

# Meet the Atlanta veterinarian who's on a mission to help animal hospitals create a great place to work

When John Younker's kindergarten teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, his answer came easy: "I want to be a veterinarian."

Dr. Younker's vision turned into reality when he received his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Georgia in 2012. After working as an emergency room veterinarian, he founded his own clinic in Atlanta. "I started from scratch, with zero patients and staff, made some mistakes and learned a lot along the way."

Now, he's on a new mission: to help other veterinary hospitals learn how they can build healthier, more sustainable workplaces that deliver high quality pet care.

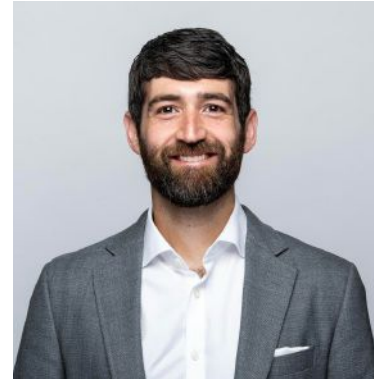
## A 'huge wakeup call'

When Dr. Younker founded his clinic, he was well-aware of the issues facing the industry: burnout, high staff turnover, long hours, stressful conversations with clients and more. Yet, in the Atlanta community, Dr. Younker's clinic had a strong reputation for providing high-quality medicine and customer service.

"In my mind, I thought we also had a great culture. But about two years after founding the clinic, I got a huge wakeup call," he said. "I started one morning at 7:45 as usual – coffee in hand, greeting everyone. I said good morning to one associate, and she looked at me with tears in her eyes. I was not prepared for what she told me in the office."

His associate shared a long list of difficult situations from the day before, including having to explain test results and deliver bad news to multiple pet owners, getting behind on her notes, working late to catch up and missing a date night with her husband. Her evening ended with a frozen pizza and a head full of uncertainty about her career.

"The stress was mounting for this associate. I realized we had been so focused on patient care we had forgotten about taking care of our people." This insight set him on a path to learn how to become a better leader and create a healthier culture. And he knew just the person to ask for help.



*Dr. Younker is on a mission: to help other veterinary hospitals learn how they can build healthier, more sustainable workplaces that deliver high quality pet care.*

[View Dr. Younker's best practices](#)

**GA | Atlanta area**

**Practice size:** medium

**Locations:** 2

**DVMs:** 11

**FT employees:** 56

**Appts per week:** ~500

**Days/wk open:** 6

**Location:** urban, retail shopping

**Proximity:** 10+ hospitals w/in 10 min drive

**Client commute:** short

## On a quest for change

Dr. Younker's father worked as a human resources executive for many years. "I asked my dad: How do you build an organization that's a great place to work?"

His father talked to him about the importance of having a living, breathing mission statement and core values.

"I'm a scientist, and I thought all this talk about mission and values was hoity-toity – not something serious scientists want to engage in," said Dr. Younker. "But my dad convinced me to ask my team what they thought about working at the clinic."

When the results of the survey came back, Dr. Younker was handed "a large slice of humble pie. It was clear I had been one of those leaders who was blissfully unaware there were problems within the hospital's culture."

## A collaborative culture takes shape

Armed with the survey results, Dr. Younker worked with his team to create an action plan and make concrete changes that could significantly improve the workplace environment.

For example, twice a week, a chaplain came to the clinic to counsel staff and address work, personal and mental health issues. The clinic also implemented one-on-one meetings for every staff member, so they could receive regular feedback from managers. In addition, the hospital carved out 15-minute monthly staff meetings to talk about goals and ideas for improvements. At every staff meeting, leaders used storytelling to share how a staff member behaved and illustrated the clinic's mission and core values.

*"You work in your business, but you also have to make the time and space to work ON your business. It's one of the best investments you can make."*

-Dr. John Younker

One year after the first engagement survey, staff members completed a second survey. The results showed a dramatic improvement in workplace culture and teamwork at the clinic.

"Veterinarians have been talking about the mental health issues for a long time. But all the messages we get are to do yoga, eat healthy, meditate, have a pink sock day or funny hat day," said Dr. Younker. "But if you're struggling, those suggestions are demotivating. To move the needle, we need to take concrete steps. And that means meeting and listening to your people regularly and taking action to care for them. Then, rinse and repeat."

## Culture centric best practices

- Yearly engagement surveys with timely action after results
- Clear mission & core values statements – and opportunities for staff to see the positive impact of their excellent work and dedication
- Monthly "How Ya Doing" meetings (1:1) with each staff member
- Scheduled & predictable staff meetings with agendas
- Supportive management team that regularly shows appreciation, such as sharing stories during staff meetings about team members who demonstrate the clinic's mission and values
- Continuous learning to help staff feel valued and motivated
- Client and patient focus that creates an environment where employees can see the positive impact of their work