

# A toolbox for transitioning from student to veterinarian: Setting yourself up for success and reframing failure in your first year of practice

Dayna Locitzer, DVM

Green Mountain Bovine Clinic  
West Chesterfield, NH 03466

## Abstract

The transition from veterinary student to private practice veterinarian is difficult. As a practitioner, one must put into action what was learned in veterinary school. Being a mixed large animal veterinarian poses additional challenges due to the ambulatory nature of the job. Clinical skills are important to master, and they will develop over time; but it is important to also consider intangible skills, such as cultivating fingertip facts, understanding appropriate applications of chemical and physical restraint, honing one's planning abilities, communicating with clients, maintaining relationships with mentors, and reframing failure. This presentation will highlight the experience of Dr. Dayna Locitzer as a recent graduate in mixed large animal practice and illustrate how she used these intangible skills to help with the transition from student to practitioner.

**Key words:** student, practitioner, toolbox, failure, success

## Introduction

As an ambulatory large animal veterinarian, I have a lot of toolboxes on my truck to help keep myself organized. I have one each for hoof trimming, surgery, obstetrics, disbudding and one with the supplies I need to check out a sick cow. While these toolboxes help me carry out the clinical skills aspect of my job, I also think it is important to have a metaphorical toolbox that helps with the intangible skills required to be a good veterinarian. Intangible skills are the skills that require intellectual thought and emotional intelligence to excel at and do not depend on physical ability. They are important to cultivate and have ready access to in your truck like any other physical resource. I like to think of this metaphorical toolbox as the "Holy cow, I'm a vet!" box. In this toolbox are fingertip facts, proper restraint, planning abilities, communication skills, mentorship and reframing failure. In the transition from student to veterinarian, it is valuable to have these intangible skills at the ready to help facilitate, excel and sustain your work as an ambulatory large animal veterinarian.

This presentation will discuss my experience as a recent graduate at a 2-doctor mixed large animal practice in rural New Hampshire. What I am sharing are the tools I used to set myself up for success as a veterinarian. I also used these tools to help reframe failures. By looking back on my failures and using my "Holy cow, I'm a vet!" toolbox to learn from each situation, I have found that these undesired outcomes have become my most valued learning opportunities. This presentation aims to share information I found useful when traversing my first year in practice and what I gleaned after reflecting on that year.

## Fingertip facts

As a new practitioner, there is a lot to remember. There are, for example, the differentials for a neurologic goat as well as the exact dosage of penicillin for that neurologic goat. It is helpful to have quick access to specific details like this that are needed on a regular basis. This is what I call "fingertip facts," or a collection of easily accessible, helpful resources that are targeted toward the kinds of cases you are likely to encounter daily. These resources might include choice textbooks kept in the truck that act as references, specific notes from vet school that have detailed instructions and dosages, articles from *Veterinary Clinics of North America* with practical information, and notes that have been gathered from clinics or externships. I created a notebook out of this last item. I use it as a cheat sheet because it contains details that have been difficult for me to memorize and it has preferred treatment protocols with recommended dosages. For example, I have a recipe for an intravenous fluid cocktail for a dehydrated calf that I learned during an externship. Having this notebook on hand helped me be prepared on Day 1 when I encountered the likely circumstance of a scouring calf.

