



# Mentoring

# 101

“Looking for a practice with mentorship for new graduates.”

**AS** business manager of My Veterinary Career, a nationwide veterinary matchmaking company, my team and I review thousands of résumés each year. The above quote comes from a 2015 veterinary graduate’s résumé and appears, in various forms, on at least 75% of résumés we review.

“Mentorship” is no longer synonymous with “hand-holding” and is

winning the credibility it deserves in veterinary medicine. Mentorship has a plethora of benefits for both the mentee and mentor, including<sup>1</sup>:

- Ability to recruit top-tier new graduates
- Faster progression of the mentee toward production
- Higher levels of veterinary care and client communication
- Increased mentee confidence and skill level

- More effective strategies for succession
- Reduced team member turnover.

I am also fortunate to be a practice owner and manager. The benefits of mentorship and seeing how much graduates desire it sold me on its value.

It is important to understand that mentorship can assume different forms. I have had several mentors throughout my career and would

not be where I am without them. In a veterinary practice, most often the mentors are owners and managers, and the mentees are other team members. Although guidance may extend beyond the walls of a practice, this article will focus on professional relationships.

### Successful Mentorships

The 4 most critical components of successful mentorships are the right people; a basic understanding of generational differences; the effective use of mentorship technology; and a clear, objective, progressive mentorship program.

#### 1. The Right People

When I was in the 8th grade, my dad, a veterinarian and practice owner, had me read Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, in which Collins discusses the importance of having the right people, in the right seats, "on the bus."<sup>2</sup> I did not appreciate the wisdom of the concept then but cannot overemphasize its importance now. When hiring a new veterinarian, the current excess capacity<sup>3</sup> can give a false sense of security and lure us into hiring a good, instead of a great, candidate.

Great new graduates understand the value of and want mentorship—not because they lack the confidence to be good general practitioners but because they hunger for knowledge that will allow them to be examination room stars, team leaders, and top

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practice producers. Before hiring, I screen candidates for their ability to be a strong mentee. Here's what I look for in a candidate:

- Interest: The candidate should ask about the practice's culture, management style, medical philosophy, strengths, challenges, and goals—someone who wants *my* job, not just *a* job
- Confidence: An arrogant candidate will not work, but neither will a candidate who is insecure; an ideal mentee is confident in both what he or she knows and does not know
- Proven leadership experience
- The pursuit of continuing education and advanced training (even as a student)
- A willingness to enter a give-and-take relationship. The candidate has ideas and recommendations to bring to the table that I must be willing to hear and discuss. The mentee needs to understand that although what he or she learned in veterinary school provided a great foundation, this is actual practice, and the ideas and processes that work for us may differ from what he or she has learned.

A successful mentoring relationship starts with the right people. I look for a mentee who meets the above criteria. As a mentee, I also look for those traits in a mentor. I have seen many mentoring relationships fail because the mentor, not the mentee, was arrogant, a poor communicator, or not committed to the process.

#### 2. A Basic Understanding of Generational Characteristics

Book upon book has been written on this subject, but the nitty gritty that mentors and mentees need to understand is what motivates different generations and how to best communicate between them.

For example, Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) generally have the attitude that no news from their boss is good news.<sup>4</sup> Millennials (1980–2000\*), on the other hand, thrive on “fast feedback loops.” If they are doing well, they want to be praised. If there is room for improvement, they want to know in the appropriate setting (ie, praise in public, reprimand in private).<sup>4</sup> An effective mentorship plan incorporates fast feedback loops through frequent “huddles.” I meet with one of my



mentees for about 10 minutes each morning to touch base and review the day; we also meet for an hour each week in the evening to review specific goals and status reports.

From a motivational perspective, Millennials generally work to live, not live to work. They are not driven by titles and salary alone, but instead want to know how their work makes a broader impact on the world.<sup>4</sup> In my practices, we do this by focusing on only 2 key concepts: best medicine and best client experience. We make every decision with the goal of providing those 2 elements. We track numbers and measure metrics, but we measure them in regard to those 2 principles.

### 3. The Effective Use of Mentorship Technology

I do not believe in reinventing the wheel. I recommend the Mentorship Toolkit<sup>5</sup> designed and created by VetPartners, the National Veter-

inary Business Management Association, and the American Animal Hospital Association. The free toolkit includes everything a mentor and mentee need to create a customizable, objective, measurable mentorship program.

The second piece of the puzzle is your practice-management software. About two-thirds of practice owners do not use “business concepts” to run their practice, yet those who do earn two-thirds more.<sup>6</sup> As mentors, we need to know how we and our practice are performing. We also owe it to our mentees to work on the key performance indicators (KPIs) that we dictate as important. For example, my practices track metrics such as gross production, average client transaction, and compliance in areas such as nutrition and dentistry.

### 4. A Clear, Objective, Progressive Mentorship Program

The answer to *How do I become a*

*mentor?* combines ingredients 1–3 and culminates in a clear, objective, progressive mentorship program. The Mentorship Toolkit is a great resource, but whether or not you use it, the mentor and mentee *must* sit down at the beginning of the relationship to determine learning and teaching styles, objectives, timetables, and desired outcomes.

### Conclusion

It soon will be hiring season, and résumés of candidates seeking mentorships will pour in. Know the value of mentorship, and use this article to ensure you are equipped to create a winning mentorship program. 

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**Editor's note:** *Stith Keiser is the founder and manager of My Veterinary Career (powered by AAHA), which matches veterinarians and practice managers, at no charge, with practices across North America. He is also a partner in several mixed and small animal practices where his responsibilities include financial sustainability, strategic planning, and team management.*

\*The years for Millennials differ slightly among sources.

### References

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