Considerations for Managing Veterinarians in Three Professional Environments (19-Feb-2001)

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Introduction

The staff of the Greek god Aesculapius, encircled by a sacred serpent, is held as a symbol of hope and triumph over illness by the veterinary profession [1]. It represents the miraculous events that occur as nature defies the inevitable. As students of the art of healing, veterinarians are accomplices to a process that places them in god-like roles. Whether clinging to an animal's life, describing new life forms, or attempting to make life more compatible for animals and man, veterinarians are united by a common oath that dedicates them to "the relief of animal suffering" [2].

Given the years of training and education required to achieve the title of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, these individuals often become highly committed and possess a deep sense of loyalty to their cause. As medical experts, they attain the self-confidence and the ability to boldly challenge the uncertainties of life. Yet, independence, professional loyalty, and creativity, the admirable qualities that make veterinarians or any professional a special commodity, also present a special challenge for those who guide them. Managers of professionals must first understand the beast in question in order to successfully harness their power and control the reins that guide them. By understanding the complexity of the individual, managers can and channel the professional resource to toward the well-being of the organization.

James Herriot depicts a model of a classical veterinarian [3]. The character portrayed is an intuitive individual that finds success easily in the simple rural setting where he practices. His education, wit, and wisdom contribute to the perception that his personal and business interactions somehow always have positive resolution. But in the modern working environment, professionals may be found in complex roles contributing to missions that are foreign and uncomfortable to them. Individuals who take the responsibility of directing an employed veterinarian must acknowledge the independent, innovative nature common to all professionals. Managers must then find ways to channel the professional's energy, knowledge, and productivity into the mission of the organization.

The veterinarian represents the organization's "professional intellect" or cognitive knowledge, as well as the advanced skills, systems understanding, and self-motivated creativity [4]. This is true regardless of the organization's size or structure. As a resource, professional intellect must be fostered and continually developed. As independent individuals, employed veterinarians can challenge management's ability to use them as resources. The organization's mission, reward system, and structure must satisfy the needs of both the professional and the organization simultaneously and synergistically.

The purpose of this paper is to identify unique characteristics of veterinarians as described for the general category "professional". Differences between managers and professionals will be identified as well as sources of potential conflict between the two. Three employment situations are considered in terms of technology, environment, and structure. The first combines small and multiperson practice. The remaining two, academic and industrial practices will be discussed in relation to their similarities to modern corporations. General managerial principles will be discussed that may provide insight into the needs of employed professionals. Ultimately, managers must recognize that the organization's structure and management style should be compatible with the inherent nature of all stakeholders, including professionals, to successfully synergize the organization.

The Professional vs. the Manager

A professional is defined as a person with a specialized body of knowledge often requiring years of study [5]. Although quite accurate, this simple definition is inadequate when considering the unique character of a professional. An expanded definition would describe an intelligent, educated, well trained, hard working, highly motivated, and egotistic individual. Unlike other individuals, professionals generally value their independence and protect it fiercely, taking satisfaction in the fact that no two individuals perform their professional task alike [6].

One of the things that makes professionals unique is their specialized training processes. Years of study result in the
Counterproductive behavior may be manifested in many forms including: more likely to occur if the professional is unable to adapt to the existing culture and organizational mission early on. Norms or goals and are often counterproductive [12]. Unwelcome conduct can occur any time during a professional career but. Deviant behavior can be defined as actions or practices on the part of the professional that are opposed to organizational "mold" the new professional into the culture and routines of the organization. It is during this period that impressions are formed regarding the direction or mission of the organization. If management can align the former student's knowledge and the manager from the professional ranks, they may retain an intimate appreciation for the task environment in which their colleagues operate thereby gaining a significant advantage over managers lacking such experience. Although their training may not have focused upon business-related functions, the duties which they have assumed more closely resemble those of corporate managers than those of their own profession. Therefore by default, the transformed manager gains a new identity in the organizational hierarchy. For example, a dean of a veterinary college may have earned a doctoral degree and diplomat status in a clinical specialty, yet administrative obligation requires his or her time be spent securing funding, satisfying political demands, or filling vacant positions. Similarly, the owner of a private veterinary practice may be preoccupied with business and community affairs. The bulk of the professional responsibility may subsequently default to the veterinary associates. Thus, as the individual assumes more managerial duties, his/her authority increases but his/her operational power or ability to accomplish tasks first hand decreases [6].

