



Slow Down to Speed Up: How to Create Practice Efficiency

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INTRODUCTION

The pressures of the pandemic forced veterinary hospital teams to change how they conducted business. Factors that influenced changes included where the hospital was located as infections rose. Leadership reacted differently based on hospital size and ownership, with some corporately owned groups responding early, proactively providing guidance and technology to help their hospitals thrive. Another element shaping the response was adaptability and resilience of leadership. The necessity to quickly modify business models simultaneously unmasked and exacerbated inefficiencies in hospital operations. Strategies discussed in this article will help hospitals learn how to identify inefficiencies and take actionable steps to become more efficient.

Is Your Hospital Led By 'Mourners' or 'Stormers'?

The operational shifts needed as the pandemic took hold was challenging for all business leaders and even more problematic for those leading veterinary hospitals, due to ingrained habits and an aversion to change. According to a study¹ of over 1,000 innovation leaders conducted between April and August 2020, companies responded to change forced by COVID-19 in two ways.

Companies led by 'mourners' adapted slowly, if at all. They took a cautious approach to change because they were overwhelmed by the emotions and uncertainty triggered by the pandemic. As a result, they focused on what they could control in an attempt to compensate for the feelings of the loss of 'normal'. A lot of energy was spent looking backward, on how things had been and also on worrying about what the future of work might look like. Caught in the grip of over-analysis, these businesses found the concept of change overwhelming. This mindset negatively impacted employees, who experienced high rates of anxiety and depression.

In contrast some businesses embraced the need to adapt, quickly adopting business models that anticipated their clients' needs and made it easy to do business with them. Companies with 'stormers' as leaders focused on creating new ways of doing business that energized and engaged their workforces.

Another major difference between 'mourners' and 'stormers' was their interaction with customers. 'Mourners' withdrew, reducing

their interactions with customers. In comparison, 'stormers' recognized that, due to the lack of social interactions during the pandemic, consumers wanted to be more connected than ever to their service providers. They understood that there was a unique opportunity to bond their customers to them and create loyalty.

Veterinary Leadership, The Pandemic and Impact on Practices

In veterinary hospitals, the pandemic unmasked operational inefficiencies. What had been inconvenient before the pandemic became painful and unpleasant during the pandemic. Practices with agile leadership anticipated where pressure points would occur and modified operations. Some examples of these changes include examination protocol modifications, from how medical history was collected, where and how the examinations occurred and how the pet owner would receive educational information and treatment recommendations.

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Another example was telephone management. Forward looking managers created alternatives to overwhelmed

customer care specialists by re-routing phone calls to employees working from home. These employees could communicate from a calm environment to meet clients' needs, from scheduling appointments to medication refills. This change reduced hospital-based team member stress. Rather than managing overactive phones, customer care specialists could focus on efficiently serving clients that were at the hospital.

Really smart leaders seized the opportunity to refine and enhance client communication and interactions, using such formats as texting, app-based notifications or direct emails to clients regarding changing hospital operations. Social media became a tool used to share hospital team's struggles, marvel at their resilience and celebrate their wins! These responses created connectivity with clients, an important function during a time when veterinary hospitals were physically distanced from their clients. It helped clients to be prepared for changing service models and allowed them to act more compassionately toward hospital teams, especially when the daily challenges veterinary teams faced were shared through social media.

Many industries, including veterinary services, expected to see a contraction in business, due to negative economic indicators, uncertainty and job losses secondary to business restrictions. Conversely, demand for veterinary care increased during the pandemic, which added a new level of stress to inefficient systems. Multiple industry analysts report that while veterinary revenues increased an average of 5-7% nationally over 2019 figures^{2,3} the number of patient visits were unchanged from 2019³. New client numbers did break a month over month

4 year decline to end up at a mere 1.2% higher than in 2019³. These statistics might surprise you, given how hard you worked in 2020 to provide care to people and their pets. Given the level of pets seen and hours worked, why aren't these numbers more impressive?

