

The Zoo at North River Veterinary: The Second Generation¹

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A concise case from the *International Journal of Instructional Cases*

www.ijicases.com

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¹ Thanks to Catherine Bagni for sharing an early draft of this case.

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As Dr. Pat³ entered the meeting room for the staff meeting at North River Veterinary Hospital, she braced herself for the usual chaos. The questions from the receptionist, the technician, and the assistant manager kept coming, bombarding Dr. Pat as she worked on a patient. “Who is receiving a Lyme vaccine and who is getting a distemper vaccination?” “Why is there an overload of surgeries booked for Monday?” “Do you know there is an appointment for a new kitten visit waiting in the lobby?” The questions never ended. Dr. Pat just stood there, trying to figure out which question to answer first, while thinking about what exactly she was doing with the patient that was wiggling its way out of her grasp. After a few seconds, she answered every question patiently. “Who’s gonna do all this work?” she wondered wearily.

The early years

Dr. Pat was the owner and CEO, head veterinarian, leader, and sometimes even the custodian at North River Veterinary in North River, CT. Dr. Pat decided at an early age that she would follow in her father’s footsteps as a veterinarian. She took over the practice—excited, stressed, and challenged, but most of all full of joy at having her very own animal hospital.

Young Dr. Pat faced many challenges in her first year, not the least of which was learning to accept that clients did not always want to take advantage of all of the services the hospital could offer. For example, a nine-plus year-old dog had a tumor which his owner would not have

² Thanks to Catherine Bagni for sharing an early draft of this case.

³ The case protagonist’s name and the company name have been disguised for privacy reasons.

doctors remove. Over the years, Dr. Pat learned that she had to respect her clients' wishes, rather than her own, in the care of their pets.

Growth brings new problems

Ten years later, Dr. Pat had commissioned the building of a new, up-to-date hospital behind the old clinic. This new facility included three exam rooms, a reception area, lobby, food supply room, surgery room, dental/x-ray room, lab/pharmacy, ultrasound/resource room, a kennel, and an office, all on the first floor. This expansion from the small clinic gave the hospital the opportunity to take on more clientele and to add additional doctors, along with increasing the staff and the opportunity for both professional and business growth. The only thing Dr. Pat regretted about this decision was not building a larger hospital earlier than she had. She was, however, completely satisfied with the fact that she owned the facility. But, as she learned, with a larger and better clinic came more employees, more clients, more patients, and more responsibility. The structure of the clinic was simple, with everyone reporting to Dr. Pat (see Exhibit 1). All decisions were made by Dr. Pat. It was exhausting for her, and it was not sustainable. She realized that something had to change.

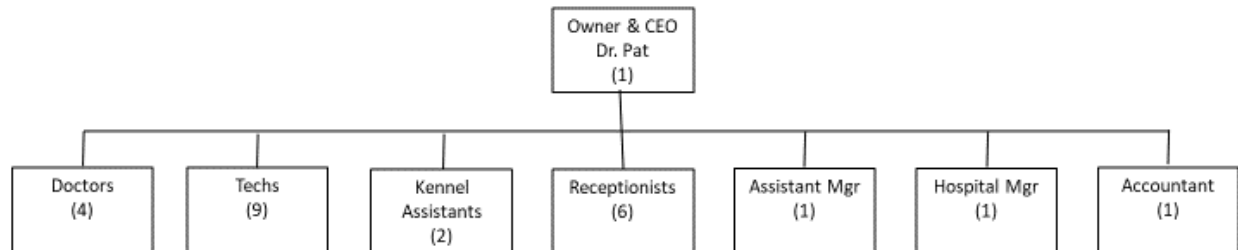
The hospital's focus was to provide a high quality of care for patients (pets) while delivering great service to its clients (pet owners). The staff consisted of four other veterinary doctors, nine technicians, two kennel assistants, six receptionists, an assistant manager, a hospital manager, and an accountant—a total of 24 staff members. They catered to a variety of household animals from dogs and cats to many different species of reptiles, as well as small animals such as hamsters, guinea pigs, and rabbits. With 24 people and all of the animals in the hospital at any given time, it was hard to keep track of who was doing what.

North River Veterinary was able to offer many services due to the modern equipment it had installed, as well as the broad experience of its veterinarians. The hospital was not a specialty clinic; instead, its focus was on routine exams, vaccinations, spaying/neutering, dental procedures, and other minor surgeries, along with caring for injured animals. North River had the advantage of having onsite diagnostic equipment from IDEX, a laboratory equipment provider, and an onsite pharmacy.

The piles kept getting higher

Dr. Pat spent her days caring for patients, taking appointments, and performing surgeries. By the end of a typical day, she was exhausted. At 8:45 pm on a Wednesday evening, after hospital hours, she returned to her desk after her last patient had left. She stared at the Post-it notes populating her computer screen and the growing pile of papers and reports on her desk and slowly took a sip of her cold black coffee. She knew her centralized decision-making was only creating more work and exhaustion for herself. She realized that the clinic had grown beyond her ability to manage it. She needed to delegate decision-making among her employees and encourage more independent action.

Exhibit 1: Organization Chart of Current Reporting Structure at North River Veterinary



Numbers in parentheses = employee count
Total employees = 25