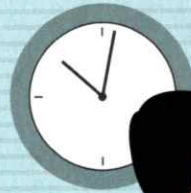
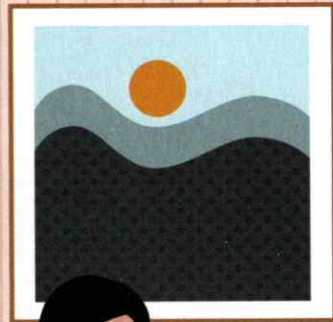


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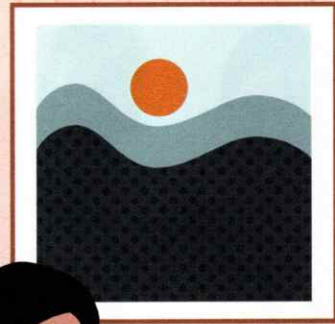
How to Co-Own a Practice Without Ruining a Relationship 28

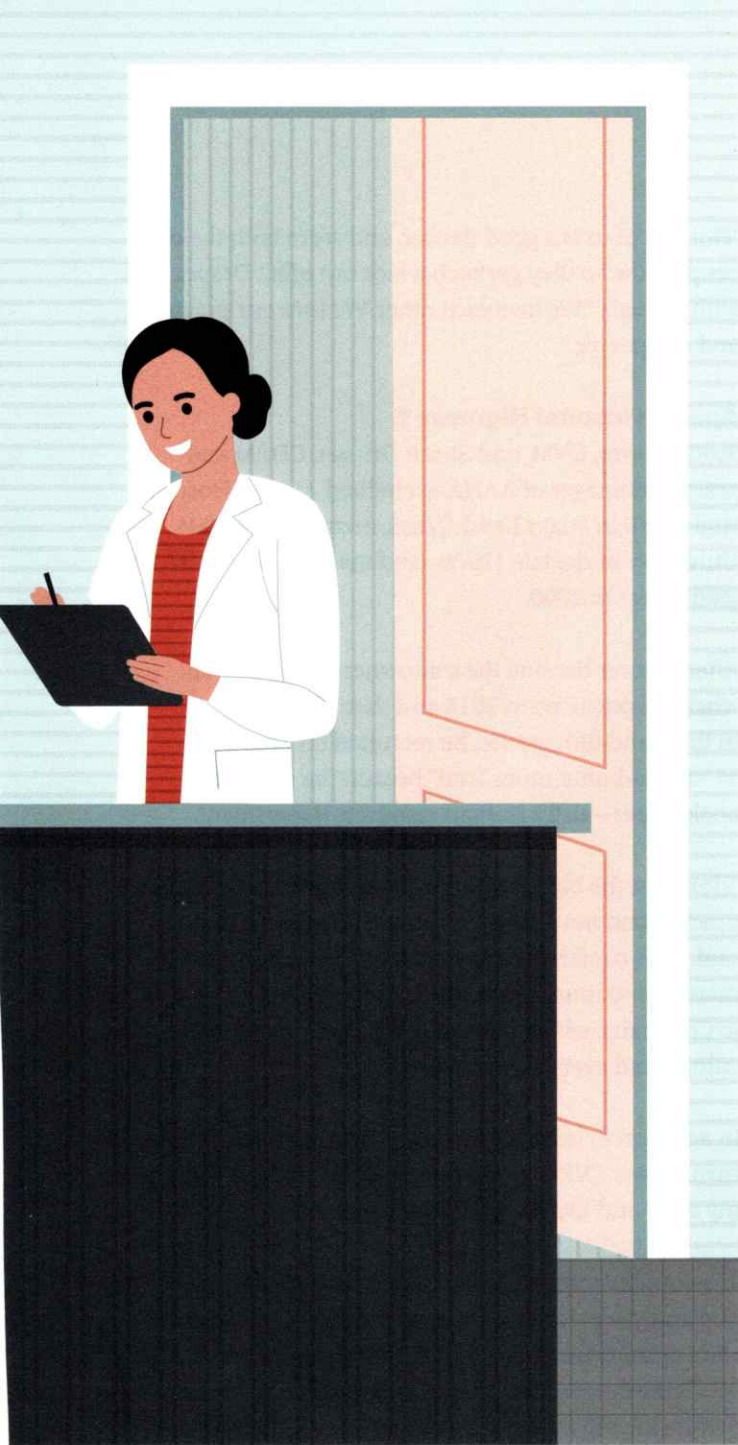


Sustainable Steps

Get Started on Reducing Your Impact on the Planet 35

Mixing Business *and* Life





Co-Owning a Practice with a Significant Other or Friend Without Ruining the Relationship

by Jen Reeder

ON AUGUST 25, 1987, WILL DRAPER FIRST laid eyes on Françoise Tyler during a first-year veterinary school orientation at Tuskegee University. He introduced himself and, though thoroughly disappointed to learn she was dating someone, they became close friends.