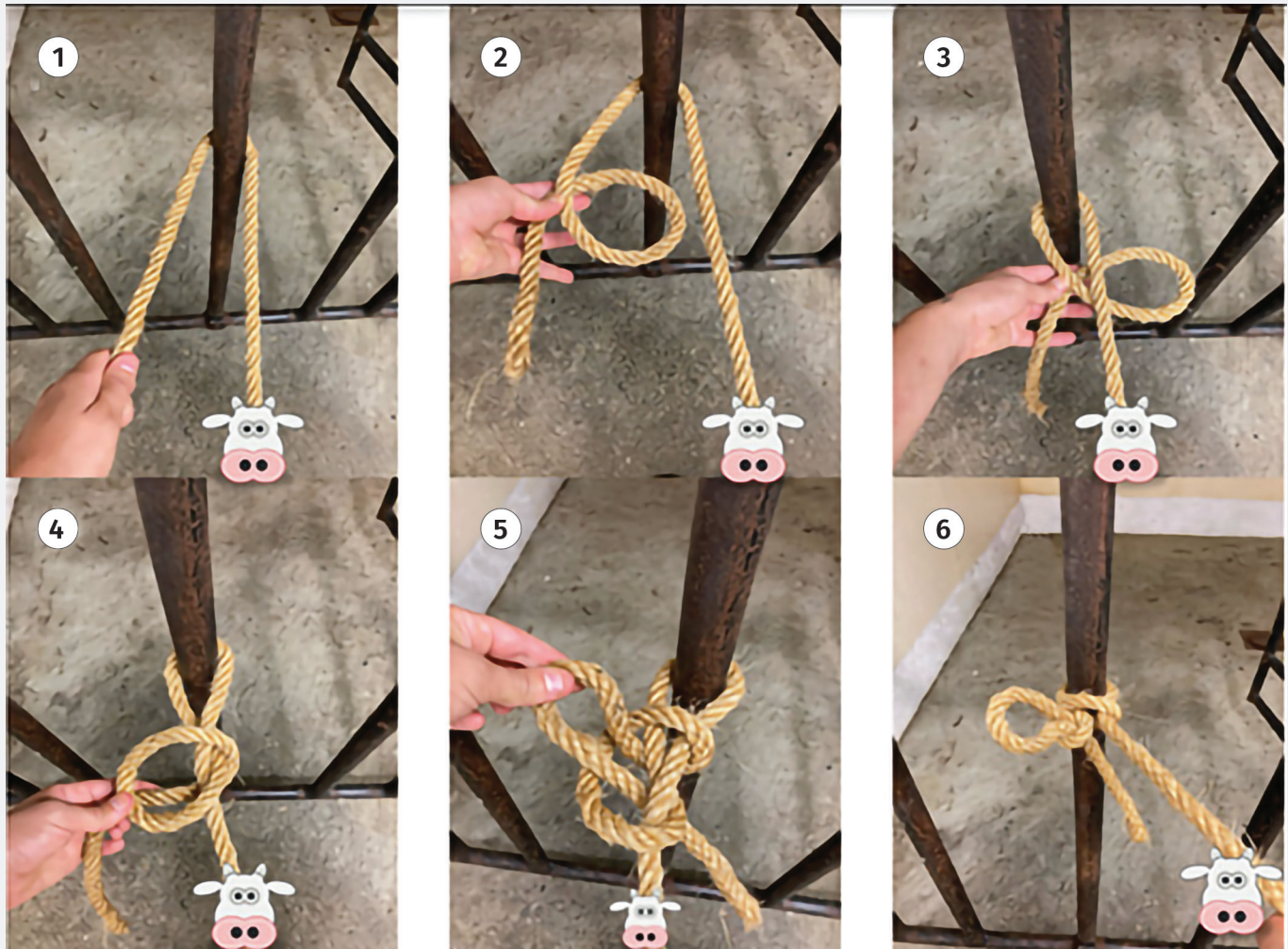
## Proper restraint

Knowing how to restrain an animal is a tangible skill, whereas knowing when to use what type of restraint and how much of it is more nuanced. As a new practitioner, it was important to know my physical power and physical limits. Just because the senior practitioner at the clinic restrains an animal in a particular way, it doesn't mean that everyone has to do it that way. Additionally, while physical restraint could be possible for a particular animal, it might be beneficial to use chemical restraint because it will incur less stress on the patient. Alternatively, using chemical restraint might not be appropriate due to risks of sedation.

Physical restraint is used daily in cattle medicine in the form of a human body, headlocks, a chute or even a halter tied to a tree. There are many situations in which physically holding the animal is useful, like disbudding a calf. If a nerve block is properly administered, a calf can be restrained with your body alone. But, there are times when you need additional help in the form of ropes.

Ropes can be useful if employed properly and safely. It is imperative that appropriate knots are used. A quick release knot that holds tension (Figure 1) is a valuable knot to know on Day 1 of being in practice. Confidence with this knot helps one accomplish procedures while knowing the animal is secure. Ropes can be used in conjunction with chemical restraint to immobilize the patient, creating an even safer working environment for the veterinarian, farm workers and the animal.

