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# A placement officer's top tips for clinical coaches

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**ABSTRACT:** Clinical Coaches play a very important role in supporting the development of Student Veterinary Nurses to become qualified members of the team. Clinical Coaches often need to overcome multiple obstacles to be able to carry out their role. Some of the top challenges they face are; supporting inexperienced students, overcoming tight time constraints and guiding Student Veterinary Nurses through both academic and pastoral problems. The solutions to overcome these issues are summarised within six top tips.

**Keywords:** clinical coach; mentor; student veterinary nurse; top tips

## Introduction

The RCVS defines a clinical coach (CC) as 'The person (MRCVS/RVN) appointed to recognise competence and make judgments about student performance and competence' (RCVS, 2017). Whilst this does form a large proportion of the CC's role, it is clear from the literature that there are many other important aspects.

In practice, the CC is responsible for supporting the student through their journey to become a fully qualified member of the team (Leigh, Littlewood, & Lyons, 2019). This involves developing a strong bond with the student, where the CC can offer pastoral and academic support (Kerrigan, 2018). The CC should regularly encourage each student to mould their own development by guiding them to identify both the skills and knowledge that they need to work on (Kerrigan, 2018). Alongside this they are often seen by their student as a role model (Badger, 2013) and therefore, will generally influence the standards maintained by the future Veterinary Nursing professionals. The CC substantially contributes to an SVN's training and often overcomes many challenges to carry out their role. Consequently, any tips that can be used to assist a CC when providing training can be valuable.

## Key aspects of a good clinical coach

The CC plays a vital role in driving the standards of the Veterinary Nursing profession by assisting with the development of their

student. It is therefore important to explore the qualities of a good CC. CCs should be good communicators, with the ability to offer guidance without divulging answers (Cottrell, 2013). This approach ensures the student is more heavily involved in their own learning. Furthermore, the CC is often the first person to be approached by a struggling student. As a result, a CC will inevitably be called upon to provide pastoral support for their students (Sibson, 2014).

Whilst the literature can outline the qualities that are pertinent to becoming a successful CC, it is also necessary to analyse the attributes that are considered most valuable by the student. Gray and Smith (2000) outlined a series of key qualities a student expects from a clinical mentor within their analysis of student-mentor relationships within human medicine (Figure 1). Student feedback presented within this study highlighted that being approachable and showing enthusiasm for the student's progression, as well as being an effective communicator, were some of the most important characteristics of a good mentor.

Facilitating a comfortable working environment and having realistic expectations of their student's development were also considered highly valuable mentor traits (Gray & Smith, 2000). Williams (2017) also agreed that a good mentor within a veterinary practice should be able to demonstrate a welcoming and patient image to the student. The role of the mentor within both human and veterinary nursing is broadly

similar and therefore veterinary nursing professionals should look to apply successful concepts from both disciplines.

### Barriers to clinical coaching in practice

Whilst a CC may possess all of the qualities listed in Figure 1, there are still other aspects of teaching within a clinical setting that can impact on the learning journey of a student. By reviewing the barriers to clinical coaching, we can try to develop and implement practical solutions.

### New students

Introducing a brand-new student to the veterinary profession can be very daunting for both the CC and the student, especially in cases where the student has only completed a couple of weeks of clinical experience. It is therefore important that the student receives a thorough induction. This is relevant from both a health and safety and pastoral perspective. Without it, the student will likely struggle to succeed within their early days in practice. Warman, Bell, and Rhind (2014) state that it is good practice to have an induction conversation with the student at the very beginning of their placement. This introduction should take place between the student and the CC to allow the CC to develop an understanding as to what clinical level the student is currently working at. It also provides a good opportunity to outline what is expected from the student and can be presented in the form of a signed training agreement. Once the CC has a clear idea of what experience the student has and the boundaries of the code-of-conduct have been set for both parties, the discussion can move onto the student's development plan. It is exceptionally important to determine what the student is hoping to achieve and what clinical tasks they would like to work on. By encouraging the student to be involved in creating their own plan, they will develop an ownership for their learning, which should aid in motivating themselves to continue to work on their advancement (Warman, Bell, & Baillie, 2014).

Key points	
•	Good interpersonal skills.
•	Good clinical Knowledge.
•	Approachable.
•	Professional.
•	Organised.
•	Provides regular feedback.
•	Caring.
•	Realistic expectation of student development.

Figure 1. Key qualities of a good mentor from the perception of human student nurses (information obtained from Gray & Smith, 2000).

### Time constraints

Maintaining the continual student support required of the CC can be challenging in the time constraints presented within an active practice. This is a viewpoint shared by Warman, Bell, & Baillie (2014). No matter how organised you are as a CC you can never predict when the next emergency is going to walk through the door and disrupt your teaching session, so being flexible with your contact time with a student is vital. Even so, planning will play an important part in structuring your student's learning. Therefore, booking time out during a working day on the practice diary to allow for tutorials or teaching sessions is useful and encouraged. CCs who find themselves struggling to complete their normal tasks alongside their mentoring responsibilities should look to their team for assistance. Sharing training duties between staff members or rearranging shift timetables may be good solutions to allow a CC to spend more time with a student.