Fast forward to 2022, when the two DVMs have been happily married since 1993. During that time, they've raised four children and are co-owners of the AAHA-accredited practice The Village Vets, which has six locations in Georgia, one in Pennsylvania, and a seventh in the works.

"The biggest part is that we respect each other, and we acknowledge each other's strengths within this adventure," Tyler said. "And we like to have fun."

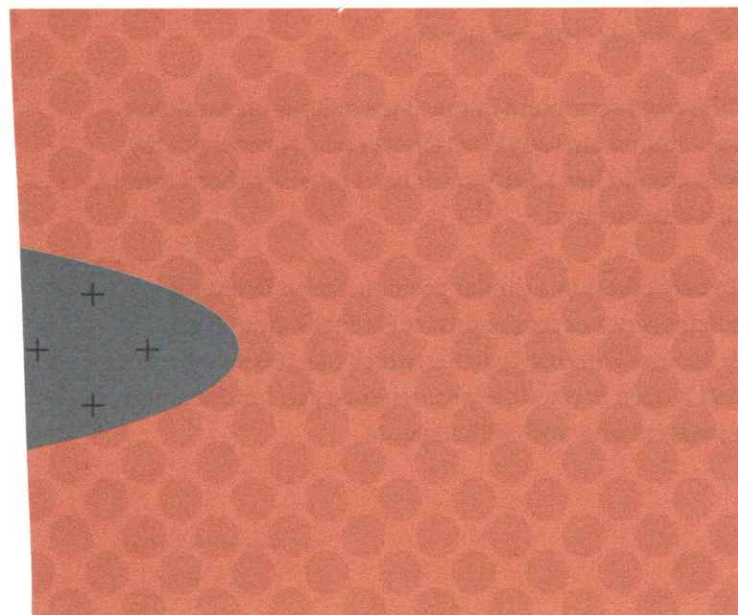
Partnering with a significant other or close friend to own and operate an animal hospital can be a daunting undertaking. What's the secret to running a successful business without destroying a personal relationship in the process? We spoke to owners of five AAHA-accredited practices to find out.

The Village Vets

While they both practice medicine, having different roles in their business ventures—and staying in their own lanes as much as possible—helps keep things running smoothly for Tyler and Draper.

"Will is the powerhouse of this relationship from the business side," Tyler said. "That's not my passion. I told him from the beginning of our relationship, especially once we started these practices, that I wanted to be the vet."

The couple respects each other's opinions, and even if they disagree on something, whether about parenting or their practices, they stick to the maxim, "Praise publicly, criticize privately."





Will Draper, DVM, and Françoise Tyler, DVM, co-owners of the AAHA-accredited practice The Village Vets.



The Draper family.

“We have a discussion with the two of us, but we always make sure we’re a united front at home or in the practice,” Draper said. “We trust that it’s going to work out and we give it our all.”

That goes for backing up their staff, too. If a client calls a team member a rude name, Draper tells the client they’re no longer welcome at The Village Vets. The couple sees their team as a family, and as “mom and dad,” have counseled employees about buying cars or their first homes and offered marriage advice. They’ll try to lighten the team’s mood on a stressful day by turning on music and dancing together.

“Not one of us is a good dancer, and we’re both the old people now, so they get such a kick out of it,” Draper said with a laugh. “We love each other. We love our practice and our people.”

Animal Hospital Highway 6

Scott Driever, DVM, and Susan Driever, CDPM and practice manager of AAHA-accredited Animal Hospital Highway 6 in Sugar Land, Texas, met at Texas A&M University in the late 1990s—and married two weeks after graduation in 2000.

After Driever became the sole owner of the hospital where he practiced in 2015 and their sons were in third and fifth grades, he recruited his wife out of “stay-at-home-mom land” because he needed a bookkeeper—and a human resources department.