**Figure 1:** Demonstration of tying a tension holding quick release knot



Learning to chemically restrain an animal effectively and safely was crucial in my first year of practice and continues to be. This means knowing the sedation protocols for the different species and for the different procedures, all details that I keep with my fingertip facts. Chemical restraint was especially important in my early days as a practitioner because, when I knew an animal was appropriately sedated, I felt more confident approaching procedures.

## Planning abilities

There is a lot of foresight that is needed in ambulatory practice. As ambulatory veterinarians, we are expected to see a full day of appointments without returning to the office and to take all the supplies that will be needed for those calls. As a recent graduate, there is a lot to think about, sometimes making it hard to focus on the actual task of being a veterinarian. Creating mental time and energy to prepare for the day's calls helps encourage my confidence as well as engender confidence from clients.

When considering the schedule for the day, I think about the procedures or tasks that will likely be performed at each appointment and about what will be needed to complete them. For example, if my schedule shows that I have a castration, I consider what method of castration to use. After choosing that method, I consider what supplies I need and make sure they are all in the truck with me.

Once on the road, preparing immediately before arriving at a call can be helpful to get in a focused mindset. I find it valuable to shut off the radio and take a moment to consider what supplies I will need for the specific call I am headed to. Often, the patient is far away from the truck, sometimes even a hike through a pasture, and it is frustrating to have to return to gather more supplies. Not only does this interrupt the task being performed, but it can frustrate clients who are potentially paying by the minute or are themselves very busy. While it is important to not feel pressured by a client, it is also important to be respectful of their time. Planning ahead about the items needed for each call helps me and, I hope, my clients to feel good about the job being done.

Planning for the expected is important, but it is also valuable to plan for the unexpected. It is difficult to anticipate all of the different scenarios that happen on a farm on a given day in a given situation. Alternative scenarios can be conjured using some imagination and making educated projections. That's why adding a Plan B to planning is a wise idea. I have found that Plan B can be an alternative scenario that you visualize and anticipate, or it can mean that you assure yourself ahead of time that you will inevitably need to be flexible with the plan you have made.

## Communication skills

While good clinical skills are important, they are not worth much if one is not able to communicate about them. Understanding how to effectively communicate is crucial to being an effective veterinarian, but it is also a moving target that demands a dynamic approach. Integrating one's personality type with the personality types of clients and using that knowledge to choose communication strategies can be a helpful approach.

