The Covid-19 pandemic created the most urgent platform for change that the veterinary profession has ever seen. Every business in every sector throughout the world was forced to simultaneously redesign itself from the ground up against a singular overriding imperative – social distancing. As human safety became the priority, established systems, processes and operating models were torn apart and hastily replaced. This article illustrates how using efficiency models can help practices recover and redefine their working models following the pandemic.

Using efficiency models to redefine veterinary practice following Covid-19

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Key learning outcomes

After reading this article, you should understand:

- The concepts that underpin efficient working models;
- How a cycle of continuous improvement can allow your business to evolve and adapt;
- How to effectively plan and communicate change within your team and business;
- How to use a framework to create team-based solutions.

A unique opportunity: reflect, rethink and rebuild

PDSA’s response to the pandemic was quick and effective. It’s charitable veterinary service relies on high volume footfall and it immediately became clear as the pandemic unfolded that this operating model exposed colleagues and clients to an unacceptable public health risk. What followed was the rapid implementation of robust health and safety protocols and the adaptation of technology to allow remote consulting.

This ensured that the caseload of sick and injured pets was serviced in a way that kept colleagues and clients safe. Remarkably, in 2020, PDSA managed to deliver over 600,000 remote consultations, allowing over 400,000 pets to receive urgent and life-saving treatment (a figure in line with ‘normal’ standards).

A change on the scale caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has an inevitable impact on the efficiency of vet practices, resulting in lost income, a distortion of the client experience and knock-on effects on employee engagement. However, despite tough working conditions, people have identified elements of their roles that they want to retain after the pandemic; for example, greater flexibility around working hours, or the ability to work from home.

There are also elements of the veterinary operating model which have been altered by the pandemic that are equally appealing; for example, calmer, quieter waiting rooms and the ability for clients to access veterinary services remotely.

So, before we scramble to return to the way things were, it is worth pausing and considering the words of Albert Einstein, ‘in the midst of crisis, lies great opportunity’.

We should acknowledge that this crisis presents a one-off opportunity to redefine how veterinary services are delivered, and at this significant juncture – between change and recovery – exists a space for veterinary practice to evolve. As part of a structured recovery programme, we should reflect on the lessons learned from the past year, rethink how we might want to deliver veterinary services in the future, and rebuild that service with resilience.

Challenges of change: where to start?

Veterinary leaders who want to embrace change are faced with questions that risk pulling their attention and focus in multiple different directions (Fig 1). It’s natural to try and create a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution that solves all the problems simultaneously. However, the veterinary operating model is complex, with many interrelated moving parts that have unpredictable impacts on each other. The rationale for change during the pandemic – ‘to protect human life’ – was so compelling that it allowed leaders to implement large-scale change quickly, despite elements of this being unpopular. However, repeated attempts to make changes of this magnitude would quickly lead to disruption, confusion and disengagement among the team. Indeed, even smaller scale changes can lead to ‘change fatigue’ or the feeling of ‘death by a thousand cuts’.

The solution to this challenge could lie within the practices of efficient working models, which rely on a culture that embraces change. In these organisations, ‘change’ has been reframed as ‘evolution’, with a framework of planning,
information gathering and inclusive problem solving, which creates an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement.

Throughout its 100-year history, PDSA has engaged with a cycle of continuous improvement, allowing constant adaptation to deliver one of the most efficient veterinary operating models in the world, successfully treating hundreds of thousands of pets every year at the lowest possible cost.

**Principles and the framework that underpin efficient operating models**

Efficiency isn’t just about working harder or making things faster, leaner or cheaper. It isn’t something that can just be ‘done’ to a business, like a task to complete or a box to tick – ‘we are now efficient’. You should think of efficiency as working smarter and as a cycle that never stops; an ongoing improvement process that allows continual adaptation and evolution.

**Principles of efficiency**

Defining principles ensures that any changes you make are aligned with your overall business purpose. This helps you focus your activities on the right things that have the right impacts. Your interventions should satisfy at least one principle that you have defined, although preferentially multiple principles, and do so without detriment to the others (Case study part 1).

**Framework for efficiency**

The best ideas will fail if they are landed badly. Having a framework (Fig 2) gives you the discipline to thoroughly plan, research and involve your team before any change is implemented, ultimately improving the chances of its success. The latter steps in the framework also provide the governance to fully evaluate the impacts of any changes before you consider any further activity. Full transparency is one of the most important factors in managing team engagement throughout this process.

