Frustrated practice managers and owners are often overheard saying "Why won't they just do their jobs?" in reference to their practice team. The first answer to that question is that the team members need to understand what job they are expected to do, and how that ties into the mission of the practice. Each veterinary practice is as unique as the practice owner. This owner has a vision of his or her practice, and this typically takes the form of a mission statement. Although usually short and rather broad, this mission statement contains the hopes and dreams of the practice owner, and should guide the business towards its desired future. Yet these are not just words on a page, or phrases framed on a wall. The mission must be intertwined into the human resources tools in order to steer the course of the practice. This is best accomplished by creating core values based on the mission statement. Let's take this sample mission statement and create core values:

"A team of compassionate professionals who provide the best medicine to pets and care to clients"

Two qualities or values that can be extracted from this statement include compassion and teamwork. The best way to acquire definitions of these values is to ask the team members themselves, what does "compassion" look like to you; how do you know when someone is expressing compassion? Perhaps, for compassion you will hear: active listening, appropriate body language, soft tone of voice. For teamwork, the team may offer: helping others, covering open shifts, and discussing issues that affect the team's harmony. Then, do the same for "teamwork" or any other quality you extract from your practice's mission statement. These core values can be included in the employee policy manual, or stand alone as a separate document that is used when recruiting and hiring new team members. They need to know what is expected of them, and how they will be expected to help the practice succeed.

The majority of your employee policy manual, however, will be policies that relate to employment in the practice. These policies need to be applied consistently to every employee, so the practice management team needs to be willing to apply these policies to each and every employee on the team. Take for example a policy regarding punctuality. The practice may establish a policy that allows for a few "strikes", but then applies progressive discipline in the form of warnings, and finally termination if it continues. The "litmus" test for applying policies consistently is for the practice to ask, "Would I be able to apply this policy to my best technician, if they violate this policy?" Your best technician may be the one who can hit a vein on a two-week old puppy and run the ventilator with their eyes closed, but they must also be expected to follow all the policies set by the practice. If you cannot apply the policy to this best technician, then you need to rethink the policy. The practice must hold itself accountable for following every policy as it is written. One way to reconcile this situation is to ask, if this technician is violating a company policy, are they really your best technician?

The employee policy manual is one of the first things given to every new hire. It is important for them to read over the entire manual, and ask questions if they have any concerns. Each new hire should sign an acknowledgement form that states they will read the manual and ask questions as needed; they should be held responsible for knowing the information contained in the manual. Yet, there are certain policies that should be reviewed in person with each new hire. These are typically policies that have been an issue in the past with previous or current employees, such as punctuality, attendance, holiday pay, etc. It is also recommended that the performance evaluation system be explained to the new hire, so they understand how their performance is going to be evaluated and how often.
Yet, the new hire is not the only one who needs to be concerned about this policy manual. It is typical that existing employees take home their policy manual and set it on a shelf to collect dust, only bothering to ask about specific policies when they need to take advantage of them or seek clarification. Therefore, it is advisable to bring up policies with the entire team on a regular basis, such as during the staff meetings. Choose a policy that is currently causing an issue, such as noticing that the team is violating some minor OSHA regulations and need to be reminded to keep food and drink out of animal treatment areas. Or choose a policy that may be an issue in the near future, such as reviewing the policy on holiday pay in early November before the holiday season is in full force. This can help modify current behavior or stave off problems in the future.

The policy manual needs to contain certain statements and discuss employment issues that are legally mandated. There should be a statement that the manual contains general information, and is not all-inclusive, and employment is not guaranteed for any particular period of time. State that this current manual supersedes any previous version, and the manual can be changed at any time by the practice owner. A legal review of the policy manual should be conducted by an attorney who specifically knows employment law, to ensure it meets the legal requirements. The practice and management team will be held to enforcing the policies contained therein, and even though it should contain a statement explaining that the manual does not create a contract, the manual can be seen as an employment "contract" in the legal sense of the word that must not be violated by either party. In other words, don't make any promises that can't be kept, and do not publish any policy that cannot or will not be enforced.

The second most important document to the hiring process is the job description, which becomes the most important tool overall in the performance management of the team. Each and every position should have a job description, including the management positions and the veterinarians. These descriptions should be revised annually with the help of the team, or when a position is open and the recruiting process starts. This is easy to do; simply make copies of the job description and circulate them to all people in that position for review and comments. Additional tasks may need to be added, or obsolete tasks removed. This job description will then be given to candidates during the interview process. They should be asked, "Can you perform this job?" and agree before offering to hire them. Then, the job description is signed by the new hire, and the original document goes into the personnel file of that team member (a copy goes home with the new hire).