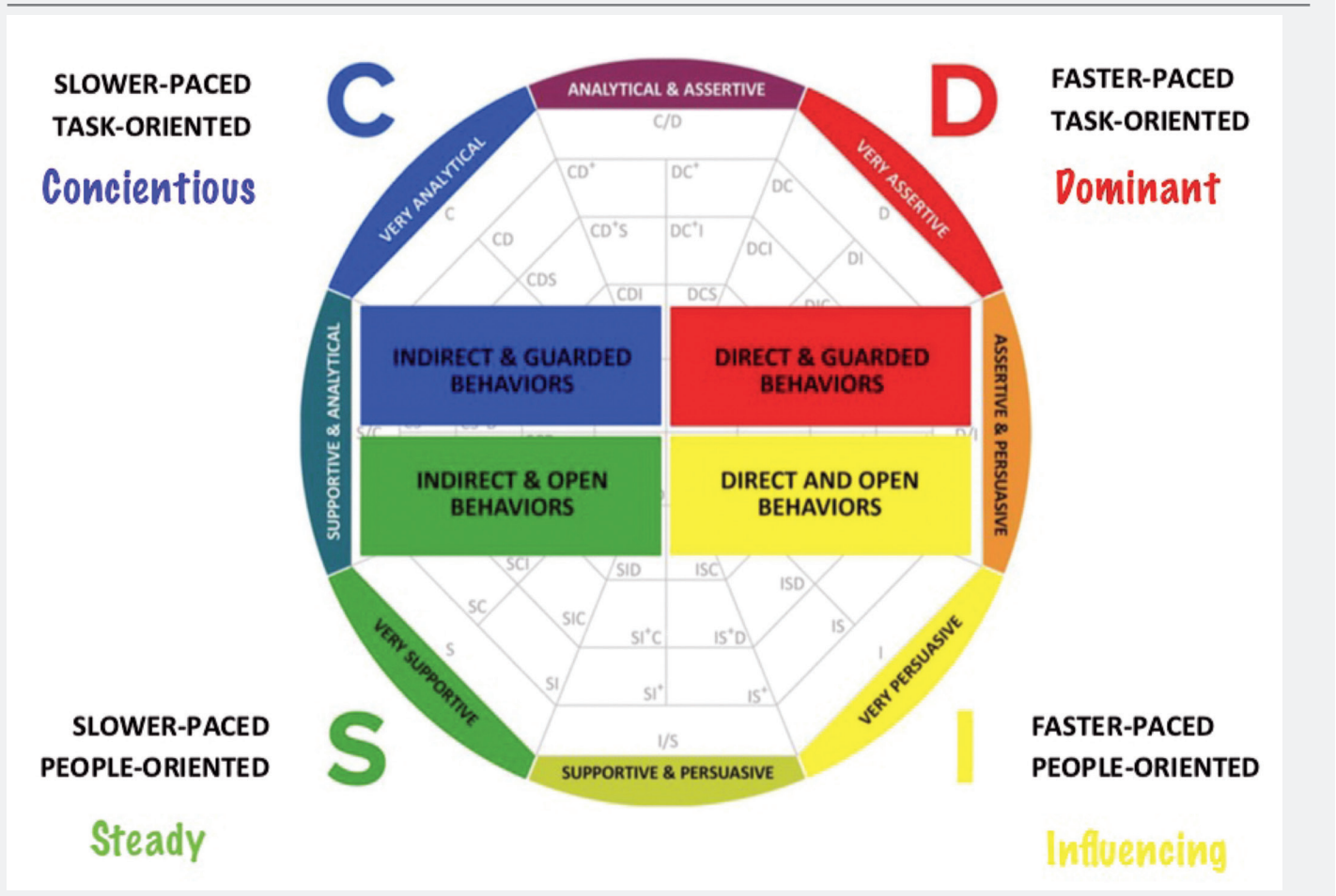
The DISC assessment is a method of characterizing people's personalities in an effort to create better and more productive work environments. In the most basic approach, the DISC assessment divides people into 4 categories: Dominance, Influencing, Steady and Conscientious (summarized in Figure 2). Each personality type associates an individual with how they communicate, understand themselves and understand the way they approach working with people. For example, a "Steady" personality does not like conflict, likes to please people, likes stability, avoids risks and enjoys teamwork. This is in contrast to a "Dominance" personality, who is OK with conflict, strives for results no matter the consequence, is OK with change, and likes to be right.<sup>1</sup> If a Steady veterinarian has a client with a Dominance personality, the Steady veterinarian might have to be more assertive in their approach and not be afraid of pushback from the client. Having a sense of these personality categorizations will help one choose an effective communication style.

Each client and situation require a consideration of what communication style to use, as illustrated in Figure 3. The 3 styles I will highlight are: expert, teacher, facilitator. The expert tells