“Honestly, the biggest challenge we had was buying the practice and not knowing what we didn’t know,” she said. “The conference for AAHA was amazing because there was so much leadership, and then it transitioned to Connexity, which then laser-focused even more on culture and everything needed.”

In addition to learning through continuing education, earning her CVPM also helped her feel like she’d “earned my spot” and the respect of their staff.

The couple’s roles are distinct, and they are also physically separated because of the building’s layout: she’s upstairs on the entrance floor, and he’s practicing medicine downstairs. They also take pains to keep their private life separate from work by refraining from using pet names like “Sweetie” at work. Instead, they refer to each other as “HR” and “Dr. D.”

“The way I act around Susan at the office is the same way I act around anybody else,” Driever said. “I never put my arm around her. I don’t touch her. I never kiss her. I think that keeps it clean.”

To help others in a similar position, Susan Driever is coadministrator for the private Facebook group Vets & Spouses Working Together, which has 260 members and is open to veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and managers who work with a spouse.

“It’s all about communication, compromise, patience, and giving each other the space to be who they are—and appreciating your partner’s strengths and their weaknesses.”

—PAGE MADER

The couple’s bond has helped them—and their practice—weather numerous natural disasters, including Hurricanes Harvey and Ike.

“I think ultimately it’s how you as a couple respond to a difficult situation,” she said. “For us, when the going gets tough, we just rise to the occasion. You can either freak out or you can take a deep breath, keep a level head and not escalate things between each other, and lead by example.”

Five Parks Animal Hospital

Page Mader, DVM, and Susan Wass, hospital administrator of AAHA-accredited Five Parks Animal Hospital in Arvada, Colorado, became friends working together at a veterinary hospital in Denver before deciding to open their own practice.

“Basically, we were both just working crazy, crazy hours and thinking, ‘Gosh—why don’t we do this for ourselves?’” Mader said. “Even though we’re two pretty

different people, our vision was pretty similar in terms of what we wanted to accomplish and what type of clinic we wanted to open.”

That vision involved prioritizing top-notch medicine and the wellbeing of their staff above profit. But opening an animal hospital in the middle of the pandemic (the doors opened in October of 2020) created unique stressors, from not being able to host an open house to having difficulty buying supplies and even office furniture. So they used the slow opening to develop systems and achieve AAHA accreditation within five months of opening.

The business continues to grow. Having roles that play to each other’s strengths has proved prudent. For instance, Wass is more extroverted and handles in-person networking, while Mader has an undergraduate degree in English and writes veterinary articles for a local magazine.

They’ve also been sure to discuss their long-term goals and potential endgame strategies to understand the scope of the business relationship.

“There are always going to be unanticipated things that come up when you open a business together,” she said. “But it’s all about communication, compromise, patience, and giving each other the space to be who you are—and appreciating your partner’s strengths and their weaknesses.”

Veterinary Surgical Specialists

Some people spend so much time at work that they develop a “work husband” or “work wife,” so why not spend that kind of time with an actual spouse? That philosophy has worked well for Rich Pankowski, DVM, and hospital administrator, and Diane Craig, DVM, DACVS, the founders and co-owners of AAHA-accredited Veterinary Surgical Specialists in Tustin, California.



Page Mader, DVM, and Susan Wass, hospital administrator of AAHA-accredited Five Parks Animal Hospital.

Tips for Working with a Significant Other or Friend

"Remember that it's not personal if a spouse or friend disagrees with you if you're talking about a work issue. They're not mad at you. They're upset with whatever the issue is." —KAREN ROONEY

"Communication is the key."
—WILL DRAPER

"It's okay to make mistakes. You're human. Learn from it and also try to have some fun during the day. You deserve it." —FRANÇOISE TYLER

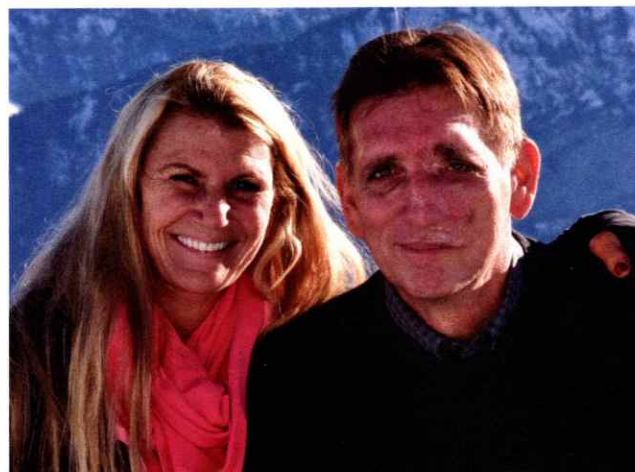
"The more defined your roles are going into opening a business, the better."
—PAGE MADER

