



# Workplace Efficiency: It Takes a Team

**F**eeling stressed? Not enough hours in the day to complete your job duties? Is your practice disordered and chaotic much of the time? If you answered Yes, you may need to focus on improving workplace efficiency.

You may not be the designated manager in your practice, yet you can add value to your role and your practice by making concrete, productive suggestions geared toward efficiency improvement. Use this article to analyze and assess your team. Present your thoughts in a productive and positive way to your practice leadership.



Many factors influence workplace efficiency, but whether team members work together effectively as a team is most important. Do you have a “working group” or a team at your practice? Working groups focus on individual goals, whereas a team focuses on shared goals. To improve teamwork and productivity, be sure to clearly articulate the goals of the practice so everyone is focused on shared goals.<sup>1</sup>

For example, if one practice goal is to provide excellent service by telephone, involve the whole team by encouraging every team member to answer the telephone during busy periods.

Even teams with shared goals run into inefficiency problems. Keep the practice running smoothly and minimize stress with these suggestions.

### 1. Establish Clear Job Roles

Team members know their basic roles. Problems arise when specific details about job responsibilities are not clearly defined. These 4 steps will help clarify roles and improve efficiency.

- **Do not make assumptions.**

What may be intuitive or obvious to one team member is not always clear to everyone on the team. Rather than assuming, check in with other members to assess their knowledge and comfort about completing job duties. Ask if they have questions

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or need assistance and clarify prioritization of job tasks when delegating. Encourage team members to communicate with phrases such as, *I can do Scooter's treatment while you review Jake's home-care instructions with Mrs. Taylor. Does that work for you? Are you comfortable giving her directions?*

- **Create daily or weekly rotating assignments.** By rotating job roles, you alleviate stress and boredom while ensuring team members learn multiple job duties. Use checklists to enhance efficiency, such as a list of duties for preventive-care appointments or a list of end-of-day duties.

- **Assign primary and secondary roles.** Defining primary and secondary roles for completion of tasks improves productivity. For example, each day you may assign a technical team member to be the backup person to assist the front-office team with answering phones. Likewise, you may assign one veterinary technician the primary responsibility of handling veterinary techni-

cian appointments, but also establish a secondary person if the primary technician is unavailable.

- **Create workflow protocols, but promote flexibility.**

Efficiency improves if the team understands and follows the same protocol. But, encourage and empower team members to deviate from protocols when necessary, such as team members taking on additional duties to accomplish daily goals when the team is short-handed. It would also be appropriate to deviate from protocols to provide exceptional service to a client who, for example, asks for his pet's medication the same day it is prescribed. The protocol may be to fill prescriptions within 24 hours, but it is more important to meet the client's needs.



## READ ALL ABOUT IT

- **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.** Lencioni P—San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

## 2. Set Reasonable Job Expectations

Workload is not always divided evenly. Some team members are more productive based on their tenure, skill set, knowledge, and speed. But if a few team members in the practice take on too much work, stress can occur. Take these 3 steps to guard against burnout and enhance efficiency.

- **Complete a team assessment.**

Make a list of each team member's skills and knowledge to see how gaps in training and expertise may slow down efficiency. Can everyone assist in surgery, or only a few veterinary technicians? Can every client-service team member answer questions about wellness plans? Do multiple team members know how to place inventory orders? If the burden of job duties is on the shoulders of only a few, then job expectations may not be reasonable. Moreover, the practice will not run smoothly if these team members are absent or overworked.

- **Implement training programs based on team assessment.**

Everyone has time constraints, so start small and look for high-gain tasks. Who can be trained in what area to have the greatest positive impact?

- **Delegate and divide the workload.** One or 2 team members cannot effectively do

it all. Delegate and distribute job duties such as equipment maintenance, inventory, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) requirements, oversight of practice programs, and cleaning. In addition, plan ahead for shift coverage during vacations and holidays. Establish that every team member is expected to do his or her part.


## 3. Improve Team Communication

Have you ever said or heard a team member say, *Well, no one told me that*, or, *This is the first I'm hearing about this*? When communication breaks down, team members become frustrated, mistakes may occur, and efficiency suffers. To keep everyone informed, discuss the form of communication that works best for everyone. Email may work for half the team while others may prefer a posted memo. If you use memos, post them where team members store their belongings or clock in for shifts. To ensure everyone has read the memo and can be held accountable, have everyone acknowledge receipt with their signature.

Use in-person meetings for messages that are urgent, time-sensitive, or need explanation, such as the need to disseminate information about fee increases and protocol changes. Use team meetings whenever feedback and discussion are desired to achieve

consensus and commitment from the team. Standing meetings work well for short meetings on one topic or for timely announcements.

Another component of team communication that affects workplace efficiency is the willingness to assist other team members. Responding with, *Yes, I can help you in a few minutes once I finish this lab test*, sends a positive message, whereas, *No, I'm busy*, sends an every-man-for-himself message. Be on the lookout for team members who may be stressed. Offering a kind word or lending a helping hand reduces stress and improves efficiency.

Every team member, no matter his or her position in the practice or the size of the practice, can take action to be exceptional and improve efficiency. Be a voice for positive change and an advocate for creating an efficient, enjoyable workplace. 

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**Editor's note:** Dr. Amanda Donnelly is a second-generation veterinarian with a diverse background in small animal practice, emergency medicine, business management and industry. Her special focus is working with veterinarians to grow their business and have their team look forward to coming to work every day. She combines her "in the trenches" practice experience and business expertise to help them communicate better with their teams and clients.

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## Reference

1. **Making the Team: A Guide for Managers.** Thompson L—Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000, p 3.