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Guiding, Not Grinding: A Better Way to Onboard New Grads

By Dr. Dave Nicol



Session Description:

The leap from university to clinical practice is steep—for new graduates eager to prove themselves and for owners managing the realities of skill gaps, client expectations, and team dynamics. Too often, this transition becomes a source of tension: graduates may feel overwhelmed and unsupported, while owners become frustrated when investment doesn't translate quickly into competence.

This session reframes onboarding as an opportunity, not a burden. Dr. Dave Nicol shares practical frameworks for owners to create structured, positive pathways that challenge and support new vets as they grow. Along the way, he weaves in real stories of success—and failure—from graduates in practice, bringing the lessons to life. By focusing on clarity, feedback, and staged skill development, owners can reduce frustration, foster collaboration, and build loyalty. At the same time, graduates must embrace their role in putting in the work—meeting the moment with curiosity, resilience, and effort.

The result? Practices where both owners and new vets share responsibility for development, leading to stronger teams, better medicine, and longer-lasting careers.

Key Takeaways:

- How to design onboarding “onramps” that balance support with challenge
- Practical systems to build skills and confidence step by step
- Tools for reducing owner frustration while holding graduates accountable
- Creating a culture of shared responsibility between leaders and learners
- Lessons from real graduates—what worked, and what didn't

Extended Abstract

Introduction: The Tension Between Two Generations

Veterinary medicine has always been a demanding profession, but never before has the entry point into practice carried such weight and complexity. For new graduates, the leap from the theoretical safety of the classroom to the clinical pressures of daily practice is daunting. They step into consulting rooms with clients expecting instant expertise, teams requiring immediate contribution, and employers balancing business realities against the long runway of skill acquisition.

For practice owners, this moment is equally fraught. Many owners find themselves caught between the urgent demands of running a profitable practice and the slower, sometimes frustrating process of developing inexperienced clinicians into confident, productive team members. Owners frequently voice frustrations: “Why do grads expect so much money when they can’t even do a spay independently?” or “I don’t have the time to hold their hands through every case.” These are real, valid concerns. Yet if the profession is to thrive, these concerns must be addressed not through resentment but through a better framework for onboarding, mentoring, and shared responsibility.

This session sets out to reframe the conversation. It is not about indulging unrealistic expectations, nor is it about forcing new grads through a trial by fire. Instead, it is about designing thoughtful, structured “onramps” that balance support with challenge, helping new graduates grow steadily into their potential while ensuring owners see their investment pay off.

Why Onboarding Matters More Than Ever

The first twelve months of a veterinarian’s career are disproportionately influential. Poor early experiences drive disengagement, burnout, and attrition from the profession (AAHA, 2024). Conversely, when new graduates are supported through well-designed onboarding, they flourish - gaining confidence, competence, and loyalty to the practices that guided them.

In broader organizational research, onboarding is foundational to retention. It fosters employee well-being, creates a sense of purpose, and reduces turnover intention (Klein et al., 2025). In fact, structured onboarding across the first year of employment has been shown to improve new hire retention by up to 25% (Bauer, 2010). Within veterinary practice specifically, poor onboarding is costly - studies vary in their estimation of the cost of getting this wrong, with recent work suggesting the cost could be 25–50% of their salary (Weston, 2025). While the Chartered Institute for Professional Development (CIPD) have suggested numbers at least an order of magnitude greater! These realities highlight why onboarding is not a “nice to have” but a business-critical investment.

The Dual Responsibility: Owners and Graduates

A central theme of this session is shared responsibility. Owners must take the lead in designing frameworks that provide clarity, structure, and feedback. Graduates, however, must take ownership of their own growth by showing up with resilience, humility, and effort. One without the other fails.

Owners who abdicate the responsibility of mentorship create disillusioned, unsupported young vets. Graduates who coast on entitlement or fail to put in the hard work waste the opportunities given to them. By making this dual responsibility explicit, tension is reduced. Owners are reassured that they are not being asked to endlessly indulge graduates; graduates understand that the supportive environment comes with the expectation of commitment. This clarity forms the bedrock of a healthier, more sustainable dynamic.

From Grind to Guidance: Reframing the Onboarding Journey

Too often, onboarding feels like a grind. New graduates are thrown into full consulting schedules with little preparation. Mistakes are met with impatience, feedback is inconsistent, and the graduate's enthusiasm quickly erodes. From the owner's perspective, the grind manifests as wasted time, constant correction, and financial strain.

But guidance, when thoughtfully structured, looks different:

- Clarity of expectations: Graduates know what is expected of them at each stage—clinically, professionally, and culturally.
- Staged skill development: Onboarding is mapped out like a training program, with milestones that gradually build competence.
- Feedback loops: Regular, constructive feedback is embedded, reducing the guesswork and building confidence.
- Support with accountability: Graduates are nurtured but also challenged; they are not shielded from responsibility but are guided through it.

This model mirrors transition-to-practice programs in human healthcare, such as nurse residency programs, which demonstrably reduce turnover and improve care quality (Goode et al., 2013). Veterinary medicine can borrow from these proven models.