The Effects of Inefficiency

Workplace inefficiency is the primary reason that veterinary hospitals didn't see greater gains in 2020. Typical hallmarks of inefficiency include increasing gross revenue with decreasing retained profits, increased overtime, increased staff turnover, pets not receiving services when due and even loss of clients.

Inefficient business practices lead to inconsistencies in client experiences, including increased wait times for services to be delivered, rushed and incomplete client communication and business mistakes such as incorrect invoicing practices. Teamwork breaks down, with each team member in survival mode, trying to make it through another day.

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In human medicine, "inefficient, chaotic and administratively burdensome work environments have been recognized as a

key predictor of clinician burnout”⁴. The outcomes are lost profits, stressed teams, frustrated clients and missed opportunities.

While the above are serious consequences of inefficiency, even more critical is the understanding of efficiency as a key driver of employee burnout. The recognition that burnout has organizational components, as well as individual ones, is mainly unexplored in veterinary medicine. A recent study⁵ evaluated workplace stressors in veterinary medicine, and designed an assessment tool to measure stressors experienced by veterinarians. Eight causative factors were identified as contributing to burnout, negative physical wellbeing and thoughts of self-harm. One of the factors is ‘workload’, associated with overwhelming caseloads, insufficient time to provide patient care, constant interruptions, long work hours without sufficient breaks and heavy administrative workloads such as charting of medical records.

Outcomes of burnout are devastating to the individual employee, the team, clients, patients and the practice. When a person experiences burnout, they are emotionally and physically exhausted, often feel isolated, defeated and that their efforts don’t make a difference. They may begin to treat others as objects, minimizing them and treating them with detachment. This attitude is readily detected by clients, who want personalized attention. This is yet another way that burnout leads to decreased client satisfaction.

Burnout also threatens patient safety and decreased quality of care. In human medicine, it is linked to an increase in medical errors³. It has a profound impact on veterinary teams and the practice itself, as individuals experiencing burnout have

higher levels of absenteeism and turnover, further stressing coworkers.

Inefficiencies very well might be a root cause of trained veterinary professionals leaving the veterinary profession. It is imperative to break the vicious cycle, as the human and business losses are costly.

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5 Ways to Drive Efficiency

Where Do Inefficiencies Exist In Your Hospital?

Recognizing and identifying where inefficiencies exist is the first step in creating effective, enjoyable hospital environments. There are several ways problem spots can be identified:

Client surveys: These can be administered in a variety of ways: after each appointment, during select time periods or annually. Each of these provides different information.

- Surveying clients immediately after appointments provides real-time

information about inefficiencies that might be developing. It allows hospital leadership to respond to client's concerns proactively, and work together with the client to create a positive outcome.

- Client surveys can be employed during select business cycles, such as during different phases of the pandemic, to learn what is working well and what can be better. By eliciting client perspective, hospital leadership is working in partnership with clients to have co-created outcomes.
- Annual surveys are excellent tools to highlight year over year trends in client satisfaction.

Get staff perspective: A second way to identify inefficiencies is to ask the veterinary team. Veterinary teams live each pain point, and are well positioned to identify what is working well and what needs to be modified. This input can be obtained through anonymous team surveys, one-on-one meetings, or group meetings among employees with similar roles, such as receptionists, tech teams and doctor teams. If a psychologically safe environment exists within the hospital, pain points due to inefficiency can be explored in all-hospital meetings. Hospital leadership should explain their observations and concerns before any surveys or meetings, asking for insight from all team members to fully identify the challenges and to develop solutions.

Know the numbers: The third way to find inefficiencies is through financial analysis. What percentage of patients are being seen when they are due for preventive and chronic care services. How many clients are missing routine care? What is the level of adherence

to preventive care recommendations? Is hospital profitability increasing year over year, or has it decreased? How do financial metrics align with industry benchmarks, particularly in high expense categories like staff payroll and cost of goods sold (COGS)?

