



Who Are the Leaders in Your Practice?

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LEADERS

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One of the most rewarding roles in managing a study group of practices is working with professionals who bring innovative ideas to the field of small business management. Dr. Wendy Hauser's unique approach to cultivating everyday leaders is a topic worth sharing through the Practice Building column. Dr. Hauser is the owner of Peak Veterinary Consulting and the author of *The Veterinarian's Guide to Healthy Pet Plans*. She is a veterinarian and a former practice owner who speaks from real world experience. I hope you enjoy this first installment of a 2-part series. —Dr. Travis Meredith

I recently asked a group of practice owners, “Who are the leaders in your practice?” This seemingly simple question prompted a host of responses, from puzzled expressions to audible recitations of organizational charts.

A particularly thoughtful response was offered by one practice owner, who shared the observation that he had a technician who was a true leader within the practice, as demonstrated by her daily actions. This technician eschewed any type of title, preferring to offer her leadership skills to her teammates as a peer.

Now ask yourself: if I had been in the room, how would I have responded? More important, does this question matter? This first article in a 2-part series discusses the characteristics that define good leaders and how to recruit top talent.

WHAT IS A LEADER?

A simple definition of a leader is *a person who motivates a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal*.¹ In this context, the leaders of a veterinary hospital play a pivotal role in ensuring that the daily operations of a practice run smoothly. Without clear, common goals, such as consistent preventive health care recommendations, how would a hospital achieve the uniformity and cohesiveness needed to provide top notch health care to its patients? A leader accomplishes these objectives by communicating—by both words and actions—his or her commitment to the well-being of the practice and by engaging coworkers in support of the practice's goals.

QUALITIES OF A LEADER

Leaders in a practice employ their skills and talents in a variety of ways. Designating a team member as a leader does not automatically mean he or she will be an effective leader. When considering qualities that identify good leaders, some of the more defining and desirable traits include:

1. **Displays emotional intelligence:** Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to effectively manage ourselves and our relationships by awareness of, and response to, emotions (see **Emotional Intelligence**).
2. **Employs a positive attitude:** Leaders set the mood within a practice. The impact of mood sharing is a well-documented social phenomenon that seems to be more pronounced in cohesive groups.

In a 2001 *Harvard Business Review* article, Goleman and colleagues reported, “Of all the elements affecting bottom-line performance, the importance of the leader's mood and its attendant behaviors are most surprising. That powerful



The Importance of the Leader's Influence on Mood

Moods must be genuine and appropriate to the workplace culture and current climate. As a leader in my practice during the horrifying terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it was important for me to be a calm and reassuring presence to my team. I reminded them that, although the attacks were a scary, uncertain, and heartbreaking time in our country's history, our clients had entrusted us with their pets for surgery and examinations that day.

For our patients and clients, we needed to perform our duties to the best of our abilities, while offering emotional support and reassurance to one another. What did this look like? We disengaged from actively listening to news that day, instead choosing our favorite music. We relied on our connections with each other, manifesting those emotions in kindness and caring toward our coworkers and clients.

Despite the fact that I had a family member who worked in the financial district and was temporarily unaccounted for, as a leader in my practice, I understood my teams' needs and my responsibilities in setting an appropriate emotional tone.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the *ability to self-manage our emotions and understand others' emotions.*

The term was first introduced by Daniel Goleman in 1995.¹ In 1998, he began to apply the concept to business after an exhaustive study of almost 200 large global companies—a study that supported his belief that, while traditional leadership qualities such as intelligence, determination, and vision are required for success, they are not enough. Leaders who inspire their employees to do their best know that success lies within the emotional impact of what they say and do.

When mastered, EI helps enhance not only leaders' effectiveness, but also the performances of their followers. As outlined in Daniel Goleman's 1998 *Harvard Business Review* article—*What Makes a Leader?*—the 5 EI skills are:

Self-Management Skills

- 1. Self-Awareness:** Having a deep and honest understanding of one's strengths, weaknesses, drives, and values, and knowing how these factors impact other individuals
- 2. Self-Regulation:** The ability to recognize, control, and redirect one's disruptive impulses or moods
- 3. Motivation:** A passion for achievement that supersedes money or status, and the drive to meet an internal standard of excellence.

