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Introduction

Abstract

In this chapter, we lay the groundwork for why it is worth investing in developing a strong communication toolbox consisting of 20 communication skills with proven success. We begin with recognizing that communication skill-building takes practice and time. Then we argue that communication is both a science and an art. The science of communication entails using the skills with purpose and intention. The art of communication requires using the skills adeptly not only in straightforward interactions but also in nuanced, complex, challenging, and high-stakes situations with diverse individuals. We acknowledge the stressful context of a busy veterinary practice and the daily challenge of attending to tasks (i.e. getting work done) and relationships (i.e. building trust with clients and colleagues). Being successful and striving for the right balance requires establishing long-term relationships with clients and colleagues. And we emphasize that team communication makes the difference between a healthy practice environment and a dysfunctional one. We conclude that embracing both roles – as animal health-care experts as well as partners to our clients and colleagues – promotes positive outcomes for the veterinary practice and our colleagues, clients, patients, and, importantly, ourselves.

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (True or False) See the end of the chapter for the answer key.

1. Effective communication can be learned through practice, feedback, and coaching.
2. Effective communication is critical to achieving significant outcomes for the veterinary practice; with colleagues, clients, and patients; and self.
3. Effective communication is integral to maintaining and sustaining a healthy practice culture and interprofessional relationships.
4. Effective communication takes more time.

Communication Matters

Communication is the most common clinical procedure performed daily in veterinary practice and prevails in every client and colleague interaction. For client service coordinators specifically, their entire day is spent communicating with others. A veterinary professional involved in 20 appointments per day will engage in more than 200,000 client interactions over a 40-year career.

(Shaw et al. 2012). This does not account for the too-numerous-to-count colleague-to-colleague conversations. The final sum is an astounding number of exchanges.

Everyone on the veterinary team plays a vital communication role. It takes a village to run a veterinary practice, care for people and their animals, and establish a functional practice team culture. Every conversation with clients and between colleagues impacts outcomes for the veterinary practice, and the resulting social dynamic affects veterinary practice team members, the clients served, and the patients cared for. Communication makes or breaks practice financial metrics, teamwork and morale, client satisfaction and adherence, and patient health. The return on developing veterinary team communication competence is multifold and an investment in patient care, client service, and team coordination. It literally pays dividends to invest in communication skills.

Equip Your Communication Toolbox

This book highlights 20 communication skills with proven success in navigating diverse clinical scenarios (Sidebar 1.1) (Appendix A). Taking a skills-based approach means we do not need a specific strategy for each routine or difficult conversation. Instead, we carry our toolbox to each scenario and pick the appropriate tools to accomplish the task. As a result, we are ready, agile, and adaptable to meet all day to day communication circumstances that present in veterinary practice.

Sidebar 1.1 Skills in the Communication Toolbox

- Preparation
- Introduction
- Agenda-setting
- Open-ended inquiry
- Closed-ended inquiry
- Pause
- Minimal encouragers
- Reflective listening
- Nonverbal behaviors
- Empathy
- Partnership
- Asking permission
- Logical sequence
- Signpost
- Internal summary
- Easily understood language
- Chunk-and-check
- End summary
- Contracts for next steps
- Final check

We rely on our communication toolbox to guide most routine client interactions, from preventive care topics, such as vaccinations, weight management, and dental hygiene, to complex end-of-life conversations, medical errors, and financial discussions. Equally important, bring our tools to collegial conversations; use them when interviewing potential employees, hosting team

meetings, and conducting performance reviews. These skills are indispensable and an important part of every veterinary professional's development. Although all communication skills are highly pertinent and critical for success (Adams and Kurtz 2017; Silverman et al. 2013), effective communication requires a lifetime of mastery. So, as a starting point, we chose 20 foundational communication skills to stock the toolbox: once acquired, expand upon them.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Just like learning any clinical skill, such as navigating new practice management software, performing a surgical procedure, or interpreting radiographs, communication skill-building takes practice and time. We obtain the baseline knowledge through reading, attending a lecture, or completing an online module. Where the rubber meets the road is testing our competency in everyday practice. Once we get the underlying principles and concepts under our belt, the best way to learn communication skills is to “just do it.” This allows us to apply our understanding of effective communication and form good habits through practice and experience.

