

Leadership

The action of leading a group of
Capacity to lead or ability to lead.
Capacity to lead or ability to lead.
Capacity to lead or ability to lead.

Employee Leadership

By Nels Lindberg, DVM

From Entry-Level to Leadership

In the life of a person working in the working world, we most often begin in an entry-level position. My first job was over spring break my 6th grade year, and that began my infant career of being a gopher for that time being. Working on a farm, you would go for this tool, go for that tool, mow this, mow that, farm this and farm that. We just did as we were told.

As life progresses, we begin to find ourselves making more decisions on our own, being a self-starter, and sometimes having people working for us. In the veterinary world, we live unassuming while in veterinary school, not having anyone look to us for answers, guidance or leadership. But as soon as we take our first job, without even knowing it, we immediately go from being a student and oftentimes a gopher, to a leader.

Now every person around you assumes you are a leader in the business, asking you for guidance on a case, looking to you to handle an upset client, asking you to make a decision on a case.

This process is what we call a transitional time in one's life of growth. There are certain aspects and attributes we must work on for this transition from student/entry-level associate to leader, and we want to think about what it

takes to do this. What are the leadership qualities required to achieve and be successful in this position?

Often we don't want this leadership position and even underestimate our ability to be one. The truth, however, is each of us has many important talents and unique skill sets that can be our foundation for self-improvement and personal growth in order to be successful at leading our veterinary technicians, assistants, kennel staff, directors of first impressions, veterinary staff, and managers.

Who else is going to be the leader? We need you to be! In all of America, there is desperate need for your skills and an ever-present need for your leadership and the growth of leaders around you.

Let's take a look at the key points of leadership needed to transition into a leader in your practice. And imagine this transition as resembling a bridge from one way of thinking to an entirely new way of thinking and perspective on life.

Forward planning. In my conversations with people, I routinely seek to understand exactly how far out they have extended their thinking regarding their dreams, plans and vision. Are they planning for the next week? Are they thinking about marriage in a year? Are they planning for kids in five years? What are their salary and savings goals over the next 10–20 years? In my experience, I would say

“True leadership means we have to absolutely care for and about our people in a real, authentic, genuine way. If we cannot accomplish this, our people will never truly follow.”

the average individual is only forward planning somewhere from about six months to a year.

For success in any endeavor in general, and in life specifically, there has to be a goal and a plan. This plan and goal-setting needs to look as far forward as one can imagine. The further out you plan and set goals, the higher the likelihood better decisions will be made and a better future achieved. Failure to proactively plan is almost a sure recipe for a poor outcome.

No matter where you are in forward thinking and planning, it is never too late to get started. If you are thinking and planning for six months from now, start looking forward one to two years. If you are planning for one to two years from now, move that vision out to five years. If you are planning for five years from now, move that vision out to 10 years.

Whatever your current time line, push it further. In the end, success is all about discipline and not fulfilling immediate desires and impulses. It is called “delayed gratification.” It’s about devising a plan and sticking to it. Leadership requires this type of thinking and is required for this transition. One cannot just be thinking about your next self-indulgent purchase, but about what life looks like for you in five years.

Lifelong learning. As veterinarians, techs, managers, etc., we have superior knowledge and experience in regards to animal health, the daily functions of the clinic, along with some “people” knowledge. However, like most people, many of us fall short in committing to making life a daily continuous learning process. This process needs one to look outside of their daily world, to learn about new things and to constantly inquire and ask questions. We need to make it a priority to expand our areas of expertise each and every day.

For the transition to leader, that continuous learning project needs to include growing and developing the area of leadership. There are many routes to learning, but a humble

attitude opens the door to learn from others.

Consider those you encounter on a daily basis: veterinarians, clinic staff, a diverse clientele with some being business owners and leaders themselves, your friends and acquaintances. All of these individuals know things that you do not and can help you grow and expand.

The sure poison in learning from others is to possess the “I know it all” mentality. There may be no better roadmap for failure than to close one’s mind to a different or new way. A humble heart and a thirst for knowledge is a true winning combination.