Ask for help: A final way to assess inefficiencies is to engage the services of a veterinary business consultant. These trained, impartial professionals evaluate daily hospital operations and workflow. They can often spot inefficiencies and missed opportunities that can be improved upon to drive better effectiveness and profitability.

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How Can the Negative Effects Of Workload Be Minimized?

The second way of driving efficiency in hospitals and lessening veterinarian burnout includes creating efficient ways to complete medical records. Some ways that hospitals can make the medical record keeping process easier include the use of the EMR modules in PMS systems, using standardized examination EMR templates

and utilizing an examination room scribe or voice-to-text tool.

Why Use Electronic Medical Records?

While the majority of veterinary hospitals have Practice Management Software Systems, a 2014 study⁶ found that only 17% used exclusively electronic records (EMR), while 63% used a combination of paper and electronic records. Advantages to utilizing the EMR module in practice management software systems include legible records, no more lost files, more standardized records and the ease of emailing records to other parties, such as other primary care veterinarians, specialist or emergency facilities and insurance companies. Often, patient records can be accessed by multiple users at the same time.

An underutilized aspect of electronic medical records is the use of diagnostic codes. If consistently entered for every patient, these codes can be used to track emerging disease trends in the hospital database, including zoonotic diseases. The codes also create marketing opportunities; targeted campaigns can be sent to the owners of pets with specific medical conditions, such as obesity, arthritis or dental disease. When electronic medical record use is adopted, outcomes include improved client communication, better patient care and operational efficiency.

Standardized Electronic Medical Record Examination Templates

The mandated adoption of electronic health records in human medicine has come with a cost. In human medicine, it has been found that for every hour spent in direct patient care, two hours are spent on completing patient medical records³ and other tasks such as interpreting lab

results, ordering medications and creating treatment plans. Additionally, physicians spent an additional 1-2 hours per evening completing medical records⁷. While time and motion studies to measure this in veterinary medicine have not been published, it is probable that the veterinarian's time spent in direct patient care and charting of medical records corresponds to the findings of this human study.

An important component to driving efficiency with electronic medical records is the adoption of standardized examination and treatment templates that can be imported into a patient's medical record. While it is tempting for each veterinarian to create their own versions, this can drive inefficiency, especially for the technician or assistant inputting information. Veterinarians in a hospital should work together to create uniform templates that are acceptable to all doctors and provide a consistent experience for all users. These templates should have as many pre-populated findings as possible to minimize data input time. Many hospitals elect to have normal findings pre-populated, which can be modified as needed. Another way to drive efficiency is to have pull-down menus, with different examination findings, diagnostics, vaccinations and medications.

Examination Room Scribes and Voice-to-Text

In human medicine, the use of examination room scribes³ is commonplace. With a dedicated team member to document office visits, the physician can be fully present for the patient. Medical records are more accurate and complete, reducing the time needed for after-appointment record-keeping by physicians, leading to an increase in professional satisfaction. The cost of employing additional team

members to scribe has been shown to be offset by increases in productivity, yielding greater profits. Finally, human patients report increased levels of satisfaction, most likely due to the increased attentiveness of the physicians.

With the current workforce challenges in hiring veterinarians and credentialed technicians, hospital leadership must seek new ways to create improved business practices. Integrating scribes into a veterinary team helps lower the risk of burnout to doctors by minimizing the after-hours charting. There is increased doctor availability during the day due to lessened administrative burdens, resulting in more patients being seen. There are decreased missed charges and less record-keeping omissions. Because our clients are accustomed to scribes in their own health care, clients will appreciate the undivided attention by veterinarians, increasing their overall satisfaction.

An alternative to scribes is speech-to-text software. These systems have improved significantly in the past few years. There is a learning curve, as the dictation will need to mirror the template of the examination, or each section will need to be cut and pasted from a document into each appropriate section of the examination form.

