More tenured staff becomes frustrated that others around them “don’t know how to do anything” or “are breaking the rules.” All of this leads to higher stress and higher burnout on the clinic floor. Finally, your clients are also affected by the disconnected training.

Example:

Your client drops off their dog (Porter) for weekend boarding and asks about pick-up time. The client service representative (CSR) tells them that they frequently close for pick-up at 6pm Sunday. The client tells the CSR that their plane lands at 5:30 and wants to know if there is any wiggle room in pick-up times. The CSR responds that the boarding crew is usually here until 7pm, so picking up Porter later should not be an issue (he was told that by another CSR when being trained on boarding). The client comes to get Porter at 6:30 and the boarding people are in the process of going home and tell the client that boarding is closed for the day. The client is furious.

While this example can be seen as a communication issue, it is also a training issue. The employee who gave the wrong information was told this was common practice, so he ignored the policy. This is very common in a sink or swim training environment.

So, what is the solution?

People crave direction and structure. While no one wants bureaucracy, people want to know the expectations, rules, and how to be successful in their jobs. This is often gained by having a structured training program to give people the foundation they need to succeed.

Creating a training structure is a tedious, time consuming process, but it saves time and provides value for both you and your staff in the long run. If possible, creating a training committee to help with the distribution of work, objectively reviewing and giving feedback, and creating staff buy-in is highly recommended.

Step 1 – Communicate: Before beginning any major initiative, it is always important to communicate with your staff what you are doing, why, and how it will benefit them. This is particularly important when creating a training program as you will need corporation and input from everyone at your clinic.



Step 2 - Observe: The first step in starting a training program is observing how your staff is currently operating on the floor. Managers and clinic owners often feel like they know everything that is going on in their clinic – after all they are the ones that are at the clinic the most! There are two important things to know about being the big cheese. One, everyone will be on their best behavior around you. Two, if something goes wrong you are most likely redirecting people so things may be working differently than you think.

Take a day or two in street clothes and just sit on the floor in different areas and watch what is going on. Do not answer questions, redirect or jump in, just watch. Write down the type of questions that are being directed at you and that you hear being asked. Also observe where you see staff creating work arounds or not following policies. Simple observation can tell you a lot about what is truly happening on the floor.

Step 3 – Test: The second step is to test your support staff on their skills and clinic specific knowledge. The reasoning behind testing is to validate your observations and assumptions.

Create a test of all the basic skills you expect each position to know within the first 90 days of employment. Include in this test both job knowledge (i.e., basic medical math questions for technicians) and clinic specific policies (i.e., your specific isolation protocol). It is important that you not use these results to discipline employees who score poorly; rather you are looking to validate your team's knowledge base. Do your high performers score as you would expect? What are the most common gaps among your newest staff members? Is there a specific clinic protocol that most people seem to be struggling with? This information is vital to creating a training program.

The next steps are to create a skills test based on what you expect team members to know within the first 6 months and first year. You can increase staff buy-in with sharing results on the tests on a global level so they can best understand your goals.

Step 4 – Gather feedback: In conjunction with step 2, gathering feedback from your employees is vital to the creation of a solid training program.

Ask your newest employees to rate their training by:

- Time spent in training
- The quality of their training materials
- Amount of information given during the training process
- Length of training days
- Overall rating for training

Other important questions to ask are in what areas the new hires feel like they need more training and if they were designing their own first week what would it look like.



In addition to new hires, it is also important to gather feedback from existing employees.

Ask your existing employees:

- What skills do you feel like every new hire should have?
- In what area do you feel new hires are most behind?
- Where are they strongest?
- Where do you see the largest gaps in knowledge with our new hires?

Other important questions to ask are:

- What role do you have in training new hires?
- What are the three most important things a new hire should learn in their first week?

Getting feedback from the staff will help you get buy-in and feedback about why you have the gaps in knowledge that currently exist.

Step 5: Analyze your results: Once the first three steps are complete, sit down and compile your data so you can begin to make an analysis. Having that training committee is helpful at this point as getting different interpretations of the collected data will help to further validate feedback. Look at your notes from your observations, the test results, and feedback provided by the staff.

- What consistencies and inconsistencies do you see between the three?
- What are your greatest training strengths, according to the data?
- What are your greatest gaps?
- Are your gaps indicative of a larger issue that is not training related (i.e., unclear goals or policies or inconsistent guidance from the doctor team to the support staff).

It is important to examine larger issues that may be contributing to training deficits as you do not want to spend time and energy creating a training program if the doctor team is only going to tell your staff to do the opposite. How people actually behave always outweighs written policy.

Step 6: Customize your training program

The long road of figuring out what your staff needs is complete and now comes the fun task of actually creating your training plan.

- Create an onboarding schedule for all new employees. Give them time to learn about your clinic culture and your protocols before throwing them into a shift. Remember, the more prepared they are when they actually start working on the floor, the more effective they will be.
- From the tests you created, create a skills list for each position to go through in their first 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, 6 months, and one year. The skill check-off should take a page from veterinary technician schools and have them see one, do one, teach one. Create incentives for the check-lists to be completed.



- Make sure you are not just training your staff on what your clinic goals are, but putting in training that will help you achieve those goals. For example, if your goal is to increase dental procedures, make sure your staff is trained on client dental education and share monthly goals that can be celebrated.
- Test how your new employee is doing as they go. What gaps are you seeing? Make sure they get extra time in those areas.
- Don't forget about your tenured staff. Get them active in training and teaching. Have them contribute feedback and knowledge to your new training program and ask them to bring topics to discuss at staff meetings.

A good training program is key to ensuring a high level of patient care and is also important to ensuring employees are successful and feel valued. Creating a training program takes time, but will make your job easier in the end.