

Are You Ready To Own?

By Mark Crootof

You daydream about having a perfect hospital, individually designed to meet your needs, with a talented, caring staff and cheerful pet owners. All of the equipment is state-of-the-art, and you can afford to take time off and enjoy your life.

But the dream doesn't last long, because your boss is gone and you're way behind on appointments. With a painful snap back to reality, you groan. Work has become a slow slog through the daily routine. You're not yourself: you're tired, grumpy, quick to snap at others. Your boss is growing increasingly obnoxious, your opinion of your coworkers is in free fall, and the next client who comes in late and complains about poor service is risking the full force of your anger.

Maybe you have Lyme Disease. Or Avian Flu. Or maybe it is time for you to reevaluate.

Some veterinarians jump into ownership immediately upon finishing veterinary school, and could never imagine not being in charge, like Jim Young DVM: "My primary motivation to ownership was driven by the desire to have direct influence and the ability to elevate my level of medicine." Others want to concentrate on their profession, find a company where they are in sync with the owner, and are happy to remain indefinitely as an associate or partner. But what if you are in the middle: secure in your skills and able to apply for financing, uncomfortable in another's employ, but unsure if you're ready to take the plunge?

The best answer is to pay attention to yourself. When every small annoyance that you previously brushed aside abruptly becomes intolerable, that is a telling indication that you need a change to a situation where you have more control. Miserable in a job you used to love? Think of it as your subconscious's way of spurring you to try something else. Practice-related stress commonly stems from disagreements about policy, poor equipment or facilities, weak interpersonal relations, and a sense of stunted professional growth or salary. If you find that more than one of these descriptions apply to you, you may want to begin pondering the pros and cons of building versus buying your very own practice.

There's no good, better, or best way of running a veterinary hospital. Different veterinarians have different needs, desires, and ambitions to fulfill, which necessitates different methodologies. There are many possibilities to consider: if a focus on high or low quantity will bring more profit, if a team-based or hierarchical approach to staffing is most effective, or what type of relationship is appropriate to develop with clients. When you disagree with your owner about the fundamentals, it is unlikely you will be happy there. Being unable to alter uncomfortable policies is a major reason to depart.

You find that you are constantly complaining about the facility where you work: the space is too small, there are too many doors, the lighting is poor, and so on and so on. Meanwhile, the X-Ray machine can remember World War I, and the CBC machine thinks the X-Ray is a young'un. The facility and its equipment are two other major sources of aggravation. Many veterinarians disagree about what constitutes a worthwhile investment, especially over ultrasound, digital radiography, or laser surgery equipment. As with differences over policy, these disagreements hint that a split may be necessary.

As your other frustrations grow, the most common victims are your professional relationships. Maybe your boss is becoming increasingly annoying, and you're finding that certain traditions – giving discounts to older clients, skipping diagnostic procedures, or taking slow days off while you still have to work – increasingly bothersome. Or maybe it's that although you've always gotten along well with the staff, they don't respect you in the way you would wish. Sometimes, they'll do what you say, but other times, they'll take a different route to the same result and miss out on some subtle reason for why you made a specific request. Their bickering, lateness, or lackadaisical attitude is driving you nuts, but you don't feel that it is your place to chide them.

Finally, you may be feeling trapped in a situation where you have to always refer the tougher, more interesting cases to the owner or to the local specialist, when you know deep down that with a little time and support that you could have easily developed the correct diagnosis. In this case, starting off on your own might be the only way in which you can continue to grow professionally. Similarly, your salary may be a point of contention: do you believe that your efforts are justly reflected by your wage, or do you wonder if the owner is taking advantage of you?

Much of this article assumes that you are upset with your practice, which is not a necessary stage (albeit widespread). If you can shrug off small irritations, and on the whole you still feel happy and appreciated, you may want to think twice about starting off on your own. On one hand, if you're still learning and in a supportive environment, it might make sense to remain and study how to create and manage a similarly strong practice or join it as a partner. On the other, despite your obvious comfort, you may have inner ambition that drives you to push yourself above and beyond the relative safety of being an employee. Paul Friesen DVM was never one who imagined becoming an owner, so his decision to do so after twelve years was more pragmatic: "I came to the place where I realized that in order to practice the type of medicine I desired, in a facility that allowed for this, and would be appealing for me to work in every day until I retired, I would have to create my own dream."

My advice? Create your own dream – this is too hard of a profession to not love your work.

Mark R. Crootof, DVM of Crootof Consulting specializes in start-up practices and design/build

SIDEBAR:

It almost goes without saying that to seriously consider the possibility of opening your own clinic, you must have reached a point in your career where you are reasonably comfortable with your medical, surgery, human relations, practice management, and business and financial management skills. Very few people are perfect in all of these fields, so take stock of your strengths and weaknesses. There are many classes wherein one can learn how to fortify a weak point, and scores of professionals devoted to assisting you through others.