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Leveraging Technology For Efficiency

The third way to drive efficiency is to leverage technology best practices. The adoption of technology during the pandemic varied greatly and was largely driven by hospital leadership attitudes toward innovation. Successful innovations are those that bring value to clients, by making their interactions with veterinary hospitals easier and more pleasant. While it is yet unknown which newer innovations adopted during the pandemic our clients will expect to continue four likely offerings that can drive efficiencies in your hospital, even after clients resume face to face appointments, include medical history/patient intake forms, telemedicine, video examinations and curbside care.

Using Technology to Enhance Medical History Gathering

Hospitals that automated the medical history-taking portion of the examination experienced decreased team stress levels, by lessening the real-time burden of collecting information. Rather than technicians or assistants collecting patient history curbside or by phone, forms were completed by the owner prior to arrival at the hospital. Veterinary members had time to review the patient's medical history in combination with presenting complaints. This approach gave the team member a better understanding of the pet's needs, including overdue services, medication refills and needed diagnostics. Clients benefitted in two main ways: they could provide a more complete medical history, with time to think about the questions being asked. Additionally, the

more comprehensive approach to their pet's health streamlined the care their pets needed. By combining services due, it was a more efficient use of the client's time and better way to drive adherence.

Hospitals leveraged online documents such as Jot or Google forms to create medical history documents. Other options include partnering with a company that integrates apps with practice management software systems to provide these services. The use of pre-collected medical history forms should not replace collaboration with the client. To bring value to the interaction, it is essential that the veterinary team member have a brief conversation with the client when they are collecting the pet from the car. The team member should review the concerns of the client by providing a brief summary, and ask if there is anything else to add. The team member should also review any additional services or medication refills that are due.

Telemedicine

Telemedicine offered a safe alternative to traditional care for both humans and pets during the acute phase of the pandemic. There are distinct advantages to using telemedicine in veterinary medicine, including increasing access for pets whose owners live rurally. The ability to 'examine' the pet in its home environment allows veterinary professionals to observe the pet in a comfortable, low stress environment, which is ideal for anxious dogs and cats. Valuable insight into different health conditions such as lameness or behavioral concerns can be gained by seeing the pet at home. Veterinarians can study the home setting, and provide actionable recommendations for environmental modification, such as additional lighting on dark stairways for dogs with vision and

mobility problems. If you are currently or would like to utilize telemedicine in your practice, what policies and guidelines need to be in place to be efficient? Resources that help provide guidance on telehealth procedures can be found at the Veterinary Virtual Care Association⁸ or at AVMA⁹.

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Virtual Examinations

Seeing *is* believing! When clients aren't physically present for examinations, it creates a host of inefficiencies that undermine the hospital's value proposition. When the client isn't part of the examination process, the ability of the veterinarian to show the client health concerns identified during the exam is non-existent. The veterinarian must verbally describe the findings, without the benefit of partnering with the client during the examination. Gaining client consent to pursue diagnostics and treatments is more difficult, and adherence to recommendations is lower. All of the back and forth creates time inefficiencies for the doctor, veterinary team, client and patient. The risks of misunderstandings and mistakes are higher.

Hospitals that enable clients to be virtually present during an examination, through the use of a video conferencing platform, are able to create a customized offering that provides client solutions. The clients can see what is happening during the examination, how their pet is reacting and the veterinarian can make recommendations in real-time, which is a comfortable communication style for both the veterinarian and the client. The ability of the veterinarian to partner with client and elicit their perspectives remains intact, leading to higher levels of client satisfaction. Because client education can occur during the visit, adherence to recommendations is higher.

There are many ways to create functional client-examination room technology interfaces. In the past year, several veterinary technology companies have brought solutions to market. Other options include using a virtual platform like Zoom, Skype or Teams and a webcam in the examination room. A meeting invitation would be sent to the owner to join the examination from their phone. If they don't have a phone, or if the hospital's internet connection is poor, provide an I-pad that uses a hot spot to facilitate a wifi connection for client use.