The learning ladder (Figure 1.1) depicts four stages of learning new communication skills, from raising awareness to reaching mastery (DePhillips et al. 1960, Wackman et al. 1976). We do not know what we do not know. The first step is obtaining knowledge to raise awareness, answering for ourselves such questions as “What is the communication skill?”, “What does it sound like?”, and “When, why, and how might I use it?”

Awareness (we know what we do not know) is followed by a period of awkwardness as we put the new skill into practice. This stage is messy, feels inept, and demands courage, patience, perseverance, and a big, heaping dose of self-acceptance until we are consciously skilled. Like learning anything new, communicating differently feels strange and sounds unnatural; the words do not always come out right at first. This necessitates a shift in mindset away from expecting perfection to embracing the awkward.

With more feedback, practice, and reflection, communication skills fall into place. Initially, using a communication skill requires a great deal of mental effort, concentration, and purposeful intent, like when we learn to ride a horse, pedal a bike, drive a car, or ski. Eventually, proficiency is achieved, competence becomes unconsciously integrated, and the skills are automatic and habitual.

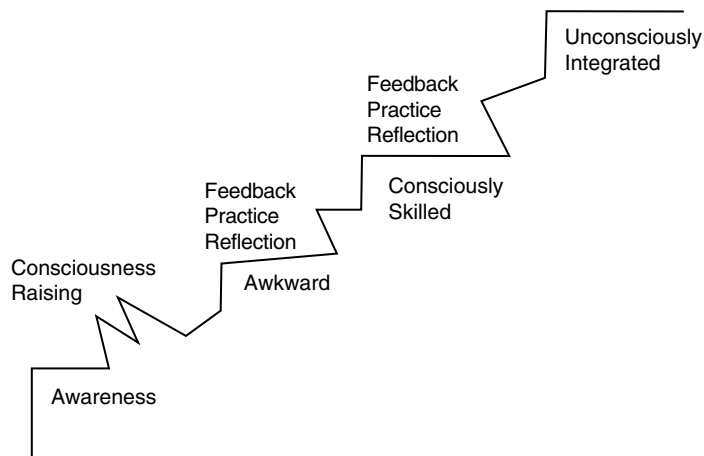


Figure 1.1 Learning ladder. Adapted from Wackman, Miller, and Nunnally, (1976) *Student Workbook: Increasing Awareness and Communication Skills*-with permission from Interpersonal Communication Programs, LLC, Evergreen, CO. USA.

This learning process demands being forgiving of ourselves, letting go, and being all right with not getting it right the first time around. Dr. Tracy Jensen, a primary-care veterinarian, consultant, and communication coach at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says, “If you are not falling, you are not skiing hard enough.” If we are not stretching ourselves outside our comfort zone, we are not learning. So, lean into the challenge of learning these communication skills and welcome the initial clumsiness that is often on the path to competence.

Appreciate Communication is An Art and a Science

Communication is about establishing trust **and** achieving outcomes. The field of medical communication was founded in 1968 (Korsch et al. 1968) and veterinary communication in 1988 (Antelyes 1988), and research touting the benefits of effective communication in healthcare is robust and persuasive. Thousands of studies in medical communication, including randomized clinical trials (Silverman et al. 2013), and hundreds of studies in veterinary communication (Adams and Kurtz 2017) inform best practices. The communication toolbox provided in this book is fortified by a database of literature and evidence-based recommendations.

