How to Leverage Technicians/Assistants

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1. Introduction
There have been many articles in recent years on the value of veterinary technicians and assistants to both hospital and ambulatory practices. Clearly in a larger hospital environment, the veterinary technician duties and supervision are well defined. The segment of practice I would like to address are the medium caseload hospital/ambulatory practices and the primarily ambulatory practices.


2. Patient Care
Hands-on assistance with basics such as actual administration of treatments, diagnostic and therapeutic care, and monitoring patient responses to treatment or progression of symptoms are but a few ways technicians and assistants are invaluable on a daily basis.

3. Client Relations
Education is paramount in practice—how to put on a foot pack, how to replace a post-operative surgical bandage, and discussion of worming and vaccination protocols with guidance to veterinary opinions as needed. Sometimes just a good shoulder to cry on is all it takes to cement client relations and build loyalty to your practice.

4. Practitioner Safety
Reliable and competent restraint is needed during procedures and examinations. The ability to have a panoramic observation to anticipate when matters are going askew before crisis hits or obstacles such as pitchforks, slippery floors, or stall doors left open inadvertently is invaluable!

5. Practitioner Quality of Life
Plain and simple, good assistants allow the veterinarian to go about his or her duties in an efficient and capable manner that will get him or her home on time to have a life!

6. Financial Return
Related to quality of life is the efficiency of service delivery and also the ability to optimize practice efficiencies from equipment maintenance to drug ordering/stocking and account receivable collections.

7. Practice Growth Potential
Efficiency, a pipeline to the equine community, a willingness to push the envelope to grow the practice—team building at it is best.
8. Changing Technology
A prerequisite to a top notch technician is the “geek” quality. The ability to learn how to operate new technology as it appears in the veterinary workplace without instructions in plain English, the ability to problem solve in the field when technical support refuses to answer, and the ability to manage the reams of raw data that emerges from our money pits—instant access to consultants and clients has created a need for technicians who are capable of operating and archiving all manner of digital information!

Raw materials needed are intelligent, innovative, independent individuals with a desire to create a “career” within your practice. Prerequisites to select for are equine expertise (that elusive quality that some people possess that allows them to “read” a horse and respond appropriately on the end of the shank), common sense, willingness to work with the practice team but still be a self-starter and work independently, people skills, reliability (on time and regular), and physically fit and active.

9. Methods to Hone Some of the Material
Discussions regarding expectations and the “big picture” of what is best for the practice is also best for all involved from doctor through receptionist through technician. For example, a poorly stocked vehicle affects doctor production, receptionist scheduling, technician efficiency, and ultimately the bottom line of practice profits.

The definition of leverage is “means of accomplishing a purpose; power or influence.” Therefore, how to leverage technicians? I suggest the means is to motivate technicians with responsibility, some flexibility to control their part under the practice umbrella, and a financial stake in the practice pie, thus providing a work environment where employees are able to remain constantly engaged in practice work previously described purposes of this discussion.

Cross-training of technicians to drug order, restrain, handle client accounts, schedule appointments, review billing details, handle archiving, and equipment service challenges is but one way for your staff to remain interested and useful. Tie technician performance to financial incentives and you provide an opportunity to build practice and improve efficiency.

One should consider flexible scheduling to meet practice and private needs. Morning and evening shifts can provide fresh, focused veterinary assistance without the cost of overtime and burnout. Alternating time in the office and the field can keep staff sharp and cognizant of the impact of each work zone on the other.

Structuring compensation with a base living wage and benefits augmented by percent of profit centers directly impacted by staff such as dispensed goods and laboratory work done for outside practices and a percent of net profit divided by total staff work hours and allocated back per hour to those working the hours provides a significant financial incentive to focus on all aspects of practice that affect the bottom line. A damaged ultrasound machine can reduce the net with loss of use revenue and the actual cost of repair—less profit for all to share!

To summarize this discussion, leveraging technicians is about careful selection of your staff, nurturing and training on all fronts, and compensating and respecting every individual within the practice in a manner in which they want to remain invested in your practice, thus presenting a congruent, efficient, and competent practice image to your clients and preserving patient and doctor survival during difficult times!