The job description should contain the main tasks that are performed by someone in that position, so that the 'essential duties' are listed. This becomes important when candidates have limited abilities or existing employees become impaired. If the 'essential duties' cannot be performed, either with or without accommodation, then the employee is not fit for that position. There is no need to ask about physical or mental disabilities when the only question asked is, 'Can you perform this job?' Besides the essential duties or tasks performed, the job description should contain so much more. It should list the knowledge, skills and abilities that are required to perform the job. It should also describe the work activities, work context, and work styles. In other words, for a technician the job description would list an essential duty of administering medication to patients, the knowledge of how to calculate doses, the skill to give intravenous injections, and the ability to identify common side effects. It would also list the work activity of administering medication using various methods, the work context of prioritizing which patients require medications first, and the work style of working in cooperation with others to get all the patients in the hospital medicated according to their scheduled doses.

The best way to create job descriptions, or overhaul the job descriptions that already exist, is to...
involve the team. This also helps to build the team "buy-in" that is so important to making the job description successful and accepted by the team. To accomplish this task, the team can be asked to perform a job analysis. The job analysis worksheet may begin by stating the mission of the practice and the purpose of the job analysis. This helps to establish the proper 'mood' of the task ahead. The existing employees should be asked to give their opinion on the following:

- previous experience and education required for the job;
- methods of interaction such as how much of the time is spent dealing with clients or co-workers on the phone, in person, via email, etc.;
- physical activities required of the person such as lifting up to a certain amount of weight, sitting, standing, climbing, kneeling, etc.;
- typical exposures to noise, bodily fluids, biohazards, etc.;
- tools and technology required by the position such as laboratory equipment, phone system, practice management software, etc.;
- and then the essential tasks.

This task list can be obtained by asking the person to identify the 5–10 tasks they perform most often, such as multiple times a day; then, 5–10 tasks they perform less often, such as once or twice a day, and stretching out to those tasks performed only weekly or monthly. The tasks performed most often, such as daily, become the 'essential duties' of that position, and are necessary for anyone hired to do that particular job.

Yet, the job description goes beyond the physical requirements and tasks of the job, particularly when the work styles are considered and chosen. These are sometimes called "soft skills". They include honesty, dependability, respect, teamwork, integrity, professionalism, etc. Oftentimes, they are the most important part of being a good employee. Team members are typically not terminated because they cannot perform the actual task, but because they cannot behave in the appropriate way. Here is a comparison of hard vs. soft skills to illustrate the point:

- A hard skill is placing an intravenous catheter, yet the soft skill is the ability to learn how to place other types of catheters.
- A hard skill is the ability to schedule an appointment correctly using the software system, while the soft skill is having the integrity to admit when a mistake has been made when a doctor is double-booked.
- A hard skill is being able to following the feeding schedules of all the patients and boarders in the hospital, while the soft skill may be knowing how to prioritize these duties among the patients.

The training program for each position should be built directly from this job description that has been created or revised by the team. This makes logical sense, as each person should be trained on everything described in the job description, and it also makes it easier to develop the training program in a systematic way. Typically while developing job descriptions for each position, it is recognized that there are certain levels that appear. For example, in the job of veterinary technician, a level one technician may be required to do certain tasks, while a level 2 or 3 technician performs more advanced procedures that require more knowledge, experience, or expertise. The training program will also be set up to address each level that is created by the job descriptions, and the program will follow the basic outline provided by the job description. Creating a training program is a sometimes daunting task, and it will take some time and attention. It is best to get the team involved in creating this training program. They know the job, perform the job, and will be asked to train and access success in new hires that come after them. It is best to take one step at a time; for each position, have those who are currently working that position outline the training program needed by following the job description. Then, they are each assigned or choose a section of tasks to work on. The Standard Operating Procedures are created as each task is explained in language and detail that would work to teach a new hire how to do the task. The training system then requires that the trainer sign off several times on the new hire performing the task adequately, until the entire program is completed.

