



Three Essential Skills for Effective Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Effective communication skills are critical in providing optimal outcomes for clients, patients and team interactions. Veterinary Colleges recognize the value of cultivating these skills in their graduates and many incorporate some form of communication training in their curriculum. Training resources^{1,2,3} for the practitioner and animal health care teams are readily available. These tools teach foundational skills necessary to effectively communicate with clients through techniques like open-ended questions, reflective listening, eliciting the client's perspective and summarization. When learned, the skills provide a baseline for positive communication.

To evolve into an artful communicator, an understanding of the role of perception in the communication process and three additional skills must be mastered. A thorough understanding of how these components influence our connectivity and relatability to others is fundamental in developing into a superior communicator. The three skills are: **Personality Preferences, Emotional Intelligence, and Generational Differences.**

When communicating with others, it is essential to recognize the role that perception plays in our interactions. We must understand our own perceptions, realizing that the person with whom we are communicating also has their own perceptions. During a successful interaction, both individuals attempt to understand the viewpoints (perception) of each other, seeking common ground. As the three skills are discussed below, the reader should remember how perception can influence interactions.

Personality Preference

As individuals, we have innate preferences which help to govern how we communicate, verbally and non-verbally and how we interact with others. These preferences are neither good nor bad. Understanding and recognizing not only your personality preferences but also those of others is critical in effective communication. Effective communicators have learned to ‘read’ other people by observing verbal and nonverbal cues. With this insight, they can modify their natural tendencies to align with other people’s preferences. In the author’s experience, this results in more effective communication with the client. The client often feels better understood, valued and is willing to partner with the animal health care team in achieving mutual goals. Outcomes include increased client satisfaction and retention. Team members involved in these communications feel empowered, more effective and have better levels of job satisfaction.

There are many personality assessment tools available to help individuals understand their own preferences. When these tools are administered to all team members, the assessments help teams understand how to respect and better communicate with each other.

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When animal health care team members become more comfortable practicing these skills with each other, they can begin to consider how to apply this knowledge in their client interactions.

For an example, consider the following: A technician is tasked with obtaining a patient history. He asks many questions and receives many answers, which he conveys to the doctor. The doctor goes into the examination room and begins a conversation with the client. During the exchange, the client adds new information or even contradicts information previously provided to the technician. When the doctor and the technician leave the exam room, the technician is upset. He exclaims “She told you different information because you’re the doctor!”. With an understanding of personality preferences, the doctor was able to explain that the client was more

informative not because she was the doctor, but because the client has an introverted personality preference. The client had time and space to think about the questions that were asked. The client was then able to add to and clarify the original history. After this conversation, the technician modified his approach with introverted clients, using communication skills like asking one question at a time and then pausing, giving the client time to fully respond. While obtaining the history took a little longer, the overall appointment times were shorter because there were less corrections and additional history provided later in the appointment.

More information about how to learn to 'read' others in the Veterinary Team Brief Article "How to 'Tune In' to the Other Person"⁴.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, is defined as the "ability to identify and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others"⁵. Identified in 1995 by Daniel Goleman, his research⁶ identified that Emotional Intelligence is comprised of five separate skill sets. The first three represent self-management skills: self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation. The final two are relationship management skills: empathy and social skills.

While there is a genetic as well as a nurture component to Emotional Intelligence, it is widely recognized that EQ increases with maturity. Furthermore, Emotional

Intelligence can be learned. It requires that individuals break old habits and form new ones, focusing on the five EQ skills.

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A working knowledge of all five skills is particularly important in the veterinary profession. Our clients are often stressed by factors beyond their control, such as ill or injured pets, anticipatory grief when faced with losing a beloved pet and the veterinary cost of care. Within our hospitals, we encounter not only the stresses that clients experience, but also the impact of those stresses on our animal health care teams. When combined with our foundational communication skills, Emotional Intelligence provides the tools to fully respond to our individual needs as well as those of our teammates and clients.

Generational Differences

Generational attitudes are comprised of traits generally assessed to a timeframe during which a group of individuals, called a generation, was born and reached adulthood.

Generations are shaped by the societal forces prevalent during the time that they are reaching maturity. It is important to consider generational differences broadly, realizing that not all members of a generation align with the attributes assessed to those age categories. Factors that might influence a member of a generation to embrace different characteristics than other members of the same category include family cultural differences and the role that older generations play in the upbringing of the individual.

Consider the variation in societal forces between 1946, the beginning of the Baby Boomer Generation and 2000, the final birth year of the Millennial Generation. Baby Boomers grew up during the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and came to age in the era of AIDS. In contrast, Millennials don't remember a world without the internet and are socially and racially more diverse than preceding generations. Many were raised in families that solicited and valued their opinions in family decisions, including major purchases and vacation plans. As such, this generation is less constrained by hierarchical boundaries in the workplace, possessing the confidence to aggressively advocate for their ideas.

Despite these disparate forces that shaped generational outlooks, there are some similarities that provide common ground. According to researcher Jennifer Deal⁷, these include:

Similar values: what matters most to all generations are the values that matter the most. Family is the priority for all age groups.

Respect: all generations want to feel respected in the workplace. The difference lies in how respect looks to the different generations. Her research uncovered that

older individuals in the workforce want their opinions to be valued, whereas younger employees associated respect with having their opinions heard.

All generations want trustworthy leaders.

Change is uncomfortable for all generations.

Loyalty was constant across generations.

The way loyalty looks in the workplace does vary by generations.

All generations are life-long learners.

Feedback is important to all generations.

As we seek an understanding of how generational attitudes influence our communication, it is helpful if we consider what broad beliefs might be ingrained within a generation. Clients that are part of the Traditional generation, born before 1945, grew up in an era where authority wasn't questioned. In the examination room, they are more willing to accept your recommendations without hesitation, as you are the expert. An artful communicator will recognize that the lack of questions doesn't truly represent what the client might be feeling and will work diligently to partner with the client, using open-ended questions, pausing and short summaries. Another technique that will work well with a client of this generation is the chunk and check technique. This approach incorporates the delivery of small amounts of information, then checking in to ensure that there are no questions before continuing.

By using foundational communication techniques and Emotional Intelligence to support how we tailor our message considering perception, personality preferences and generational attributes we can facilitate truly effective client, patient and team outcomes.

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Wendy Hauser, DVM is AVP, Veterinary Relations, Crum & Forster Pet Insurance Group. In 2015, she established Peak Veterinary Consulting, after working as an industry Technical Services Veterinarian. With a DVM from OK State, she has practiced for 30+ years as an associate, owner and relief veterinarian. She is highly engaged in AAHA leadership and currently serves as the AAHA Delegate to the AVMA House of Delegates. She is the co-author of "The Veterinarian's Guide to Healthy Pet Plans."

REFERENCES

¹FRANK Communications Workshop, Colorado State University; cvmb.colostate.edu/academics/clinsci/veterinary-communication/Pages/frank-workshops.aspx

²Partners for Healthy Pets <http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org/communications.aspx>

³<http://www.veterinaryteambrief.com/> Multiple articles by authors such as Jane Shaw, Lisa Hunter, Jeff Thoren and Sally Starbuck Stamp

⁴<https://www.veterinaryteambrief.com/article/how-tune-other-person>

⁵<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/emotional-intelligence>

⁶<https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader>

⁷Deal, Jennifer J. Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young & Old Can Find Common Ground. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA 2007

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