

10 Rules for Life After Graduation

By Karyn Gavzer, MBA, CVPM

As hard as veterinary school is, life after graduation can be harder if you don't know the new rules. They have changed from the ones you had in school — maintain a certain grade-point average, attend class, do your assignments, and graduate.

Life will never be that simple again.

Once you graduate, your whole world changes. You go from a fiercely competitive environment to one where teamwork and collaboration are what count. You go from being a lowly student to the head of the pack.

Once you graduate, life becomes more complex and others' expectations of you change. Along with that white coat comes a new level of professional responsibility. There's so much more to think about that it can be a bit overwhelming to try to figure it all out.

The following 10 rules of professional behavior (and a bonus tip at the end) are offered to help you better understand your new role, gain respect and build healthy relationships as the new doctor on the team:

1. Do not gossip or make off-handed snide remarks. Friendly small talk is fine. Gossip and sneers, on the other hand, are hurtful and damaging to others. Such behavior is immature and unprofessional.
2. Dress professionally, including your shoes. Dirty, beat-up athletic shoes are not professional. If in doubt, ask what the doctors usually wear and dress as they do.
3. Be punctual, ready to work, and stay until the work is done, without complaining.
4. Do your share and offer to help others when you are not busy. You get back what you give.
5. Say "please" and "thank you." That's simply good manners, and it will keep you from sounding as if you are barking orders or appearing condescending or unappreciative.
6. Respect others. Show consideration. That includes active, attentive listening.
7. Stay composed, especially when you are feeling stressed or upset, and maintain a positive attitude. Other team members will notice and take their cue from you.
8. If you make a mistake, admit it and say you are sorry. Don't obsess over it. The only real mistakes you can make are to keep repeating the same ones without learning from them.
9. Do not overly fraternize with support staff, no matter how much you like them. It is hard to hold onto the respect of those you work with when they've seen you chugging shots at the bar or you've told them all the sordid details of your last relationship.
10. Aspire to excellence in patient care as well as in your relationships with clients and co-workers. Being a successful veterinarian is a two-part job: It involves working well with animals and people.

Bonus tip for success

In addition to these 10 rules, it pays to have a curious mind. Assume nothing. Ask. If you do, you will earn the respect of others, who will see that you want to get it right. And you will keep yourself out of trouble.

Two examples follow to show you how healthy curiosity and a willingness to ask questions can benefit you:

Example 1

Your patient needs a blood draw for lab tests. Do you draw the blood in the exam room? Take the patient to the treatment area? Do the draw yourself? Ask someone to do it for you? Who? Everyone seems busy. You decide to ask the technician who is preparing a dog for surgery.

The technician says that she is almost finished, and if you'll bring your patient to the back, she will draw the blood as soon as she is done. You get your patient — a large, neutered, 6-year-old Rottweiler — and bring it to the treatment area, where she quickly straddles the dog, hits the jugular and draws the blood.

She asks what tests you want run and promises to take care of it. She tells you that a copy of the results will be in your inbox first thing tomorrow morning. She checks to see if you want her to enter the lab charges on the patient's record, or if you prefer to do it yourself. She returns the patient to you so you can finish up with the client.

Aren't you glad you asked? Otherwise, you would have needed to figure out all that on your own. And if you did the blood draw yourself, you also would have offended the technicians, who would have been upset that you didn't let them do their jobs.

Example 2

You've got a tricky case, and you are not sure what is wrong with your patient. You have some ideas, and you could take radiographs and run expensive tests to do rule-outs. Or you could treat the pet symptomatically for a few days and wait to see if it improves on its own.

You decide to do the X-rays and run the tests. Later, the client complains to the practice owner about the bill. She says the additional costs were never explained to her and that the new doctor didn't seem to know what she was doing. The practice owner is irritated that the client is upset and that he didn't know there was a problem until now.

Had you checked with the practice owner, who also was working that day, he could have conferred with you and helped guide your diagnosis.

He also would have advised you to prepare an estimate to go over with the client, considering the X-rays and tests would most likely cost more than \$200.

He would have given you some tips on how to talk to the client about her pet and the tests. In the unlikely event that the client still complained about the bill or didn't feel confident in your abilities, the practice owner would be prepared to defend you because you had asked for his help and appropriately gotten him involved.

Life after graduation can be a lot easier if you know and follow the 10 rules and ask questions when you need help.

About the Author

Karyn Gavzer is a veterinary business consultant and nationally known writer and speaker. She says her job is to help practices "go and grow" with training, marketing and new ideas. She is an adjunct instructor for the [American Animal Hospital Association](#) (AAHA), and a founding member of the [Association of VetPartners](#), formerly known as the Veterinary Practice Management Consultants and Advisors.