"Respect each other and lead by example."
—SCOTT DRIEVER

"One of the things that we really stress to our employees and our kids is to try to have a balanced life." —DIANE CRAIG

"We don't do pet names at work. We want it to be professional." —SUSAN DRIEVER, CDPM

"Invest in a cleaning service for your home at least every couple of weeks, if not more often, because then when you're at home, you can spend time with your spouse doing fun things or with your children." —KAREN ROONEY



Diane Craig, DVM, DACVS, and Rich Pankowski, DVM and hospital administrator, are the founders and co-owners of AAHA-accredited Veterinary Surgical Specialists.

"I think a marriage involves a lot of technical details, a lot of planning. Rich and I have always worked together in delegating different parts of the responsibility to each other, including the childcare for three kids and a house and five pets," she said. "So, we delegate a lot of responsibility to our employees and to each other. I think it helps a lot that we trust each other's judgment."

The two listen to their team, share decision-making, and "lead from the bottom up, by example," she said. Because they don't have an autocratic veterinary practice, their two daughters, who are both veterinary students, thrived by working at their practice during the pandemic.

In fact, the young women saw a need and got the idea for creating a software program that uses artificial intelligence to ease the transition of medical records coming into a referral practice. They won a contest and a venture capital group invested \$500,000 in seed money to help them create Transfur (in beta testing as of April 2022).

"That's one of the things that came out of working cooperatively in the practice and seeing what was going on," Pankowski said.

Pankowski's background in surgery helps him, as an administrator, know how to support the needs of the surgeons at the specialty practice. The couple has regular meetings to discuss how things are going, who's having concerns, and any good ideas for the practice. While they

“We delegate a lot of responsibility to our employees and to each other. I think it helps a lot that we trust each other’s judgment.”

—DIANE CRAIG, DVM, DACVS

sometimes talk about work in the mornings, there’s no shop talk at night. But they bring their family life into the practice in a special way.

“Diane managed to have all three kids while she was working as a surgeon. It was important to us in terms of our culture to make sure that the staff knew that family was important,” he said. “So I think we’ve taken a lot of issues very seriously with the staff to help support them family-wise.”

Burr Ridge Veterinary Clinic

Brian Rooney, DVM, and Karen Rooney, practice manager of AAHA-accredited Burr Ridge Veterinary Clinic in Darien, Illinois, have been married 38 years for myriad reasons—including that they never tell the other one how to do their job.

In fact, Karen Rooney was hired as practice manager 25 years ago by the former owner—not her husband, who became the primary owner about eight years ago.



Brian Rooney, DVM, and Karen Rooney, practice manager of AAHA-accredited Burr Ridge Veterinary Clinic.

“Now I work my normal 40-plus a week in the clinic because our kids are grown up and out of the house,” she said. “But when they were little, I still did a lot of my work at night after they were sleeping and on weekends from home.”

She also went into the office on Brian’s day off so that she wouldn’t feel guilty leaving their daughters with a sitter, and he’d have a chance to bond with them. At AAHA and American Veterinary Medical Association conferences and other continuing education events, they’d try to attend sessions at different times so one of them could be with their kids in the hotel. They also ate dinner later than other families so that Brian could eat with them after work.

Now she marvels at how she got it all done and hopes veterinary professionals will find better ways to support colleagues with small children. Adding a daycare to a practice isn’t typically feasible because of liability concerns, so understanding that it’s okay to give up some other priorities like keeping a spotless home can help, she said.

It also helps to have shared activities outside of work—the Rooneys attend church together each Sunday—as well as separate interests. For example, she enjoys being in a book club while her husband prefers gardening. She also recommends planning at least one monthly date where you don’t talk about work.

They also never raise their voices to anyone—not the staff or each other. Ultimately, her advice for finding the ideal partner is simple: “Marry your best friend.” ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder works from her home office in Colorado, which she shares with her husband and their senior dogs, Rio and Peach.