Potential Professional Conflict
The expertise that a professional brings into an organization represents a significant resource. Indeed, professionals are being employed in large corporations at an increasing rate. The trend is expected to continue into the next century [9]. As with resources, a professional's performance should reflect the full expression of his/her talent and expertise. Professionals generally hesitate to subordinate themselves to others or to support organizations with goals that are not congruent with their own. Likewise, they may turn inward, isolating themselves from the organization's vision and purpose unless deliberately led in that direction. It becomes the manager's responsibility to develop and subsequently tap the organizational resource embodied within the individual. Therefore, the manager must understand and be prepared for sources of potential conflict, what types of behavior are expressed as a result of conflict, and potential solutions. Failure to recognize the inherent nature of professionals and proactively avoid potential conflict will limit the professional's (and the organization's) ultimate success. Although professionals are employed in small organizations as well as large, the discussion in this section is again limited to large corporate businesses for illustration purposes. A new professional brings a body of current technical information plus an "idealistic" viewpoint as he/she enters the workforce. Also, the new associate possesses an "openness" or a thought process, which is accustomed to learning. Thus, the first few months of employment provide a window of opportunity for managers to orient, or stated in stronger language, "mold" the new professional into the culture and routines of the organization. It is during this period that impressions are formed regarding the direction or mission of the organization. If management can align the former student's knowledge and open attitude with the organizational goals, there is a high likelihood the professional will adopt those goals and become a productive member of the organization. Failure to guide the professional during this critical stage allows the employee to develop perceptions about management, co-workers and his/her new role within the organization that are self-serving rather than being compatible with the needs of the organization [10,11]. Deviant behavior can be defined as actions or practices on the part of the professional that are opposed to organizational norms or goals and are often counterproductive [12]. Unwelcome conduct can occur any time during a professional career but is more likely to occur if the professional is unable to adapt to the existing culture and organizational mission early on. Counterproductive behavior may be manifested in many forms including:

- bootlegging,
- apathy,
- unethical practices,
- excessive professional privilege,
Bootlegging is the practice of engaging in projects that benefit one's personal career even though they may not pay off for the organization. One illustration would be a researcher employed in a firm that produces biological vaccines. The researcher becomes counter productive when more emphasis is placed on mapping the mechanisms by which the host produces immunity and working on the subsequent publications (personal benefit) rather than developing a process to produce a commercial vaccine (economic benefit.) This behavior is a result of a greater allegiance to the scientific profession than to the firm which employs him. The recognition which could be bestowed by the professional association has priority over the urgency to obtain federal approval of the product and its introduction into the market.

Apathy and burnout result as the individual becomes emotionally detached from the organization. A feeling of or alienation replaces the enthusiasm that once served as a motivator. Productivity may decline to a level where the professional cannot justify his/her existence within the organization. Apathy is not uncommon within academic institutions. Jobs secured by tenure in combination with a bureaucratic organizational structure are ideal settings for individuals to drift into a powerless trance. Motivation and productivity can be replaced with status quo and survival.

Unethical practices and excessive professional privilege are actions that result as the employee attempts to exploit his/her position. Obviously, the causes of such behavior could vary, but in general they result when the professional perceives inadequate recognition or compensation for the efforts expended. The long-term employee whose career has reached a plateau may be as likely to be involved in theft or abuse of benefits as does an employee with an unknown history [12]. Successful professionals are frequently sought out by competitors or other organizations. Although this progression may be painful for mentors or managers, it represents a development that is similar to raising children and should be welcomed. The legacy left by the employee should be valuable despite the future loss. However, when employees exit the organization prematurely it may result from a festering of frustration or the cumulative negative effects of many events. In that case the resource is not only lost to future opportunities, it is likely that the employment of the individual was plagued by inefficiencies and other types of unproductive behavior.

Veterinary Professionals and the Environment

Veterinarians in Private Practice - In 1997, 77.7% of veterinary graduates entered private practice [13]. The graduate faces many uncertainties as the transition to the practice environment unfolds. Fresh from academia and licensing board exams, the new graduate is equipped with details of pathology, physiology, medicine, and surgery. Each case is challenging as long lists of potential diagnosis reflect all possible alternatives to the symptoms exhibited. In time, the cases, which originally appeared complex, actually become a routine daily event. The new veterinarian may actually find himself/herself searching for a challenging case to provide variety and stimulation. Modern diagnostic tests augment the practitioner's efforts to such an extent that with little exception, most cases can be sufficiently diagnosed and treated without the need for referral or expert consultation. Thus, the working environment settles into a routine predictable pattern.

