

# What Can't Be Taught

## Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

### The path to success

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**R**electing back on my first year in practice, I can't help but think that it's funny where your path ends up taking you. That's part of the beauty of the future. It is unknown and ripe with potential. For the last 3 years I have given a lecture to a group of first year veterinary students about unconventional careers in veterinary medicine. To date, my career path has been just that, interesting, unconventional, and not what I would have ever predicted when I first stepped out into practice. During that lecture I put up the same slide every year about the path to success. You may have seen it. It shows two arrows side by side. The one is straight, pointing upwards, and is labelled, "Success: What people think it looks like." The other is a convoluted line of twists and turns, ups and downs, circles and knots, and is labelled, "Success: What it really looks like." Even though the arrows eventually end up in the same "successful" place, the slide illustrates the point that there is rarely a straight line to your end goal.

"Who here is planning to own their own practice?" the professor at the front of the room asked. I still remember that day in vet school like it was yesterday, even though it was nearly 15 years ago. I was sitting in an Art of Veterinary Medicine class at the Ontario Veterinary College and we were talking about business ownership. About 20 of us, a fifth of the class and myself included, raised our hands. I thought I had my path all mapped out. I would graduate from vet school, go work for a year or two in mixed practice, and then buy my own shop. I had always wanted to own my own business, and had always had an entrepreneurial spirit, running several small ventures when I was younger. To me, the path to success in veterinary medicine was the ability to have your own piece of the pie, where you got to run things the way you wanted to, and to grow a business with your own vision. There was excitement in steering a ship, mentoring lots of people, and leading people towards a common goal. As the daughter of an engineer, I loved the idea of building something up, making it better. Yet if someone would have

told me then the twists and turns my path would take, I never would have believed them.

True to my initial vision, I headed to a mixed animal practice in a rural community upon graduation. I was a food animal person, passionate about swine medicine, but I also enjoyed small animals too, and often joked that my future clinic would be called "Hogs and Dogs Veterinary Hospital." That first year out was an eye opener and it all but washed my dream away. Swine prices had bottomed out, and I had graduated in the face of the BSE crisis. Food animal work was nearly non-existent, and what little there was amounted to "blessing cows" instead of getting to do anything interesting or progressive. The nice thing about mixed practice is it has a little bit of everything in it, and I got to experience things that I never thought I would enjoy. Who knew I'd enjoy working with horses? The thought of touching these million dollar racetrack animals in vet school had made me nauseous, but far from the track, the horses and horse owners in Northern Ontario were fabulous. Small animal practice also became something I grew to love even more. A consummate problem solver and a lover of hands-on learning, the challenges of unravelling a complex medicine case was thrilling. Being isolated from specialty referral practices meant that this little vet clinic tackled some pretty cool surgeries that I would later learn were rarely performed outside of a specialist's hands. I learned to be brave and stand on my own two feet. But the hours were brutal, the on-call nearly killed me, and I seriously questioned my decision to become a veterinarian on more than one occasion.

Veterinary technicians will be your best friend when you graduate from vet school. They will be your safety net, a listening ear, your biggest help, and your greatest champion. It wasn't until a special vet tech said to me, "Heather, if you stay here, this is as good as you will ever be, and you've got so much potential," that I realized I needed to move on. And so the first twist in my path started, with many, many more to follow. In the years since that first job, I've worked in AAHA accredited small animal practices with all the bells and whistles, I opened my own locum business, I worked in academia, private industry, and eventually found my arrowhead.

I never opened my own shop, and I'm fairly certain that I never will, but I never lost that passion for business and leadership. As the Director of the Veterinary Teaching Hospital at the Atlantic Veterinary College, I get to fulfill all the criteria that I defined as being successful when I was a student and I get to follow that passion. I lead a phenomenal group of people and we

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work together towards a common vision, excellence in veterinary service and teaching. In terms of building and making things better, my entire team gets to work towards improving the most important thing in veterinary medicine, future veterinarians. I love the feeling of having exponential impact on the next generation of veterinarians, and I couldn't be more proud of what

I am doing today. I often tell the students that everyone has an idea of their path, but it's okay for that vision to change, because it often will. If you keep an open mind, follow your passion, and do what makes you happy, the possibilities in veterinary medicine are endless.