You might recall a role model sharing, “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it”; truthfully, it is both. Communication content is **what** we say (i.e. the science), and it comprises the biomedical background and experience required for effective information-gathering and client education. The communication process is **how** we say it (i.e. the art), or how we come across when we ask questions, provide explanations, or support decisions. For the message (the content) to be received, it comes down to our delivery (the process), which requires paying close attention to the communication skills used.

The science of communication entails using the skills with purpose and intention. Many of us did not receive formal training in communication skills and were schooled painfully by trial and error. With knowledge of communication skills and their impact on clinical outcomes – like choosing instruments from a surgical pack – we select the best communication tool or tools at the appropriate time to target and achieve our sought-after outcomes.

The art of communication reflects our ability to apply the skills adeptly not only in straightforward interactions but also in nuanced, complex, challenging, and high-stakes situations with diverse individuals. One size does not fit all. An indication of communication mastery is the ability to be fully present in the moment, quickly assess the scenario, and implement our communication skills accordingly. A high level of proficiency is also demonstrated in keen self-awareness, noticing when an interaction goes off the rails, and the ability to make a prompt repair and recovery.

Build, Maintain, and Sustain Relationships

A common retort we receive during communication workshops is “I’m not a counselor.” So, let’s get this straight up front: we are not asking, expecting, or training you to be or become a therapist, as you, a veterinary professional, are not equipped or licensed to provide psychological counseling. However, we are strong proponents of building relationships and supporting clients and colleagues for success in veterinary practice. Dr. Matthew Johnston, an avian, exotic, and zoo veterinarian and communication coach at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says, “If you use effective communication, you won’t need to be a counselor.”

Veterinary medicine was established in the eighteenth century with a focus on animal healthcare. With the cultural shift in our views and uses of animals and the transformation of the human-animal

bond, it is now a “people profession.” Veterinary medicine serves animals **and** the people who care for them. The daily challenge in a busy practice is balancing attending to tasks and relationships. It entails embracing both roles – as animal healthcare expert as well as partners to our clients and colleagues.

The desire to help our patients using the scientific mind leads us naturally down a path of “find it, fix it.” There’s a downside, however, to this apparent efficiency. We miss things. Make assumptions. Make a mess of an interaction, even misdiagnose. When drilling clients, like a detective interrogating their suspect, we drive our agenda forward and neglect to invite client contributions. With insufficient information-gathering and understanding, we prescribe treatments that a client cannot administer, afford, or get on board with. In our rush to finish the appointment on time, we unintentionally run over the animal’s advocate. The result is a time-consuming snarl to untangle, and efficiency goes out the door.

Retired emergency veterinarian and Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences communication instructor, Dr. Sam Romano says, “Go slow to go fast.” This means listening more, being curious, and acknowledging client perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. Doing so pays off with efficiencies later in the interaction. We are often fearful of opening a can of worms and not knowing what to do with them, or how to respond to, what is shared. And we are always afraid of running behind. It seems paradoxical, but slowing down now with a client and showing patience and the courage to listen reaps rewards and time savings in the end. Take the time to be present. Empathize and collaborate to build trust, buy-in, and commitment – these are the critical ingredients for client adherence, satisfaction, and long-term client retention.

Enhance Clinical Outcomes

Communication impacts clinical outcomes at every level – for the veterinary practice; our colleagues, clients, and patients; and, importantly, ourselves (Sidebar 1.2). From generating a sustainable client base to retaining talented team members to ensuring that our patients receive the care they need, it all comes down to communication. Be purposeful and intentional, focusing on communicating, to achieve desired outcomes with colleagues, clients, and patients.

Sidebar 1.2 Clinical Outcomes of Effective Communication

Veterinary Practice

- Enhance efficiency
- Reduce malpractice claims
- Improve practice performance

Veterinary Team

- Foster satisfaction

Clients

- Increase recall and understanding
- Promote adherence
- Cultivate satisfaction

Patients

- Boost health

For the Veterinary Practice

Enhance Efficiency

Time management is one of the greatest day to day challenges in veterinary practice. A common misperception is that partner-oriented appointments take longer. Building relationships is the ticket to getting down to business. Invite clients to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas; and listen closely, as clients who feel heard are ready to problem-solve, tackle decision-making, and accept a plan.