The chain-of-command or organizational structure of most traditional veterinary practices is quite simple. Managers have intimate contact with their veterinary associates and lay staff. Communication should occur with ease. Professional responsibility evolves informally and the new veterinarians must adjust their practical skills to accommodate the organization. Likewise, as in most small businesses, the owner retains the final decision making power. Therefore the apprentice/employee assumes few duties other than those which relate to veterinary science.

Service professionals have been equated with mini-firms [14]. The analogy proposes that the operational units (individual employee or team) are independent subsystems that must act autonomously to deal with uncertainty. That is they must assess the need present in the environment, assemble the resources required to solve the problem, and subsequently provide services which are the product of professional practice. How well the task has been completed is determined by the client. Client satisfaction is not only measured verbally but also in the form of revenue. Thus a veterinary practitioner's productivity can be measured in terms of dollars produced.

Some variation regarding the working environment exists between multi-person practices with three or more primary owners and their smaller counterpart. In larger practices, the employed veterinarian functions largely in a mechanized, technical role. Mechanized in this context refers to repeated, predetermined functions designed to be duplicated throughout the organization. Emphasis is placed on business volume and efficient use of human resources. The veterinarian enjoys the luxury of trained support personnel and diagnostic equipment. Activities focus on veterinary science rather than managerial responsibilities. Because some level of specialization frequently exists among the senior veterinarians, entry level veterinarians may be encouraged to refer complicated cases to other members of the practice. In effect, this may encourage specialization and reduce the uncertainty which confronts practitioners in situations with fewer resources.

Employed veterinarians in small practices must be prepared for a wide variety of cases. This diversity creates a generalist which in the long-run may cause feelings of inadequacy as illustrated by the phrase "jack of all trades, master of none". This feeling occurs as the practitioner struggles to keep current on a broad range of new scientific information. In addition,
veterinarians in smaller communities may be more likely to assume public leadership roles. Although not directly related to
the firm, their visibility in the community is considered a valuable contribution. Veterinarians in small practice then, must be
prepared to deal with a variety of technologic and external environmental situations.

Employment in the private veterinary practice has been characterized in this discussion as less technical than had been
anticipated by graduate veterinarians. Over time, a mismatch emerges as the skills of the professional mature, the nature of
the work becomes routine and less challenging. The organizational structure of most practices is simple and controlled by the
primary equity holder(s). This implies that although the employed veterinarian must function as an independent unit,
operational performance occurs in intimate contact with his/her superiors which can create conflict. Key sources of
uncertainty involve interface with the public, declining levels of challenge, and incessant scrutiny from the employer. When
viewed from this perspective, it is understandable that new veterinarians suffer from unrealized expectations. The motives for
entry into the field can easily fade as reality sets in. Apathy, excessive professional privilege, or exit from the organization
are not uncommon among new veterinary professionals that are not successfully integrated into an organization.

The character of academicians closely resembles that of master sculptors. The products of their work are valuable and very
difficult to duplicate. Thus creative academicians may become protective of their field and show little tolerance for peers in
other departments. Deviant behavior may be hard to identify. For example if an academician is assigned equal responsibilities
in teaching and research, it is difficult to regulate how much time and effort are expended on each area. Furthermore, greater
rewards are frequently granted through successful research accomplishments than through routine teaching duties.
The academic environment is contingent upon the level of technology that exists in the field. The uncertainties which are
faced by academic veterinarians are those which only a limited few possess the ability to address. Conversely the authority to
allocate funding and provide other vital resources rests with administrators, frequently far removed from the operational
level.

Although academic veterinarians enjoy autonomy within their respective department or field, the organizational structure in
which they operate may be rigid and complex. There are frequently many levels of hierarchy, which exist between them and
the administration. Individuals who have little understanding of the academic's professional stature or area of expertise may
control physical and financial resources. This bureaucracy may cause perceived or real barriers to the flow of information,
resources, and ultimately successful completion of tasks.

Tenure is component of an evaluation system that has evolved to preserve the freedom of expression that is paramount to the
discovery new facts and ideas. Job security is granted following years of excellent performance. In theory, individuals are
expected continue a career of excellence. However, tenure can create a barrier between academicians and administrators if
apathy and burnout replaces zeal and determination. Outside of allocation of resources, department heads are left with few
managerial tools and must be creative in efforts to motivate and to influence the performance of tenured faculty [15].
Bureaucratic management structure has its greatest opportunity to influence the members of the organization before they
actually are hired. Great care should go into the interview process explaining how the organization operates and what will be
expected of the individual. Dialogue is important to get the interviewee's reaction to existing structure. A clear picture of the
goals and contribution of the applicant can make to the organization should be obtained.

