

Accountability: What's Growing in Your Garden?

By: Louise S. Dunn

 Weeds - All I see are weeds! Where are the plants? I stand here surveying my work, all those hours planning, tilling, fertilizing, planting, and what do I have to show for it? Weeds. Weeds growing taller than the plants. Weeds overtaking the rows of carefully laid out plants. In some areas, I can't tell if there are any plants growing at all, it looks like all weeds.

As I drive to work I feel discouraged with my garden plot. Instead of dwelling on my weed-infested garden, I contemplate the day's activities waiting for me at work. But I just can't get the garden out of mind, and, come to think of it, work at the veterinary practice is just like my garden!

The practice is a garden, you spend time and effort planning, analyzing, preparing, evaluating, assessing and harvesting. It seems that the practice can have weeds too, threatening the growth of the practice just like the weeds in the vegetable garden threaten the growth of the plants and the potential harvest!

WHAT'S GROWING IN YOUR PRACTICE?

What are the weeds in the veterinary hospital? Complacency, Tardiness, Inconsistency, Unengaged work force, Lack of responsibility and ownership - all of them weeds and all belonging to the genus of weeds I will call "Lackus of Accountabilitus." Cute name for a deadly weed sprouting in the practice.

Like the vegetable garden, the practice requires attention beyond the initial effort of starting a garden/practice. Daily attention to some basic tasks, or dare I call them gardening activities, can keep the weeds out. To prevent the overgrowth of Lackus of Accountabilitus one must consider the following:

PLANNING

It is all about the leadership, vision and mission. To have a productive garden or practice, one cannot stop after the initial planting. The team needs the master gardener (i.e. owner/manager) to be constantly aware of the vision and mission and their leadership role. Do not underestimate the power of leadership with direction.

Leadership by direction starts with the owners and managers. It means making decisions, clearly communicating decisions and directions, and demonstrating purpose. It means getting the right people on the bus and in the right seats. It means working ON the practice as well as IN the practice. Being a leader is equivalent to being the master gardener, you are the one charged with the duties of tending to the entire plot - planning, planting and fertilizing via a clear vision and mission.

Poor direction means poor planning. Poor planning means a poor end result. Having a strong vision and mission gets buy in by the team because they see where the Leadership is coming from and where it is going. Giving the team their job descriptions enables them to know the importance of their roles and the part they have in the direction the practice is going. Without these, the team is exposed to "weeds" of Lack of Engagement and Lack of Responsibility. Do you have any of these weeds at your practice? Take a moment to consider leadership with direction and how the vision and mission are being communicated.

PLANTING

Planting involves tilling, hoeing and planting the seeds. Developing the standards of care is much like preparing the soil and planting the seeds. It starts with procedure, a seed, and it can only be planted in soil that has been well prepared if it is expected to take root and grow.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) and Protocols, though not meaning to be set in stone, should be considered as guiding principles for the team to operate within. These guiding principles need to be tended to on a regular basis as medicine changes and needs of the business change. Protocols let the team know what is expected of them and what the goals are.

The practice needs procedures and protocols. The team needs to learn about these, espouse them and communicate them. Protocols are a method of communicating a consistent level of excellence. By not planting the seeds of protocols (and SOP's) the team falls prey to the weed of Inconsistency. If you have the weeds of inconsistency in your practice, take a look at your planting procedures.

FERTILIZING

I am not talking about just throwing manure on the ground. It is about knowing which nutrients are needed and how much. Fertilizing in the practice means training, developing, feedback and coaching. In order for the team to grow there needs to be regular fertilizing.

Some of the fertilizing can occur in team training meetings or individual career mapping, open book management and metrics, even feedback and consequences are all types of fertilizer needed by the team. Not every "fertilizer" is appropriate; there are different types, different nutrients and different mixes. The master gardener/leader must assess the situation and determine which fertilizers are needed.

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• [Front Page](#)

In this issue

- [Using Key Performance Indicators to Better Manage Your Practice](#)
- [A Valentine to a Beloved Pet](#)
- [When is an MSDS not an MSDS? When is an SDS: The GHS and its affect on us](#)
- [Better Housing for Cats](#)
- [Cloud Computing: Real Savings, But Overcast With Risk](#)
- [Accountability: What's Growing in Your Garden?](#)
- [Improving Compliance Through Client Education](#)
- [Creating a Loyal Customer ... to the end \(Part 2 of 2\)](#)
- [How to Manage by Core Values](#)
- [Use this tip and triple your efficiency \(and make more \\$\\$\\$\)](#)
- [Why Some Pet Owners Won't Consider Chemotherapy for Their Pets](#)
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Don't let anyone fool you; neglecting these fertilizers will result in poor team growth and productivity - just like the vegetable garden. Is the tardiness weed growing? Then tend to feedback and consequences when working with the tardy team member. Is the weed of complacency overtaking some team members? Perhaps some attention to open book management and discussing metrics will kill that weed.

WHAT WILL YOU HARVEST?

Odd, having a garden or managing a practice are rather similar activities. You want your plants to grow and produce a good harvest from the garden - just like you want the practice to grow and produce. The only way the practice is going to grow is if the individual team members grow without being choked out by the weeds of Lackus of Accountabilitus.

What do you expect to harvest from the practice, especially if there are weeds growing among the plants? How can you get rid of the weeds without damaging the plants? Can the "plants" trust the master gardener to tend to the garden and get great productivity? Can the "plants" be held accountable to grow and produce?

By not paying attention to regular planning, planting and fertilizing, a garden will succumb to the overgrowth of weeds thus preventing the plants you want to grow from thriving and producing a rich harvest. Your practice and your team are very similar to those garden plants. Without regular leadership, protocols and coaching your team will succumb to a lack of accountability and thus a lack of growth and productivity.

A great garden can provide for more than just a few family members, it can produce enough to share with others. Your practice can see the same effects - servicing more pets with excellent medicine, enabling the team to grow in both their careers and their jobs, and producing a rich harvest to keep the practice in business.

Yes, a practice is like a garden. So it begs one to ask, "Mary, Mary quite contrary, how does YOUR garden grow?" How are YOU going to respond?

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