Care and compassion. As people who work in a veterinary clinic, we inherently have a caring heart or otherwise we wouldn’t do what we do. We deal with new life, daily life and death of patients daily. Often our hearts and souls are even overwhelmed with a love for not just our patients, but our clients. But how much love do you show your co-worker who annoys you from time to time?

True leadership means we have to absolutely care for and about our people in a real, authentic, genuine way. If we cannot accomplish this, our people will never truly follow. Many of us know about this first hand because we have worked under leaders who lacked compassion and consideration. Chances are good that when you have been under the thumb of a “hard core” leader (meaning poor leader!), you most likely did not perform your absolute best. Not surprisingly, you probably moved on to another job with better prospects.

In making a successful transition to leader, one must develop the skill of caring for and protecting your people. This is a trait that should come naturally. If not, it can be developed, but often requires extra effort. Your job is to get the best out of co-workers and support them. This is where leadership makes the difference. We must care so much for our people that it bleeds from our pores.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Humility. One of the greatest attributes that anyone can possess is that of genuine humility. Humility is a special trait that has its highest calling when possessed by those in leadership positions. Humility is often confused with “weakness,” but nothing could be further from the truth. True strength underlies humility.

One definition of humility is that it does not require thinking less of yourself—it is thinking about yourself less often. Leaders with humility (and compassion) put the needs of others ahead of themselves. This trait can become contagious and, when it does, it will transform the performance and attitude of an individual or even an entire organization. Humility is not concerned with who gets the credit.

Self-awareness. How many times have you said or heard others say, “I don’t care what they think!” We have all said it or heard someone say it. But to be a leader, one must care about what others observe and perceive. Having a high level of self-awareness allows us to step outside of ourselves and observe. Self-awareness is our ability to understand how our actions, interactions, tones, words and facial expressions affect those around us.

As a leader, we must understand that what we say and do is a positive, negative or neutral. You may be having a bad day, and if you aren’t self-aware regarding that fact, your actions and words will likely negatively impact your crew. Having a strong sense of self-awareness or “EQ” helps you adjust so that you can lead your crew in a way that they will do, act or execute as needed. Being self-aware is critical to your success.

Submission. We all have a sense of independence to us. This independence includes other similar traits such as confidence, pride, being a little cavalier and the desire to be the best. However, regardless the profession or way of life, to be successful at anything, we all have to submit ourselves

to a higher being, a higher purpose, calling to the team or to the organization.

It took me 32 years to learn the lesson of submission—to fully submit to my wife, my businesses, co-workers, and to the process of fulfilling my extreme desire to be the very best I could be in life. Also to my profession, my faith and my family who all so needed and wanted me too.

Until we “submit” and forget about being “independent,” we will never achieve extraordinary levels of success. The world, life and the organization are much larger than us. We cannot do anything worthwhile without the help, mentorship, generosity and faith of others. And we must submit to that. If we remain independent and keep thinking, “I’m my own person” or “I’ll do it alone,” then we can’t be a leader.

Jack Welch is quoted as saying, “Before you become a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.”

As leaders, it is our job to bring out the best in others. And we must be humble, caring, compassionate and keenly self-aware individuals looking down the road 10-plus years. We must be learning all we can each day as we are submitted to a higher purpose and calling to help grow even more leaders.

While people can be gophers, veterinarians and bosses, not everyone can be a successful leader. Take your game—your art of who you are—to the next level, and help us grow and refine our industry. Be the absolute best titanic version of you possible through continued lifelong self-improvement. In fact, be a self-improvement junkie! Thanks for your service and dedication.



Nels Lindberg, DVM, is a graduate of Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine and the owner of Animal Medical Center (AMC) in Great Bend, Kan. Dr. Nels is also owner of Progressive Beef Consulting Services and Research, and is a partner in

Production Animal Consultation, an independent consulting group serving the protein industries. A Kansas native, Dr. Nels has published several articles in peer-reviewed publications and is frequently requested to speak at veterinary conferences and training events, sharing his expertise with numerous industry, professional and community organizations. Dr. Nels balances his busy veterinary practice with large animal consulting, public speaking, leadership training and business coaching. He and his wife Karen are parents to twins Nash and MacKenzie.

Follow Dr. Nels on Facebook, Twitter and at www.drnels.com, which features his “Leadership Thursday” blog post.