Managers of academic veterinarians must take advantage of the early periods of employment. Impressions that are made on
the employee may shape long-term perceptions of the organization [16]. Likewise, impressions made by the new
professionals may affect their peer's perception of them long into the future. A formal orientation process that involves
interaction between administration and new faculty could inspire, educate, and establish a desirable pattern of behavior for
the new employee.

Once a faculty member is freed to perform his/her duties, a proactive managerial approach involving influence,
encouragement, and persuasion is appropriate. Equipment, support personnel, and financial support are essential raw
materials. Likewise, the professional may become frustrated if procurement of scarce resources becomes a major component
of his/her responsibilities. Shielding the professional from excessive involvement in bureaucratic paperwork is a major
component of the manager's support process. Since recognition within professional associations is a significant motivator,
opportunities for collegial interaction should be encouraged. Money for travel and continuing education can provide incentive
and boost moral. Professional accomplishments should be acknowledged and rewarded with whatever resources are
available.

Managing academic veterinarians involves a process of an empowering the individual academician. The major objectives
involve establishing goals, creating open lines of communication, providing scarce resources, and finally letting the accepted
system operate with as little adjustment as possible.

**Industrial Veterinarians** - Industrial veterinarians have characteristics common to all the previous categories. These characteristics are significantly magnified because the level of training, visibility, and responsibilities are also magnified. Veterinarians in industrial positions usually have extensive formal training similar to academics. They perform daily in a complex, profit-driven arena dealing with highly technical tasks. Interface outside the organizational boundary is likely to be with influential corporate managers, regulatory officials, or peers in similar positions. Veterinarians that make the transition from academia to industry must sacrifice their independence and adopt the strategies and goals of the organization. The working environments in which industrial veterinarians operate and the relational boundaries they span are highly technical and complex. Decisions made in industry are profit driven and may have significant financial impacts.

Organizational structures among industrial firms vary. Large firms tend to have non-technical administrators who deal with organization-wide issues such as funding, long-term goals, and procurement of resources. Veterinarians rarely assume purely administrative roles. Although professionals frequently choose roles that do not venture far from their scientific training, there may also be real and perceived barriers that limit veterinarians access to non-scientific positions. Veterinarians are usually members of a technical team that are assigned to support sales and marketing or to conduct research. A senior professional scientist traditionally manages these groups [17].

The most recent structural trend involves integrating veterinarians into tactical teams which serve a single animal species or product line [18,19]. These teams are designed to promote communication and action between sales and technical representatives, reducing the time required to react to the customer’s needs. Team managers frequently have non-technical backgrounds. Yet another structure couples the veterinary professional to small sales and marketing groups, where he/she serves as advisor, consultant, or ex-officio team member [20]. Direct report, however, is to a technical manager acting as a liaison or coordinator between upper management and field sales. The latter structure provides intimate interaction between the veterinarian and the team members. In addition, the professional can preserve "consultant status" by remaining detached from a selling role. With the support and understanding of the professional in management, the veterinarian is free to make tough decisions without the repercussions which might have occurred with a non-technical person in the supervisory role [7,14].

The manager’s paradigm of professionals, however, has significant influence on the industrial veterinarian’s role and effectiveness within an organization. Managers with a scientific background are likely to understand or retain similar values and motives as those of the professional. This inherently minimizes potential conflict. Non-scientific managers may perceive the veterinarian as an enigma. Faced with sales goals and quotas, the non-technical manager may have expectations of the professional which are uniquely different from those held by the professional. A potential for conflict may be created when managers call for action which borders or extends beyond the veterinarians’ value system e.g. ethics or initial expectations at hiring. Successful non-technical managers seek to understand the psychological needs of industrial veterinarians and draw upon their capabilities for the benefit of the organization.

Industrial veterinarians serve an organization as a source of creativity. Whether the task involves developing new products or positioning an existing product within a market, the organization relies on the veterinarian’s technical expertise for ingenuity. Managers can stimulate the professionals by providing equipment, support personnel and other resources. These resources coupled with encouragement, create an environment of empowerment and creativity, ultimately adding profit for the organization.