Practical Frameworks Owners Can Use

Owners often ask, "What does supportive onboarding actually look like in practice?" This session provides clear, actionable frameworks, including:

1. The 90-Day Onramp: Designing the first three months with deliberate pacing, shadowing, and graduated responsibility.
2. Competence Milestones: Breaking down key clinical skills into stages, allowing owners and graduates to track progress transparently.
3. Structured Feedback: Using weekly check-ins, written reflections, and mentor debriefs to keep communication open and constructive.
4. Cultural Integration: Helping graduates not only learn medicine but also understand the values, client expectations, and team dynamics unique to the practice.
5. Stretch Assignments: Introducing progressively harder cases or responsibilities that push graduates just outside their comfort zone while maintaining safety nets.

These frameworks allow owners to feel more in control of the process and reduce the frustration of "babysitting." Graduates, meanwhile, experience steady growth and the psychological safety to learn from mistakes.

Building Confidence Through Clinical Gateways: Dentistry, Surgery, and Medicine

A key principle of effective onboarding is sequencing skill development to provide early wins while scaffolding more complex competencies. Three domains—dentistry, basic surgery, and medical case management—together provide powerful gateways for growth.

- **Dentistry as a gateway:** Dentistry offers relatively predictable procedures and a sufficient case volume, allowing graduates to master technique, develop fine motor skills, and achieve visible patient outcomes. These successes counter imposter syndrome and help graduates feel they are genuinely contributing to the practice.
- **Basic surgery as a skill scaffold:** Routine surgeries, such as neutering, provide opportunities to consolidate foundational skills—asepsis, tissue handling, anesthesia monitoring, and surgical decision-making. Because the procedures are structured yet demanding, they help new veterinarians gain technical fluency while building the resilience needed for more advanced surgery.

Medicine as a cognitive foundation: While dentistry and neutering foster hands-on technical growth, medical case management challenges graduates' reasoning and problem-solving abilities. History-taking, diagnostic planning, and interpreting results push new vets to refine clinical reasoning and critical thinking. These cases provide the intellectual stretch that balances the technical practice of surgery and dentistry.

The triple win: Dentistry and medicine also happen to be strong revenue drivers in most practices. When owners intentionally channel graduates into these areas, they gain a virtuous cycle: graduates develop essential technical and cognitive skills, they experience early belonging through contribution, and the practice sees immediate financial return. What once felt like a cost or burden now becomes a win-win-win. This is the ah-ha moment: onboarding isn't just about reducing frustration - it can actively grow both people and profit when structured well.

Dentistry as a Gateway to Confidence and Belonging

An important counterpart to the feeling of imposterism - an experience widespread among new graduates - is the power of belonging.

Studies affirm that belonging reduces stress, improves well-being, and fosters professional growth. In fact, research in doctoral education shows that perceived belonging is one of the strongest predictors of reduced imposter feelings and improved psychological outcomes (Sverdlik et al., 2020). In human dentistry, where new graduates also often report high levels of imposter syndrome (Singh et al., 2022), inclusion and mentorship make a tangible difference.

Belonging is built on the back of both skill acquisition, but also (very importantly), social interactions. In short, cues that indicate acceptance and approval from colleagues. Feeling integrated into the professional community and supported by colleagues matters! In veterinary onboarding, owners can replicate this effect by providing early wins (such as structured dentistry caseloads) alongside relationship-building mentorship. This combination builds both competence and connection, helping graduates transition from self-doubt to confidence.

Bridging the Generational Divide

Underlying many of these tensions are generational differences. Owners often represent a generation raised in a culture of hard work, long hours, and financial sacrifice. Graduates today bring different expectations around work-life balance, wellbeing, and career trajectories. Rather than framing these differences as right or wrong, this session positions them as realities to be navigated.

Owners will be encouraged to embrace the strengths of younger generations—tech-savviness, empathy, and fresh energy - while also setting boundaries around professional standards. Graduates will be reminded that medicine is not mastered overnight and that growth requires persistence, practice, and humility.

By framing generational differences as complementary rather than adversarial, practices can harness the best of both worlds.

Conclusion: Shared Success, Shared Responsibility

Veterinary medicine is at its best when knowledge and compassion flow across generations. New graduates bring energy and optimism. Owners bring wisdom and experience. Both bring frustrations when expectations collide. But by shifting the focus from grinding through the transition to guiding it with intention, the profession can create stronger veterinarians, happier teams, and healthier practices.

And here lies the ultimate ah-ha: onboarding is not just about reducing friction or preventing burnout. When structured around gateways like dentistry, surgery, and medicine, it becomes a triple win - graduates build skills, they find belonging, and practices generate meaningful revenue. Owners are not just mentors but architects of growth, crafting environments where investment in people pays dividends in both human and financial terms.

This session is a call to owners: step into your role as guide, mentor, and leader. Create the frameworks, set the boundaries, and provide the support. And it is a call to graduates: embrace the challenge, put in the work, and grow into the professional you aspire to be. Together, you can create the future of veterinary medicine - one guided, not ground-down, graduate at a time.

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