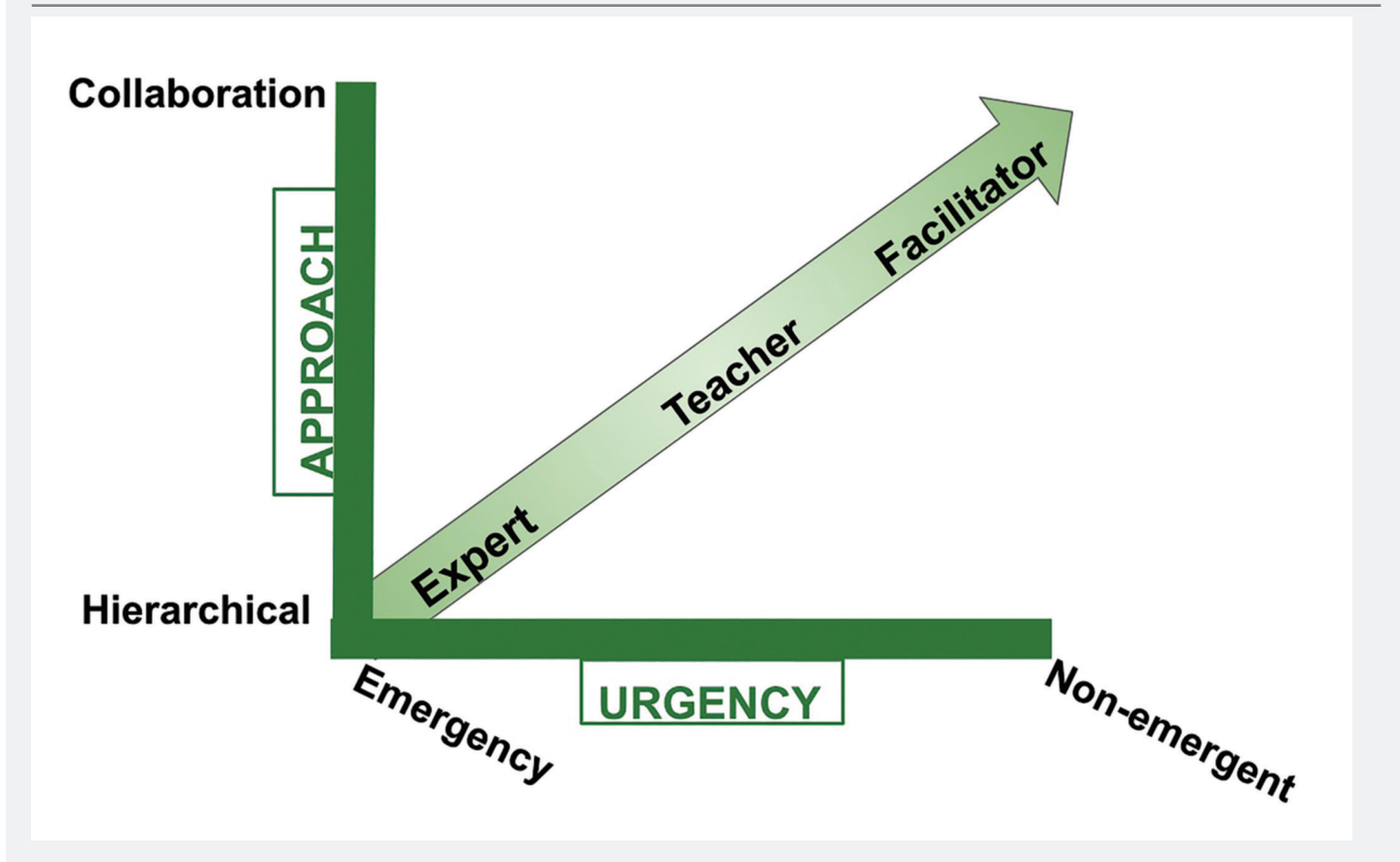
the client what is going to happen. This style is most useful in emergency situations where the veterinarian must take command without taking too much time to explain. But it can also be useful with clients who want to be told what to do, either because they lack confidence or want definitive answers. The teacher educates the client about options and guides them toward a decision. This is a collaborative style that is appropriate for stable situations where the veterinarian is called on to consult about a problem. It is also a good communication style to use when working with people who don't like to be told what to do without some context and information. When this method is allowed for, it can create mutual respect between client and veterinarian in which both parties are apt to learn from each other. Last, there is the facilitator style that can be used when the situation is non-urgent or an elective procedure is being considered. This style works well when the clinician helps enact a decision the client is already interested in pursuing. Ideally, this occurs with clients where there is mutual trust.<sup>2</sup> In this situation, the veterinarian provides the client with the services that are needed to carry out their decision. For example, a client might like to do their own disbudding. The veterinarian can facilitate that by communicating about training and providing the supplies, thereby continuing to be involved in the process.

Last, communication with clients isn't just about the interaction the day the veterinarian is on the farm. It is also about follow up. Following up with clients about patients that have been treated is valuable in many ways. It expresses care to the client regarding their animal and farm operation and helps build a

**Figure 2:** Four personality types of the DISC assessment.



**Figure 3:** Communication style choice based on situation and client preference



relationship. More importantly, it is a way to get feedback on performance. When I was in my first months of practice, making these calls and hearing what was successful was an enormous boost in confidence. On the other hand, it was equally important to know when there wasn't a desired outcome because it allowed for learning opportunities.

