How to Transition a New Associate Into Your Practice

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1. Introduction

You have been running around checking mares at 7:00 AM, seeing colics at 8:00 AM, getting routine appointments in the middle, breeding mares once FedEx delivers, seeing another colic at 8:00 PM, checking that mare for fluid, and maybe going to bed at some point to start all over tomorrow. Perhaps an associate would be a good idea....but that is a lot of work right? You bet it is, but if you do it the correct way, you have a life back, happy clients, and potentially someone to buy your practice in the future.

The most important item needed is patience. Before you even start looking for an associate, think about what your needs and wants are. The first step involves an appropriate interview process. Spend some time interviewing candidates. Identify your top two to three and have them come to your practice for a day or two. Make sure they fit with your practice, your clients, and your culture. Pick a few cases and ask “What would you do?” so you can see how your philosophies mesh. Watch them interact on an actual call with clients. If you are an anaerobe and they are an aerobe, it is not going to work; you just can’t live and work in the same environment!

The next step may not seem important to the transition but it is imperative. Find a good veterinary-specific lawyer and get a good contract before your new associate starts. A good lawyer knows the most common sticking points and will help you work out the important details before you commit to each other. Listen to the points made by the lawyer and address them now.

2. Now to the Nitty Gritty

As soon as you have determined who your associate will be and when they will begin, start talking with your clients about their skills and qualifications. Horse people are crazy, and we don’t like new people! At every appointment, spend a few moments talking about your new associate and how they will take care of your client’s needs.

This is also a good time to update your website with your new associate’s biography, photograph, and any other pertinent information. The more clients know about “The New Person,” the more likely they are to use them.

Along those lines, schedule an educational seminar or open house to allow your clients to meet the new associate in a social setting. This takes the stress away from both your associate and your clients. Your associate only has to focus on meeting
the clients, not what vaccines they are due for, how
do I use the computer, and where does this road go.
Clients don’t have to worry about their horse’s im-
mediate health issues or the stress of an emergency
situation.

Be committed to mentoring even the most experi-
cenced associate. You can’t just drop them into the
practice, clientele, and staff. Anticipate having
your new associate ride with you for at least 2 wk.
During that time, make sure they have face time
with your most important clients. These are the
clients that need to be comfortable with your new
associate if it is going to work in the long term.
We will often schedule a quick stop-by just to be sure
these clients get quality one-on-one time with the
new associate.

If your associate is a recent graduate, be prepared
to give significant guidance on medical and surgical
procedures. You should bring them along for sig-
nificant cases, for instance, a difficult lameness,
dental extraction, or laceration repair. The oppor-
tunity for face time with you will give them confi-
dence to deal with cases in the future. It will also
let them know you are there as a knowledge base
they can use. Don’t forget to use their knowledge.
Recent grads come out with the latest and greatest
imaging and therapies. They also tend to be better
record keepers. Use these qualities to elevate your
practice and your own knowledge.

Does your new associate have specialized knowl-
edge in an area? Tell your clients loud and often.
Okay, don’t scream at them, but if your associate
loves lameness, send that slightly off hind limb
lameness to them. They will enjoy spending all
that time blocking, the client will be happier, and
you will be happier doing what you enjoy.

Especially if you have been a solo practitioner but
even if you are the “Senior” doctor in the practice, be
prepared to transition the staff. Staff have often
become used to your way and see it as the only way.
However, we all know nobody does it the same.
We have established vaccine protocols, pre-purchase
exams, and some of the routine stuff, but we still all
have a different sedation protocol we like. This can
be a source of tension if staff take a “Well Dr. Was
Here First does it this way!” attitude. Take the
time to train your staff that change is not bad, sup-
port your associate’s decisions, and help keep com-
munication lines open.

If you have been that solo road warrior who
worked 24 h/day 7 days/wk, be prepared for an
honest discussion about work/life balance. The
younger generation is willing to work hard but
wants to play hard as well. They are also ready to
be educated about more than just medicine. Take
that “I want a raise” talk and turn it into a discus-
sion of how finances of a practice work. Take the “I
want a new gadget” talk and turn it into a discussion
on this is how you pay for your new gadget. It
should be noted that, as a member of the “younger
generation,” we don’t take just plain no as an an-
swer; educate us on how to earn more money and
how to afford that gadget we want. Just like cli-
ents, a more educated associate is a better associate.

Regular staff meetings and doctor meetings will
help keep those communication lines open, identify
potential problems early, and allow for rapport to
build between yourself and your associate. The
ability to set aside time to deal with issues as they
come up will make the transition smooth for you,
your staff, and your associate.

One should be prepared for communication to
come in different forms, especially if you have hired
those of us from a younger generation. You will
learn how to text on your phone whether you like or
not.

The end result should be that you have a life back,
your associate earns a good living and expands their
knowledge and practice base, your staff and clients
are happy, and all is right with the world. Time
spent transitioning your associate will result in a
statistically significant rise in practice profitability
and efficiency.