

Keeping Your Local Managers Meetings Fresh

[Jessie Merritt, CVPM](#)

Oswego Veterinary Hospital (Lake Oswego, OR)

Local Veterinary Practice Manager Meetings are priceless in terms of networking with peers, predicting future challenges to the profession locally, trouble shooting individual issues, and sharing lessons learned.

The VHMA has an excellent article on beginning a Veterinary Practice Managers meeting at <http://vhma.org/associations/1346/VHMAJanuary2008.pdf>. For the purpose of this article, we will assume you belong to an established veterinary practice managers meeting and may want some ideas on keeping it fresh and vital.

Whether you are a local group of managers who meet casual for lunch once a month or a formal state association, there are a few basic commonalities to help keep the group up-to-date and beneficial.

- 1) Organizer – If you don't already have someone who takes responsibility for managing the group schedule, we suggest you find someone to fill that role. Members get frustrated and disenfranchised when meeting dates, times, or locations are uncertain or not posted on a reasonable time schedule. This role can also encompass keeping the contact list and meeting topics list up-to-date.
- 2) Core values –
 - a. One of the most important values a group may agree on is confidentiality. Members need the freedom to share challenges, lessons learned, and other details without being concerned that the information will make it out to the general public or back to their team. For example: a manger may want to discuss a situation with an employee's behavior or performance using details they would never release to the other employees (and rightfully so). What is said at the meetings stays at the meetings or the group will die a slow (or not so slow) death.
 - b. Something else to consider is whether your group decides to have prerequisites for joining. For example, some groups only accept management personnel in an effort to keep the conversation more focused on management topics and avoid medical topics or front office details. This is something to consider if you find the meetings diluted by a very large range of titles. Also, do you want DVM's to attend? This may also change the dynamic and flow of the meetings. All things to consider when choosing the core values for your group.
 - c. Who has a voice in the group? Do all members have equal voting power on topics and speakers or is there a "board" that makes most of the decisions?
- 3) Sponsorship – Depending on the size of your group finding sponsorship may offer you more flexibility in bringing in speakers or holding events. It isn't uncommon for local company representatives to sponsor the meetings and meals.

- 4) Venue – You will want the site to be convenient to attend (think location and parking), comfortable seating, few noise distractions, and ideally access to some tech equipment such as flat screens or projectors. Some groups have a member with a large enough hospital to host the meetings and some groups meet at libraries, community rooms, or restaurants. Again, a sponsor can be helpful here.
- 5) Technology – We have all heard some great speakers who can keep us mesmerized for hours as they share their specialty with us, but it never hurts to have access to a screen, laptop, and projector for videos and slide presentations. Again, at the risk of being repetitious, company representatives often have these resources if no other member does.
- 6) Speakers – We all want to go to meetings where we can hear an interesting speaker who discusses topics we deal with in the trenches, so it is worth spending some resources in time and effort to attempt to line up speakers who can deliver.
 - a. Company representatives can sometimes offer valuable talks on relevant subjects, but you will need to guard against allowing the meetings to turn into “lunch and learns” where timely topics from the pulse of the industry are substituted for product promotion.
 - b. Do you have a specialty hospital or teaching hospital in town that may have a team member in upper management who would be interested in speaking at a meeting? Larger facilities may have H/R personnel, inventory specialists, triage teams, or financial managers who could bring a great deal of value to a meeting.
 - c. Not all topics must be veterinary specific so think outside the box and you will be surprised how many professionals would be willing to speak to a group of managers just for the opportunity to network and showcase their talent in hopes of future business. Some examples include: life coaches, counselors in grief and compassion fatigue, mentors, insurance agents, your local labor and industries office, or local OSHA office.
 - d. Your local city or state veterinary medical association can also be incredibly helpful on a variety of topics from state law to statistics.
 - e. Don’t forget about the wisdom in your own ranks. Many of our peers have been in the profession for years and have a great deal of wisdom to share.
 - f. Roundtables can be an invaluable tool in these meetings. Let the members know in advance what the topics will be so they have time to give it some thought and bring their questions - or lessons learned to the table. Ideally have someone in charge of moderating to keep on topic and make sure the introverts of the group have an opportunity to participate also. If a spontaneous topic forms in the middle of another discussion the moderator can write that topic down in the “parking lot” to be sure the group will get back to it, time permitting to avoid the conversation from running down various tangents.

- 7) Alternative communication routes – The meetings are irreplaceable but often times there may be an issue in between meetings that a manager would like help with. Here is where the alternate communication routes can be helpful. Some examples include: a private Facebook page for the group members where you can post or download documents, a Google Intranet site offers more flexibility and more options and is not difficult to set up, and certainly group e-mails similar to a list serve can be very valuable between meetings. Here is where your “Organizer” or group leaders can make a real difference and create and manage the website or e-mail lists.
- 8) Recruit – Recruit new members continually. New members bring new ideas, new perspective, experiences, and enthusiasm. Some ways to do this include advertising on your local VMA website, creating a flyer to send out to local hospitals, and making sure your company representatives know you are always looking for new managers.
- 9) Passion for your peers – Hopefully your members are in this profession because they love it and believe in it. When that is the case there is a natural enthusiasm to share and network that can add incredible value to the meetings. A few very specific topics may be unwise such as directly comparing fees or discussing specific medical conditions of employees, but the greatest benefit will be in a group of managers who feel confident in the safety of the environment of the meetings, websites, e-mails, etc.
- 10) Topics – the topics are endless and ever changing but should be relevant to what the majority of the managers are facing at the moment. For example, discussing budgets in November or December is ideal but discussing them in July might attract fewer attendees. Below are just some of the limitless ideas for meeting topics in veterinary management;
 - a. QuickBooks vs. PeachTree?
 - b. Backup systems for data, backup for hardware, dual-monitor setups for various purposes.
 - c. Going digital with your radiographs.
 - d. Benefits of VHMA membership.
 - e. Interoffice communications.
 - f. Open Office vs. Microsoft.
 - g. Management vs. Leadership.
 - h. Laptops vs. desktops vs. tablets, antivirus applications.
 - i. Remote access – Logmein – PC Anywhere - Remote Desktop, etc.
 - j. Finances, benchmarks.
 - k. Ethics
 - l. H/R Law:
 - i. Drug testing.
 - ii. Employee pregnancy.
 - iii. Non-compete contracts.
 - iv. Pet ownership in question.
 - v. Can you deduct missed charges from an associate.
 - vi. Waiver for working interview?
 - vii. Wage and hour considerations.

- viii. Sharing medical records without owner consent.
- m. Dealing with difficult clients.
- n. Inventory management
- o. Personality testing
- p. Team building exercises
- q. Flex scheduling
- r. Practice profitability
- s. Strategic Planning
- t. Handbooks/manuals. Departmental or hospital wide
- u. Staff leveraging
- v. Books, bring and introduce your favorite book about the profession
- w. Labor laws and regulations
- x. Staff job satisfaction/burn out/compassion fatigue
- y. Dealing with personnel issues – tardiness, insubordination,
- z. Open book management

Most importantly – take pride in what you do for a living and the amazing people you get to do it with!