## Mentorship

Creating a diverse well of mentors felt key to learning and growth in my first year in practice. I utilized traditional mentorship relationships, like the ones from my veterinary school, AABP, previous externships I had done, and my place of employment, but I also accessed less conventional styles of mentorship. Some of these were, for example, my peers, my clients and even myself. Taking advantage of all of those resources gave me a variety of perspectives, and it did not exhaust any one source.

In my first year of practice, I reached out and applied for a mentor arranged by AABP. An experienced cattle veterinarian was picked for me based on my application. After 3 years we still talk regularly, less now in moments of panic. I also reach out to my advisor from school often as well as veterinarians who I externed with before and during vet school. Having access to these experienced veterinarians provides comfort and years more experience to draw from than what I possess.

I have also found mentorship through my peers. I maintain a small group chat with my close friends from school who have provided counsel in a pinch, troubleshooting of undesired outcomes and solace in difficult times. I also utilize "The Vet Truck:

Bovine Vet-to-Vet" Facebook page, which is a vast resource for all aspects of what it means to be a cattle veterinarian. Both of these peer-to-peer resources gave me the feeling that I had more colleagues than my 2-doctor practice could provide.

I have also viewed my clients as mentors in 2 ways. Some of my clients have been farming for longer than I have been alive, and have a lot of insight into managing cows. I use a collaborative communication style when working with these clients in non-emergency situations because I know there is a lot to glean from our conversations. I also acknowledge that clients provide me with cases that I learn from. When I have difficult cases, I do my best to grow from them. I do this by following up with clients, by researching information, by talking with mentors, and by considering how these cases will help me progress as a veterinarian. In this regard, both my clients and my past-self act as mentors.

## Reframing failure

I have used the guidance I set forth here to position myself for success. I have planned well for cases, used the resources I had available to me, consulted with those wiser than me, and I have achieved positive outcomes. I always had the intention to succeed, but during the first year in practice (and beyond), that did not always happen. While success is valuable, we have the potential to learn more from undesired outcomes, also thought of as "failure." Having undesired outcomes is hard because as a veterinarian, I want to help people and their animals, and I do not want to inflict pain on an animal, which sometimes can happen as a result of missteps. Reframing failure by viewing it

---

as my most valuable learning opportunity helps me cope with the hardship of it and transforms my moments of failure into personal mentors.

For example, I was called to a difficult calving for a beef cow at a farm where there was no cell phone service. When taking the history, I found out the calf likely had been dead for at least a day. When I performed a vaginal exam, I recognized that both front feet were present in the pelvis, but the head was curled backwards. I tried to employ as many tactics as I could think of from the different mentors I've had. I pumped the uterus with lube as I had learned from an externship in New Zealand. I changed tactics every 20 minutes if I didn't make progress, as I had learned from my theriogenology professor. I employed the use of a chain guide to guide a chain around the neck of the calf as I had learned from a Vet Truck Facebook post, but none of this helped correct the malpresentation of the head. After 2 ½ hours of trying, the cow, farmer and myself were exhausted. We decided that the cow should be put down. I left that call frustrated with myself and the situation. Of course, if the farmer had noticed the cow calving earlier, it would have potentially been a better outcome, but I also know that I likely made some mistakes.

Feeling motivated by this undesired outcome, I searched Facebook for suggestions on a "head back calf" and I found other recent graduates expressing frustration with the same situation. I also saw encouraging words from other practitioners with tips and tricks as well as comforting sentiments. I wrote to my group chat and learned that the likely best thing to do in that situation is to cut off the head and pull the body out and then to reach back in for the head. I looked at my obstetrics notes from vet school about fetotomy cuts, in order to feel better prepared for future fetotomies. And lastly, I gave myself some slack. I acknowledged that it was a difficult situation and that I am still learning. After all, being in private practice means just that: this is all "practice," which is why I put the concept of "reframing failure" in my toolbox.

## References

1. Stup, R. DISC. PowerPoint Presented at: AABP Manage Your Rural Practice for Success; March, 3-5, 2022, Des Moines, IA.
2. Morrissey, J. Communications in the Clinics. PowerPoint Presented at: VTMED5707 Professional Development/Practice Management; November 8, 2018, Ithaca, NY.