Besides creating the actual training program, the act of training someone new is also huge. First, it is necessary to assign someone to train the new hire. There can be a variety of people involved, as each existing employee may be able to teach their particular area of interest or expertise. This also allows the new hire to create relationships with many members of the team as they are settling in to the job. Typically, we expect someone doing the job to be able to train someone as they both work the daily load. This is often not realistic, as the fast pace required by the daily load does not allow the trainer to adequately explain each step, or allow the trainee to...
attempt to perform the tasks on their own. Therefore, the trainer-trainee pair should be given a lighter load during training so each step can be reviewed, demonstrated by the current employee, and attempted by the new hire. Other team members should be assigned to pick up the extra load, or an additional person should be scheduled to allow the practice to remain productive and efficient while training is taking place.

People learn in many different ways. Some people are visual, preferring to see diagrams or instructions written out for a task. Others are auditory learners, and they need to hear the process before it can soak in. Others need to read the instructions on their own before they can understand the sequence of events. Therefore, a variety of teaching methods should be utilized by those training new employees. The material can also be found in a variety of places such as text books and journals, online continuing education courses and videos, in-house seminars, and outside or off-site continuing education events. The trainer needs to be patient, consistent, and be able to access whether or not the new hire is catching on as they proceed. The trainer needs to be approachable in their attitude, so the new hire feels comfortable admitting when something doesn't make sense or when they have questions or concerns. It is also important to hold every employee accountable for the knowledge and skills they must acquire to do the job right. The best way to ensure accountability is to institute testing methods to establish objective ways of measuring success. Again a variety of testing methods is preferable. This can include demonstration where the employee shows that they can perform a task to the manager's satisfaction. Other testing methods include typical questions such as multiple-choice and true/false, and these work well for medical knowledge. Essays are the best format for assessing how the employee would respond to certain situations involving those "soft skills" or client service excellence. Other creative ways can be used to add variety, such as crossword puzzles, search-and-find, and fill in the blank style tests. There are websites that can help customize these types of quizzes or tests.

When it comes to new hires, it is difficult to know whether their previous experience will apply to this practice, and whether or not their education will make them a more valuable employee. Therefore, while someone may be expected to fill an upper level position based on their resume or application, they still need to prove themselves and start at the beginning of the training program. They need to learn the basics of the facility and process, such as how to clean cages and operate the laundry machines, or what patient care forms are used and how communication flows in the practice. A timeline should be implemented to reflect how quickly the new hire is expected to advance. For example, someone who may seem to be perfect for a level 2 technician is given the first 90 days to complete the initial levels of the training system, and demonstrate that they then belong in the level 2 technician spot. Their compensation should start lower than a level 2 technician until they prove themselves, and then be increased as they prove their rightful place in the practice hierarchy. Future advancement will result in increased responsibilities, authority, or perhaps compensation.

The existing employees also need to be continually trained, as veterinary medicine advances and changes. To determine what topics to train on, survey the existing employees as to their needs and wants. Encourage them to keep up with changes in veterinary medicine so they can expand their learning as a team. There are always new equipment to learn, new protocols to learn, and new products to learn about in order to provide information to clients. As the employees go through the performance evaluation process, new goals are determined which can also determine more training topics. Team members should be encouraged to participate in creating and teaching new material, particularly if they are given an allowance to attend continuing education events. The benefit to the practice goes beyond that one person's advancement, as the entire
team should be taught when the employee returns to the practice to share their new knowledge. The topic of the training will determine which team members need to attend, and whether or not attendance at the event is mandatory.

Along the way, throughout hiring and orientation, training and advancing, employees need to be monitored and informed as to their progress even between performance evaluations. This is when coaching and counseling comes into play. This occurs during every meeting, whether it is an informal chat or necessary disciplinary discussion, or a scheduled performance evaluation. There is a type of meeting that is recommended called an Employee Development Meeting (EDM). These are routine, scheduled meetings, preferably occurring once a month between each individual employee and their direct supervisor. The purpose of the EDM is stated: "When relationships are strengthened, progress is discussed, and decisions are documented." These meetings are the time when goals are discussed and due dates revised if needed, issues are discussed that may be the beginnings of a disciplinary problem, and the supervisor and employee can strengthen their relationship. It is preferable to use a worksheet to document the discussion, which both the supervisor and employee sign so it becomes part of the employee's personnel file.

Successful Performance Management begins with a solid foundation of human resources tools, which help in identifying and selecting the best candidate for the job, describing the expectations for each position, and providing the training and coaching necessary for success.