Financial resources are less likely to be barriers to the industrial veterinarian as compared to academicians [17]. Likewise, the sense of being confined within a sluggish bureaucracy can be avoided within a corporate setting. If a veterinary professional adopts goals that are compatible with those of the organization, management may have the power to provide rewards and ample resources to accomplish those goals. Obviously, these provisions are in contrast to academia. Steven Jobs, founder of the Apple Company has been called a master impresario of creativity, in an attempt to stimulate industrial professionals. Jobs designed a workplace in a fantasy-land setting that was intended to inspire and motivate. His encouragement of teamwork, promotion of non-traditional thinking and contrarian interaction between designers and engineers forced exploration of new areas and subsequently resulted in a productive research group that was fueled by energy, emotion, and self-satisfaction [21]. Although the model that Jobs designed may not be practical in most organizations, it illustrates that strategic use of resources is a valuable tool to spark creativity and expand the limits of technology. Resources such as high salary, bonuses, entertainment, travel, or state of the art technical equipment when used appropriately, can be used to stimulate creativity and direct the efforts of professional employees. Since promotion seldom takes the veterinarian far from the technical role for which he/she was hired, strategic use of financial resources is an important tool for management.

Industrial veterinarians work with very high levels of technology and environmental uncertainty. Their actions may have great impact on the profitability of the organization. Micro-management of these independent efforts is not likely to be productive. Managers can provide direction to professionals by developing short and long-range objectives. If objectives are created in a cooperative spirit, the professionals can satisfy personal and corporate goals simultaneously. This process also establishes a measure of success and can be incorporated into an evaluation process.
Individuals are frequently employed within corporations after demonstrating maturity in their scientific discipline through academic training or professional experience. They are entrusted with high levels of responsibility. Managing professionals with maturity and responsibility must be proactive. Establishment of general direction, providing resources, and rewards are the implements that managers must use to guide the efforts of industrial veterinarians.

Management Principles
Bywaters (1991) has outlined a set of principles from which Table 1 was adapted [6]. Managers must recognize that the foundation of an organization is its people. Hiring the best possible candidate for the job will increase the likelihood that an employee will be successfully integrated into the system.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Principles for Managing Professionals. From: [6].</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Assure the mission of the organization is compatible with the ethical code of the profession.</td>
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<td>2. Keep only a few business objectives that need to be supported.</td>
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<td>3. Limit rules to those things that are essential.</td>
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<td>4. Emphasize the professional advantages of teamwork.</td>
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<td>5. Organize in a combination of centralization and decentralization.</td>
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<td>7. Fight to communicate.</td>
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<td>8. Build consensus.</td>
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<td>9. Rethink your reward system.</td>
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<td>10. Stay future-oriented.</td>
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Instilling an understanding of the mission of the organization in the first few months of employment will provide direction for new employees while they are in the impressionable period. Managers should realize that forcing intensive early development through mentoring, on-the-job training, and peer pressure introduces positive paradigms of the organization's culture. When the mission is revealed, it must be compatible with ethical code of the professional to avoid undesirable behavior and premature exit from the organization. Long-term professional and business goals must include honest and realistic productivity expectations.

New employees need to feel like a member of the team. Opportunities for creativity are an essential component of a professional's developmental process. If the tasks veterinarians are asked to perform tend to become routine, then efforts to stimulate and encourage professional development must be deliberate [22]. Continuing education can be an excellent source of stimulation and reassurance. In addition, providing resources can also encourage specialty skills that can evolve into profits for the organization.

Assignments should be increasingly challenging and rewarding. Likewise, employed veterinarians should be included in the organizational decision-making plan as soon as feasible. While incentives should share profits created by the employed veterinarian, performance evaluation standards should be based upon the end product. Likewise they should both be congruent with the organization's mission as well as the professional's career direction. Managers of veterinarians should avoid authoritarian strategies that involve issuing orders. Professionals are best stimulated through powers of persuasion, negotiation, and communication.

Summary
Veterinarians are highly educated, uniquely creative individuals. Managing the resources embodied in a veterinarian can be challenging. However, it can be assumed that the person who accepts a role as a manager is in pursuit of challenge. Managers who consider the education, experience, and values that veterinary professionals possess, can channel those resources for greater benefit of the organization. A match must exist between the individual organizational task or responsibility, the environment, and the structure.

Inherent differences exist between professionals and managers. This is largely due to their organizational responsibility but can also relate to past experience and training. Likewise, veterinarians in varying working environments have unique characteristics that warrant consideration to fully utilize their expertise and creative potential. A proactive and understanding managerial philosophy can synergize human and physical resources to attain fulfillment of the organization's as well as employee's goals.
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