**CASE STUDY PART 1: DEFINING YOUR EFFICIENCY PRINCIPLES TO FOCUS YOUR ACTIVITIES**

As a practice leader, you want to instigate a culture of continuous improvement within your team. You should start by defining your principles of what the proposed change should deliver. For example:

- Improvements in animal welfare
- Increase in pet numbers
- Increased income
- Better client experience
- Better employee engagement

Reflect, rethink, rebuild

Reflecting, rethinking and rebuilding is where the cycle of continuous improvement begins, ends and begins again. This stage of reflection and planning is critical to identify the specific area where you want to focus your efforts, and to ensure that any change you are considering is effective and aligned with the principles you’ve previously defined. Think of this exercise as a strategic thought process, or a pilot study, so that you can test an initial hypothesis in theory and explore the size and scale of a potential project (Fig 3).
Practice improvement

Measuring current performance

Selecting the right measures helps you to understand your current situation, but also gives you the means to track performance going forwards. It’s preferable to use key performance indicators (KPIs) rather than metrics to measure performance. Although these often get confused, the key difference is that a metric is a simple number that gives you isolated information about a specific process, while a good KPI is more specific to the goal you are trying to achieve and can help you measure your movement towards that goal. Ultimately, metrics identify the quantity, while KPIs help you understand the quality of the measures (Case study part 2).

It’s also worth considering a balance of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ KPIs to give you a more holistic view of performance. Hard KPIs are usually measured in units of numbers, money or time and are generally easier to report from most practice management systems. Soft KPIs usually relate to people, their experience, or their feelings of value towards something. Leaders often focus on hard KPIs as they are much easier to interpret, but soft KPIs are just as important and can help you understand the impact of any changes from a people perspective.

Root cause analysis

Observing

When faced with areas of under performance, leaders will often jump into ‘solution mode’, feeling confident that their operational knowledge gives them the insight that they need to address the problem. However, these efforts often fail and can even make performance worse, which can then deflate enthusiasm and erode a leaders credibility with the team.

So, why do things sometimes go so wrong?

CASE STUDY PART 2: MEASURING CURRENT PERFORMANCE

You’ve noticed a dramatic decrease in the sales of preventive products over the past year. You know Covid-19 has had an impact but you think there are still some opportunities to improve the current ways of working. You know that the team and clients are frustrated as the practice has a strong culture of preventive medicine. Therefore, you explore the following measures to understand performance:

| Metrics                             | Efficiency KPI                                      |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Consultation numbers                | Consults per veterinary surgeon per day             |
| Number of preventive products sold  | % of consults that result in preventive sales        |
| Income from preventive products     | Preventive products sales per pet                    |
| Client survey numbers               | Client satisfaction score                           |
| Staff survey numbers                | Employee engagement score                           |

Fig 2: A framework for efficiency: the cycle of continuous improvement
Practice improvement

performance; if you have narrow goals, then you will ultimately have a narrow focus of success. Although you may improve that specific area of performance, you may also inadvertently cause disruption elsewhere.

In our case study scenario, a leader who focuses on the narrow goal of ‘income’ could easily embark on initiatives to drive sales of preventive products. In doing so, they would miss the valuable information provided by the root cause analysis, meaning that their solutions might risk layering more stress on a team that is already close to breaking point.

Therefore, at this stage, strengthening your goal with a purpose that relates to your previously defined principles will help give your team clarity on why this change is important (Case study part 4).

Create team-based solutions

A very effective way to implement change is to create solutions from the ground up, leveraging on the insight, expertise and innovation from your team. Most people want to be productive and might already have ideas of how they can improve the areas of work that they directly influence – allowing people to have a say in how improvements are made will impart ownership and motivation around the change process.

Invite key members of your team to a facilitated meeting, or if you’re feeling brave then invite everyone! Present the problem you have identified and then discuss your observations, interpretations and the KPIs that demonstrate your analysis of performance. Give your team members time to share their insight and experiences and encourage them to create a plan that aligns with the principles you have defined.

These exercises usually lead to a number of suggestions, some of which are considered ‘quick wins’, and as a leader you can quickly offer credibility to the change process by agreeing to these suggestions on the spot (Case study part 5).