To better manage appointment time, elicit the client's agenda up front to meet their expectations and mindfully structure the appointment (Dysart et al. 2011). If unable to address all the client's concerns, prioritize – and seek alternative approaches, such as a drop-off or a recheck visit. Pace with the client during diagnostic and treatment planning to identify concerns and address obstacles, detours, or roadblocks in the moment. Ask “What else?” throughout the appointment to avoid an “Oh, by the way” moment at the end (Dysart et al. 2011).

Reduce Malpractice Claims

A strong foundation of trust and a resilient client relationship provide a cushion when things go wrong. Set a tone of collaboration upfront, make authentic connections with clients, and ask them about themselves. Listen to their stories and how they share observations on the animals with whom they live and believe in the client's expertise. Build rapport to enhance information-gathering and subsequent diagnostic accuracy to minimize medical errors (Dinsmore and McConnell 1992). A trusting relationship carries the partnership through good times and bad. Clients know that we as veterinary professionals are imperfect human beings. When we let clients see our goodwill, compassion, and underlying intention to keep their best interests in mind, regardless of outcome, they will be more understanding and forgiving.

Improve Practice Performance

Communication that builds client and collegial relationships is the bread and butter of a successful veterinary practice. Connect with clients to enhance efficiency (Dysart et al. 2011), promote client adherence (Kanji et al. 2012) and satisfaction, and improve patient health – all of which directly affect the bottom line. Revenue is generated when patients receive the healthcare they need and clients the quality service they expect. The result is meeting the metrics of practice success, including average client transactions, return client visits, client referrals, a healthy client base, and positive client reviews, while attending to patient care. A base of loyal clients is critical to practice financial performance, and so is a core team of content and dedicated employees. Equally important is the recruitment and retention of talented team members, resulting from appreciation and recognition, opportunities for professional development, and a healthy workplace culture (Moore et al. 2014; Pizzolon et al. 2019).

For the Veterinary Team

Foster Satisfaction

Professional wellness is a major factor in the health, well-being, and longevity of veterinary professionals (Nett et al. 2015). The ability to successfully navigate difficult discussions is related to veterinarian and client well-being. When unsuccessful, veterinarians experience a reduced sense of

well-being and job satisfaction, increased emotional strain, and detrimental client impact. For example, facilitating the euthanasia decision-making conversation was found to be more challenging than performing the euthanasia procedure (Matte et al. 2019).

One of the protective factors against compassion fatigue is the fulfillment derived from interactions with teammates and clients (Cake et al. 2015). Client and team interactions are a source of professional fulfillment (Moore et al. 2014; Pizzolon et al. 2019; Shaw et al. 2012) and reduce stress and burnout (Moore et al. 2014, 2015). Improving teamwork reduces medical errors, a major stressor for veterinary professionals (Cummings et al. 2022). Enjoying work with our clients and colleagues boosts team morale and makes the veterinary practice a fun, engaging, and empowering place to work.

For Clients

Increase Recall and Understanding

It is often challenging for clients to comprehend all the details, jargon, and descriptions related to their animal's disease, diagnostic tests, or treatment plan. Before launching into one of our well-honed spiels, in the name of client education, stop and assess what the client knows already, to tailor information directly to them. Gauge the depth of their knowledge, and identify their communication preferences to provide the level of detail they desire and present information in a way that makes sense to them. To enhance client understanding, translate foreign medical terminology and speak in layman's terms. Take complex medical concepts and break them into bite-sized pieces. Invite clients to ask questions throughout the appointment, check in frequently, and ask them to repeat back what they are hearing to increase their recall and understanding (Stoewen et al. 2014a).