Curbside Care

Innovative hospitals modified hospital operations to minimize curbside inefficiencies. They introduced apps that text hospital computers or designated cell phones, alerting the front desk that the client has arrived. This tool reduced incoming phone calls, minimizing stress and chaos at the front desk. By using curbside check-in forms housed on the app, the client can indicate if they are at the hospital for an appointment, to pick up food

or medications and where they are parked. These alerts can also be programmed to show up on treatment room white boards, so that the entire team is aware of when clients arrive.

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A common drawback to curbside care is client contact post-examination, when examination findings are summarized and consent for clinical recommendations obtained. Many clients use the time in the car to work remotely and ignore incoming calls. Utilizing an app that can send a text notification provides an alternative way to reach these clients. It is also helpful to set expectations with clients, using the signposting communication technique:

"Mrs. Smith, after Dr. Brown examines Fluffy she will call you and discuss the examination findings and make any care recommendations. This call should happen in the next 20 minutes. Because we want to be able to treat Fluffy in a timely manner and get her back to you, it is important that Dr. Brown can talk with you when she calls. We have found it is best for our clients to avoid being on the phone during this time. If you haven't heard from us within 30 minutes, please text us at 123-456-7890 for an update."

Educating clients, especially the owners of new puppies and kittens, has been challenging during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, client education mainly occurred in the examination room, prior to

the physical examination. Curbside care, with its longer appointment times, means that something has to be sacrificed, and it is usually preventive care client education. One way to continue to provide this critical service is to video record needed client education, hosting it on a dedicated channel, like YouTube, Facebook live or Instagram TV. When unique content videos are hosted on your website, they have the added benefit of increasing SEO, which will elevate your website in google rankings. When an appointment is scheduled, send clients a confirmation text or email with links to the recommended educational content. Explain to them they should watch it before arriving for the appointment, so that any questions they have can be answered while they are at the hospital.

Creating Efficiency Using Team-Based Models of Care

Establishing team-based models of care is the fourth way to drive efficiency. In human medicine, studies found that a “strategic redistribution of work among members of the practice team, so that the right person is doing the right work at the right time”⁴ resulted in better job satisfaction, lessened burnout and lower rates of turnover in both doctors and staff. Health care team members can work at the top of their license, which creates better opportunities for continued learning, more engagement and better patient care.

In veterinary medicine, we hire employees for positions and are rigid in the roles they fill; preventing them from spending their time doing what motivates them, within a broader job description. This oversight leads to a lack of engagement, defined by Gallup as “those who are psychologically unattached to their work and company and who put time, but not energy or passion,

into their work. Not engaged employees will usually show up to work and contribute the minimum required. They're also on the lookout for better employment opportunities and will quickly leave their company for a slightly better offer.”¹⁰ As we consider how team based models of care can create efficiency, hospital leadership should ask employees “what motivates them”. According to Gallup, engaged employees are “those who are highly involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace.” These attitudes are critical to efficiency.

In veterinary medicine, the team-based model of care is often identified as “leveraged veterinary teams”. When correctly structured, each team member contributes to patient care in ways that correspond to their training and skills. For example, examination room scribes are responsible for capturing physical examination findings, diagnostic recommendations and treatments. They schedule medical re-evaluation, preventive care, surgical and dental appointments.

“When correctly structured, each team member contributes to patient care in ways that correspond to their training and skills.”

During an examination, assistants gather and review medical history with the client, provide client education, assist the doctor during the examination and help veterinary technicians during laboratory

sample collections and other diagnostics. They create treatment plans and fill medications prescribed by the doctor. They review the medication directions with the client, including side effects and answer any questions.

Veterinary technicians obtain test samples, perform in-house laboratory testing and provide results to the veterinarian. They supervise radiology procedures and perform patient care, such as changing bandages, rechecking surgical incisions and oversee the care of hospitalized patients.