CASE STUDY PART 3: OBSERVATION AND EVALUATION

You spend a morning observing and evaluating the waiting room and the veterinary consultations:

| Observation                                                                 | Evaluation                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| There are no displays or conversations relating to preventive products in the waiting room | People: there is a new receptionist who is not yet fully trained on any of the practice preventive products or services |
| The practice management system (PMS) does not indicate flea, worm or vaccine status of pets | System: alerts regarding flea/worm/vaccine status on the PMS are not configured properly               |
| The vet regularly leaves the consultation room for long periods of time     | System: the vet is looking for equipment shared between prep and consultation rooms, or going to the reception where the printer is located |
| A proportion of the vet’s consults are actually traditional nurse consults (ie, postoperative checks, nail clips and dressing changes) | Process: the nurse rotas show there are only nurse consults on two mornings a week, meaning the vet has to take more of these consults on |
| The vet misses opportunities to recommend preventive products in consultations | People: consultations feel rushed and the vet appears stressed                                          |

Your root cause analysis identifies that the vets are under increased pressure due to three main areas of inefficiency that are reducing their time and ability to effectively recommend preventive products:

- Inappropriate booking process means that vets are doing work that nurses should be doing
- Inefficient consulting room set up
- No prompting of clients with regards to buying preventive products

CASE STUDY PART 4: STRENGTHENING GOALS WITH A PURPOSE

| Goal – what you want to achieve | We want to improve our workflow in order to increase the opportunities to recommend preventive products |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Purpose – why is this important | Effective recommendations of preventive products improve pet welfare, drive income and meet the expectations of our clients |
Practice improvement

CASE STUDY PART 5: QUICK WINS AND IMPROVEMENT PLANS

In your facilitated session there was general agreement in your observations and discussions surrounding KPIs, and the team were very keen to explore how to improve practice performance. Your team initially wanted to consider employing more vets to reduce some of the strain on them; however, after further discussions and suggestions agreed to the following changes:

Quick wins
- Configure the practice management system to show preventive alerts for each pet
- Receptionists to weigh animals on arrival and update records with current preventive treatment status
- Additional printer to be installed by the consultation rooms and additional equipment to be bought for the consultation rooms to improve workflow for the vets

Longer term improvement plan
- The nurse rotas to be reviewed to ensure there are nurse consults offered every day
- A new appointment booking process to ensure vets are only doing vet consults
- Receptionists to be trained on preventive products and protocols so they are able to answer client questions
- A preventive leaflet to be created that can be handed to all waiting clients
- Waiting room displays to be regularly refreshed to highlight new products by a designated team member
- Introduction of a ‘healthy pet plan’ with all staff trained on the products and their benefits

The exercise should culminate in everyone agreeing to play their part and taking ownership of the change process from that point.

Assess the impact

Use your KPIs to track performance against your goals for a number of months. It’s very important to share these results with the team so that there is a continued focus on the project and so that success and learnings can be discussed. When your team becomes empowered to bring their ideas to life they soon see this process as a positive mechanism that improves the way they work.

Allowing time for the changes to properly embed also gives you the ability to understand the impacts that they may have on other areas of the business – you may relieve the pressure on a workflow bottleneck only to move that bottleneck further down the line, so this period of assessment will help to inform your next cycle of activity (Case study part 6).

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced change on a scale we could never have imagined, and as we look towards an uncertain recovery phase it’s clear that businesses that can react and adapt will have the resilience to survive, and even thrive. This reactive framework combines concepts of operational efficiency with learnings from grassroots leadership initiatives. However, regardless of the model you choose to adopt, it’s important that you consider the process of change as a continuous and disciplined cycle. Instilling this in your team culture will give you the best chance for adaptation and evolution to face whatever challenges the future may hold.

Further reading

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CASE STUDY PART 6: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CHANGE

You track performance for six months and see a clear improvement in the numbers of consults each vet is delivering, and also the percentage of pets that receive preventive products as a result of these consults. Your vets report that the changes have made the consulting experience easier and less stressful for them. Furthermore, your team have really got behind the ‘healthy pet plan’.

However, the marked increase in sales of preventive products has led to a huge increase in dispensary activity, which has subsequently put pressure on the individual team member responsible for this. Therefore, you plan to start the process of continuous improvement again with this now being an area of focus.