Promote Adherence

Clients are more likely to accept recommendations from a professional with whom they have a trusting relationship. Trust-building starts with identifying our clients' concerns, goals, expectations, and priorities up front so we meet their needs (Dysart et al. 2011). To further develop the relationship, provide empathy, care, and compassion and offer partnership throughout the visit. Elicit client's perspective to identify their caregiving strengths and potential challenges that need to be overcome. Then tailor a plan that fits the client and patient. Involve the client at every step, as an actively engaged client is more likely to adhere to recommendations (Kanji et al. 2012).

Cultivate Satisfaction

In many regions, clients have choices when seeking veterinary care for their animals. Interestingly, their decisions are not based on our grades in veterinary school, diagnostic brilliance, or surgical ability, but rather on their perception of how much the veterinary team cares (Brown and Silverman 1999). As Theodore Roosevelt said, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." It is the one-on-one relationship that often brings a client back, so invest in clients and their pets to foster long-term relationships and retention. How much we care comes through in the way we interact with the animal, introduce ourselves, listen to the client's concerns, provide support, and demonstrate interest in, relate to, and connect with the client (Coe et al. 2008; Stoewen et al. 2014b).

For Patients

Boost Health

Clients are our conduit for applying our medical knowledge and delivering the medical care that pets need. As veterinary professionals, we need to build trust and engage clients as partners in their pet's healthcare. We rely on the client to share key data to make an accurate diagnosis, to give permission for diagnostic and treatment options, and to provide at-home nursing care for the pet.

Foster Veterinary Team Culture

Day to day interactions between veterinary colleagues, ranging from social chit-chat to critical life-saving instructions, are the foundation of team communication. Highly functional team conversations build a practice environment of trust and respect. And a trusting practice culture creates positive work processes, promotes colleague recruitment and retention, and fosters team engagement, morale, and satisfaction.

Team communication makes the difference between a healthy practice environment and a dysfunctional one; enjoying work or dreading it; flourishing in an open and trusting atmosphere or wilting from gossip, back-stabbing, competitive one-upmanship, and tip-toeing around each other; and taking initiative or being fearful of making a mistake (Moore et al. 2015). It's not surprising then that a colleague's decision to quit or dedicate their life's work to our clinical practice comes down to the quality of the practice culture. Highly functional teams nurture fulfillment, contentment, and meaning, which preserve a long career in veterinary medicine (Moore et al. 2014; Pizzolon et al. 2019).

Coordinate Relationships

Veterinary teams with high relational coordination possess common goals, share knowledge, and demonstrate mutual respect (Gittell 2003). With shared goals, team members envision common targets and outcomes and value working together to achieve them. With shared knowledge, colleagues not only appreciate each other's roles and empathize with each other's challenges but also are competently cross-trained to step in for each other when needed. The emphasis on interdependence engenders mutual respect, as individuals recognize, grasp, and appreciate the contributions of others.

Achieving relational coordination within a veterinary team requires frequent, timely, accurate, and problem-solving communication (Gittell 2003). The team "spider web" (Figure 1.2) depicts the communication pattern of relational coordination. When team members communicate and check in regularly with their colleagues, they manifest their best selves within their roles and responsibilities and those of their colleagues. On the other hand, the spider web portrays how easy it is to unintentionally drop information between hand-offs, forget to pass a message on, or exclude someone from a conversation.

Establishing relational coordination means balancing team communication that nurtures relationships (i.e. builds a cohesive team) while completing tasks (i.e. gets the work done). This is a difficult juggling act in a hectic environment. Often the day to day demands of a fast-paced veterinary practice favor task-oriented communication over relational, placing team engagement at risk.