The veterinarian's focus is on the client, allowing them to create strong bonds by minimizing distractions. The veterinarian has time to elicit the client's perspective and goals, taking these into account when developing treatment plans which aids in cultivating partnership with the clients. Ideally, they have time between visits to review the patient's medical record, make adjustments and close them.

The outcome of leveraging veterinary teams is higher client satisfaction, resulting in strong hospital-client bonds and higher word of mouth referrals.

"The outcome of leveraging veterinary teams is higher client satisfaction..."

Veterinary team members are empowered, feeling a greater sense of purpose in their work, using their skills and knowledge to contribute to both the client and patient well-being.

By trusting and leveraging their teams, veterinarians are able to provide focused care to an increased number of clients. The efficiencies in medical record documentation process minimize the after-hours demands of record keeping, lessening veterinarian burnout.

Evolving Client Behaviors

The final way to drive efficiency is to understand how the pandemic has impacted client behaviors. The pandemic was disruptive to pet owners as well as veterinary hospitals. As veterinary hospitals forge a path ahead, how do they need to modify their business practices to meet new client expectations?

Personalized Care During Physical Distancing

Consider how pandemic hospital operations created a less personalized experience for clients. Interactions with animal health care teams were severely curtailed, clients felt isolated from the veterinary office visit and concerned about 'abandoning' their pets to receive necessary care alone. As a result, many clients were anxious and scared, which manifested in dissatisfied and verbally abusive behaviors directed at veterinary teams or on social media. Hospitals that successfully managed this client behavior understood and acknowledged pet owner fears. They were accountable to their clients' needs through frequent communication that set expectations for clients, taking the surprise out of the visit. With every interaction, be it curbside, phone or in writing, they used empathy and compassion to help

personalize interactions. How will your personalize the client experience as we resume more normal business operations? What worked before the pandemic may not be enough now.

Creating Tighter Client Bonds

The pandemic had an upside for pets and their care. Given the limited opportunities to bond clients to hospitals with curbside care, what do pet owners need to make sure they continue to provide necessary preventive care? Communicating with clients throughout the year will reinforce the importance of veterinary care for their pets. Send curated content to owners based on breed, life stage of the pet and seasonal health risks, in easily consumed formats such as short videos or infographics sent via email and text links. Leverage remotely located employees to make overdue reminder phone calls, sending overdue services text messages and emails. Make it easy for clients to schedule appointments by using on-line appointment scheduling, allowing them more flexibility in the scheduling process. All of these actions will help increase efficient interactions.

" Send curated content to owners based on breed, life stage of the pet and seasonal health risks, in easily consumed formats such as short videos or infographics sent via email and text links. "

Make It Easy for Clients to Say 'Yes'

Another way to drive efficiency is to take the surprise and negotiation out of the cost of pet health care. Educate clients early and frequently about the anticipated costs of each life stage. Proactively offer solutions to help owners afford the care their pets will need by educating them about wellness plans, pet health insurance and third party payer solutions.

" Another way to drive efficiency is to take the surprise and negotiation out of the cost of pet health care. "

When clients are empowered to accept care recommendations, it minimizes the time spent in treatment plan negotiation, creating efficiency.

What Do Your Clients Want?

What pandemic-inspired services will clients expect to continue? Don't guess... ask your animal health care teams and your clients what they would like to see continue. To elicit the client's perspective, use the previously discussed surveys, a poll publicized through email and text messages, and your social media pages. Team members can contribute to the conversation through surveys or during staff meetings. Remember, new initiatives need to be about bringing new value, not new things. These initiatives will only be useful if they create value for the customers and efficiencies for the hospital.

Conclusion

Beyond the obvious financial benefits that result with improved clinical efficiency, there are reciprocal benefits on team well-being. These include positive impacts on workplace culture, a greater sense of teamwork and employee engagement. The creation of more efficient workflow results in a reduction of employee burnout, leading to better career satisfaction and professional longevity. When employees are happier and the hospital environment is more welcoming, the impact on both clients and pets is less stress. It is worth your time to slow down, find and fix inefficiencies, to speed up!

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