Relationship Skills

- 1. Empathy:** The ability to recognize and understand other people's emotions and perspectives
- 2. Social Skill:** The ability to find commonalities and build relationships; this competency also encompasses the ability to network and manage relationships.

Can EI be learned? Strong evidence supports a genetic component to EI; however, it is believed that nurture plays a role as well. The research of Goleman, among others, has documented that EI can be cultivated through a strong desire and conscious effort to modify behavior through extended practice and feedback from others, to strengthen specific EI skills.

Reference

1. Goleman D. What makes a leader? *Harvard Business Review* 2004 (January). Available at <https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader>.

pair set off a chain reaction: the leader's mood and behaviors drive the moods and behaviors of everyone else."² The authors labeled this effect *mood contagion*.

Which emotions are most easily spread? Goleman's studies find that laughter and cheerfulness top the list; in fact, smiles and laughter indicate friendliness, help build relationships, and create a sense of unity. Thankfully, irritability spreads less easily, and depression is the least contagious of the emotions.

Therefore, practice leaders must understand that their attitudes truly establish the emotional climate in the workplace. Goleman found that when people feel good, they are most effective at work. In addition, a harmonious work environment is readily detected by your clientele, greatly impacting the willingness of clients to seek your services and refer others to you.

3. Advocates for employees: Practice leaders should be active advocates for the hospital, creatively contributing to practice growth and development. They should seek to bring value by contributing ideas for new or improved processes. Leaders should also strive to add value every day by being fully engaged with their teams, clients, and patients. I always appreciated the luxury of being at work and being able to focus my full attention on that day's activities, providing a respite from

concerns unrelated to work.

Additionally, effective leaders advocate for the growth and development of those who follow them. In *The Servant Leader*, James Autry states, "Much of the psychological, emotional, and financial well-being of other people is dependent upon you and on how well you create the circumstances and the environment in which they can do their jobs."³

Therefore, it is incumbent upon practice leaders to set their followers up for success through mentoring, coaching, and establishing the expectation of accountability for each individual's actions.

- 4. Embraces change:** Ideally, leaders approach their roles by always asking, "What else can be done to make this better?" They embrace new challenges and search for opportunities to innovate, grow, and improve. Furthermore, they are not intimidated by risk or failure; instead, they learn from these setbacks and become more effective leaders. As such, leaders also need to have confidence and resilience. When a goal is reached, a leader again asks, "What else can be done to make this process better?"
- 5. Functions as a role model:** The behavior of leaders establishes expectations for their followers. Their daily actions demonstrate their commitment to the organization and to those they lead. There are no shortcuts in leadership; leaders must give 100% every day.

For example, during a computer software conversion, a computer technician was troubleshooting problems and training our hospital employees. A client purchased a bag of dog food, which I carried to her car. When I re-entered the hospital, the technician commented that this was the first time he had seen a veterinarian carry a bag of food to a client's car. That comment is still memorable to me because it demonstrates how a leader sets an example by following the same client-service guidelines set for the rest of the team.

CHOOSING LEADERS

The leaders chosen in a hospital become part of the core team. The following guidelines help clarify how to choose leaders, whether they are promoted internally or hired externally:

1. Is a leadership role really needed for this position and why?

As an example, consider the responsibilities of lead technician. If your hospital has a small technical

staff, is it necessary to have a lead technician? In this situation, will appointing one member of the technical staff to this position provide any benefits? What about unintended consequences, such as resentment by coworkers? What responsibilities will this individual fulfill that are currently not being met?

2. What is the process for selecting a new leader?

I suggest interviewing potential candidates for all leadership roles, as opposed to internally appointing a new leader. An open application process feels more fair and balanced to the team as a whole. It also provides the opportunity for the interviewers to hear unique ideas and gain valuable insight regarding workplace dynamics from candidates who might otherwise be overlooked. When interviewing applicants, the interviewer might ask, "What critical insights or talent—that are currently missing from the leadership team—will this individual contribute?"

Behavior-based questions are excellent tools to help identify desirable leadership characteristics. See **Behavior-Based Interview Questions**, which provides a description of this interview technique, as well as some helpful questions that can be tailored based on the skills needed to fulfill the job. Job descriptions provide an excellent starting point for the creation of these questions.