Another difficulty, that often stems from time constraints, is the ability to provide constructive feedback to students. Providing effective feedback is key to the advancement of a student's practical ability (Warman, Bell, & Rhind, 2014). Students should be encouraged to engage with their own learning by reflecting on their performance. Questions such as; 'what did you do well during that task?' and 'what can you improve on next time?' will assist the student in identifying the areas that they need to work on, which can then be used as discussion points. At the end of the feedback session, the student should decide upon an action plan, detailing the parts of the feedback they are going to work on (Warman, Bell, & Rhind, 2014). Ideally, feedback should be provided to the student immediately after the task. However, time constrictions often conflict with this. Instead, regular tutorials can provide the CC with an opportunity to discuss feedback with the student, but this ideally should refer to specific examples.

### Student challenges

Tutorials can also aid in supporting a range of vocational challenges faced by the student. Balancing the demands of their placement and their training provider (the course provider) can be overwhelming. This can lead to a student struggling to stay motivated to complete what seems like an impossible task. Regular tutorials can be helpful in involving the student in the development of solutions to their problems. A useful tool that CCs can use during these is the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) (Figure 2) (Whitmore, 2017).

Goal	What do you want to achieve?
Reality	What is the current situation? What is stopping you from getting there?
Options	How can you reach your goal?
Will	What actions must you take? What is your time scale? How likely are you to compete the task?

Figure 2. GROW model template. From Whitmore (2017).

A CC should preferably aim to avoid providing solutions before the student has had an opportunity to consider their options first. This allows the student to come to their own conclusions regarding the challenge (Kerrigan, 2018). From discussions using the GROW model (Figure 2), the student can set themselves SMART targets: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound (Doran, 1981). For example, 'by next Tuesday I will claim competency for section one, task two'. This will give them ownership of their own learning and provide them with a clearer direction. Alongside providing academic guidance, tutorials also give the student the opportunity to divulge any pastoral issues. The GROW model can also be used to assist the CC in identifying where the student may need additional support for pastoral problems (Sibson, 2014).

Should a student identify a pastoral problem that a CC feels unable to assist with, it may be preferable to seek assistance from the training provider. Before discussing any issue with the training provider, you must first gain the student's consent. Whatever has been discussed with a CC should be considered confidential until that permission has been granted.

### Unclear clinical coach and training provider expectations

The training provider should aim to assist a CC with all aspects of training and should be used by the CC whenever appropriate. Each training provider will have a unique way of structuring their student curriculum. As a result, the targets that they set and advice they provide will differ between institutions. It can therefore be very valuable to build a relationship between the training provider and the CC early on. The training provider will often produce resources that will give guidance on what is expected from a CC. These resources provide insight into the course content they have developed, allowing a CC to tailor the clinical work to the theory being taught to the student. It is beneficial to become familiar with the targets students are being set and the deadlines these are to be completed by. The training provider should also outline what progression is expected of a student

**Summary of CC top tips**

**Tip 1:** Create a supportive and approachable persona, alongside demonstrating enthusiasm for the students learning.

**Tip 2:** Complete an induction tutorial and create a development plan for the student.

**Tip 3:** Seek support from the practice team when required.

**Tip 4:** Encourage students to reflect on their own performance and identify areas of improvement.

**Tip 5:** Complete regular tutorials tailored to the student's needs (try using both the GROW and SMART models).

**Tip 6:** Develop communications with your students training provider. They're also there to offer CCs support.

▣ **Figure 3.** A summary of CC top tips, identified from the ideal qualities of a CC and the barriers to clinical coaching.

and provide feedback on the technique of the CC. It is important to remember the role the training provider should play in providing support to the CC, as it is often overlooked in these instances. If you need assistance as a CC, do not hesitate to contact them.

## Conclusion

Evidently, a CC has multiple obstacles to overcome to be able to provide support for their students. By highlighting the ingredients that create the ideal CC, we can reflect on our own performance as CCs. Furthermore, identifying and outlining the basic challenges CCs face in practice and reviewing solutions to overcome them should lead to a better and more streamlined learner experience in the future

(Figure 3). CCs are encouraged to follow the six top tips outlined within this article to achieve this.

It is important that we recognise the significant impact CCs have on the Veterinary Nursing profession and the significance of their role in supporting and training the next generation of RVNs. The vital contribution of CCs to the VN occupation cannot be understated, so I would like to take this opportunity to thank all CCs for their continued time and guidance in shaping our future RVNs.

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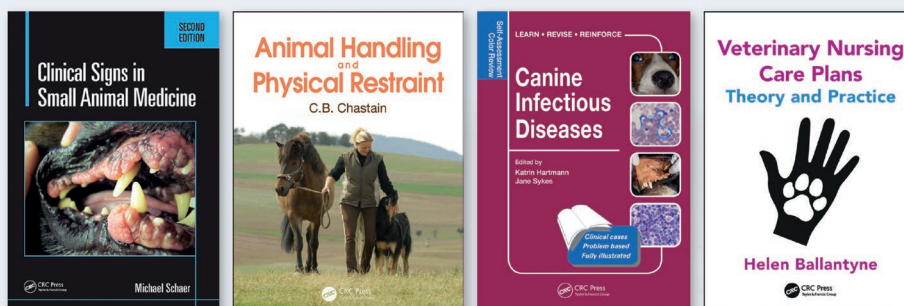
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