The challenge is looking at each individual interaction and how it contributes to team building, function, and effectiveness. This focus pays off in dividends, including career satisfaction and fulfillment (Moore et al. 2014; Pizzolon et al. 2019), improved task efficiency (Gittell 2009), healthier

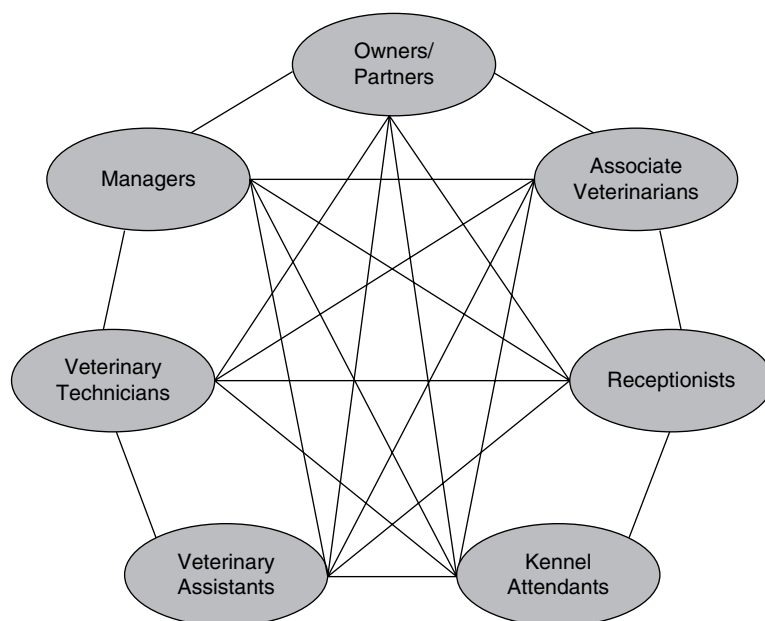


Figure 1.2 Relational coordination. Adapted from Gittell (2009) with permission.

patients (Gittell 2009), decreased burnout and cynicism (Moore et al. 2014), and reduced costs of care (Gittell 2009). The bottom line is creating a supportive, engaging, creative, and productive workplace that fosters fun, enjoyment, and fulfillment for all.

Make Time to Communicate

Over the years, one of the most common rebuttals we hear in teaching communication to veterinary students and professionals is “I don’t have time for this.” It is not the quantity of time spent with clients that is ultimately of greatest importance; it is the quality of the time together. For both the client and the veterinary professional, being distracted and hurried detracts from the experience, while being present and engaged nourishes the interaction. Client adherence is reduced when veterinary professionals are perceived as rushed (Kanji et al. 2012).

Reflect upon the “quantity versus quality” proposition, and assess your practice culture – is it defined by high-volume quantity or high-touch quality of appointments? The differentiator tends to be appointment length – 10- to 15-minutes in high-volume clinics compared to 20- to 30-minute appointments in high-touch clinics. A mixed model is flexible scheduling, such as 15-minutes for a recheck examination, 30-minutes for a wellness appointment, 45-minutes for a sick-pet appointment, and 1-hour for a new puppy or geriatric visit.

Especially in fast-paced, high-volume practices, prudent implementation of top-notch communication skills improves client service and patient care when there is not a minute to spare. Effective communication is possible during even the shortest appointments; doing so is challenging and requires a highly skilled and attentive communicator. The key is providing an opportunity for clients to share and feel heard. These relationship-centered appointments can be more efficient than traditional biomedically oriented appointments (Shaw et al. 2006).

The aim of this book is to create highly skilled and attentive communicators. We hope to compel you to invest in developing your communication skills and equip you with a strong communication toolbox to build relationships with clients and colleagues. Then use the communication skills with purpose and intention to achieve clinical outcomes for the practice, your colleagues, clients, patients, and, importantly, yourself. We wish for each of your interactions to foster a long-lasting, fulfilling, and meaningful career in veterinary medicine.

Answer Key

1. Effective communication can be learned through practice, feedback, and coaching. [True]
2. Effective communication is critical to achieving significant outcomes for the veterinary practice; with colleagues, clients, and patients; and self. [True]
3. Effective communication is integral to maintaining and sustaining a healthy practice culture and interprofessional relationships. [True]
4. Effective communication takes more time. [False]

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