3. What are the leadership position expectations, how will they be communicated to the new leader, and who will be responsible for providing mentorship and feedback?

It is strongly recommended that a written action plan be developed to help foster the professional growth of a new leader. Although written for veterinarians, American Animal Hospital Association's (AAHA) mentoring guidelines provide helpful information applicable to new leaders.⁴

4. Is the practice owner willing to "get out of the way," allowing the new leader to assume the responsibilities assigned to him or her?

This can be particularly problematic for managers whose practice owners continue to micromanage. One remedy to this problem is regular meetings and goal setting between the owners and manager, ensuring ongoing communication and collaboration.

IN SUMMARY

The process of identifying and choosing leaders can certainly be daunting, but it is worth the time and effort to carefully and thoughtfully select the individuals who will comprise a leadership team. They are, in large part, the single greatest advantage in driving the health of your practice and your future success.

How NOT To Choose Leaders

The question of how to effectively choose a good leader elicits many interesting answers that demonstrate several mistakes practices make when doing so.

- 1. Selecting by default:** More often than not, in practices that internally promote personnel, leaders are selected by default, and they are often the employees with the longest tenure in the practice.
- 2. Using the role as an enticement:** In other cases, the leadership role is offered in place of a raise or as an enticement to retain an employee. I once observed an interaction that was initially intended as an employee termination, but concluded with the promotion of the employee to office manager. When I asked the practice owner about this decision, she replied, "By promoting this employee to the position of office manager, the additional responsibilities will improve her performance." Unfortunately, this was not the case—the employee was eventually terminated, but not before great harm had been done to the unity and morale of the veterinary team.
- 3. Appointing too many leaders:** In *The Advantage*, author Patrick Lencioni states that leadership teams function best when they are small and nimble because this structure results in more effective communication and decision making.⁵ Conversely, the larger the leadership team, the more likely the team will be to communicate by making statements rather than asking questions. For example, a statement from a larger team may be, "I think we need to offer wellness plans," whereas a smaller leadership group is more likely to communicate by asking questions to clarify an advocacy statement, such as, "If we offer wellness plans, how will this benefit our hospital?" Why does this communication difference occur? Larger groups have more people to contribute to conversations. Afraid that they will not be able to re-enter the conversation in a timely fashion, they state their position rather than asking questions. This results in leadership teams that make decisions without fully exploring the issues, such as "What are the unintended consequences of this action?"

Behavior-Based Interview Questions

Behavior-based interviewing employs a unique questioning approach that helps evaluate a candidate's experience and behavior with regard to the core competencies or skills required for success in the job for which they have applied.

There are no "correct" answers; rather, the interviewer identifies desired skills and behaviors, then asks open-ended questions that elicit detailed responses. It has been estimated that behavioral interviewing, whose premise is founded in the belief that the best predictor of future behavior is past performance, is 55% predictive of future on-the-job behavior, whereas traditional interview methods only identify future behavior 10% of the time.

Examples of behavior based questions include:

1. Tell me about a time when you:
 - ▶ Persuaded others to follow you.
 - ▶ Took charge of a situation and what the outcome was.
 - ▶ Had to discipline or fire a friend.
 - ▶ Had to use verbal communication skills in order to get an important point across.
 - ▶ Felt you were able to build motivation in your coworkers and followers.
 - ▶ Knew your teammates were negative. How did you respond?
2. Describe a time when you:
 - ▶ Felt your ethics were compromised.
 - ▶ Were disappointed in your behavior.
 - ▶ Were tolerant of an opinion different than yours.
 - ▶ Had to conform to a policy with which you disagreed.
 - ▶ Had to stretch yourself and your abilities to get a job done.
 - ▶ Were able to effectively "read" another person, allowing that insight to direct your actions to resolve a problem.
3. What is the most difficult thing that you do on a daily basis in your current role?
4. When working on a team, what role do you usually take? Why?
5. Describe the process you used when you had to make an important, professional life decision.

The interviewer will typically ask additional questions based on the applicant's responses, probing for more depth or detail. Follow-up questions may include:

1. Tell me more about that moment.
2. Explain your decision process.
3. What were your thoughts at that point?

EI = emotional intelligence

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