

## **DIRECT AND COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION**

Megan Brashear, BS, RVT, VTS (ECC)

Purdue University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, West Lafayette, Indiana

Conflict comes in many forms in the veterinary hospital and is unavoidable. As in any workplace, coworkers do not get to choose who they spend their day with and different personalities and opinions can lead to minor conflicts. Add in the stress of client interactions and unpredictable patients and veterinary employees find themselves needing to excel in conflict resolution. Depending on your own experiences and communication style, it may be difficult to engage in any sort of confrontational communication. Confrontation does not always mean yelling; it can mean any conversation around a difficult topic. Sometimes, an easy two-minute chat for one can be a confrontational issue for another so be prepared for any sort of response. Waiting for the appropriate time to have a conversation with a coworker, even if it 'isn't a big deal' can make a big difference in the way the information is received. Be sure to show empathy and true concern for what the other person is going through. Reassure the other party that their issue is valid and they have been heard.

Talking about dealing with any sort of stress must begin with self care. You cannot be at your best and ready to work hard for others if you do not start with a full heart. Exhaustion, stress, and burn-out will all empty your emotional reserve and you may find yourself angry, tired, disinterested, and see your performance suffer at work. Self-care begins with simple changes – eating well, exercising, and getting enough sleep. These small changes can create a big impact on your ability to think clearly and respond to stress. Many veterinary hospitals operate in a guilt culture, where staff members work long hours and extra shifts out of guilt to their coworkers and other patients. Lunch and breaks are not taken because there is always more work to do and more patients to care for. Staff members work through colds and fevers because staying home sick means your team has to work twice as hard. Salaries are low and benefits are not always offered. Vacation hours might be part of the deal but not always used. This information is not new news to any of us yet we still choose to work in the veterinary field. The challenge is to break the guilt culture and ensure that you are taking time for yourself so you can give time and energy to the hospital.

In a 2013 Veterinary Economics survey, the top three most common causes of conflict in veterinary hospitals were: staff not completing their duties as asked, staff gossiping about each other, and managers assigning tasks and resources unfairly. Interesting that while we can all remember a “crazy client” story or five, client issues were not in the top three reasons. We all need to take responsibility for our actions and interactions with each other on the hospital floor.

In any type of staff conflict, unless there is real fear of a physical altercation, the staff involved should attempt to resolve the issue themselves without involving managers. The stress of involving management can unravel conversations that might not need to be so intense. Remove the conversation from the hospital floor or where other people can overhear. Conflict is rarely one-sided. Commit to listening to the other person and hearing their side; chances are there will be work to be done from both parties. Discuss action items and both work towards a resolution.

In high stress communication, what is not verbalized is as important as the words spoken. Non-verbal communication can undo carefully considered words and all team members need to be aware of what their body language is saying. While the “correct” body language is easy to mimic, “faking it” does not work, as people will still continue to send non-verbal signal which can confuse the other party. The following tips can help improve non-verbal communication:

- Be present! As soon as the mind jumps to how to respond or starts formulating a response, eye contact fades and you begin to communicate indifference. Remain present in the conversation focusing on what the other person is saying and feeling
- Manage your own stress. Prepare as much as possible for difficult conversations, and practice calming yourself down when unplanned conflict comes up. Take a deep breath, ask for a moment alone, focus on the outcome, and move forward
- Control your emotions. We cannot control other people, but we must be in control of ourselves. In order to have this control we must be self-aware of what we are feeling and how we convey that feeling to others.
- Learn to read subtleties in the other person. Is there eye contact? Is it threatening? How is their facial expression? What is the tone of their voice? Does it match what they are saying? How is their posture? Are they standing over you or next to you? How is the back and forth of conversation? Is there interruption and talking over?
- Use caution when discussing finances that you do not appear apologetic or embarrassed about pricing as this can relay that the client is not getting what they are paying for

In moments of conflict, resist the urge to use accusatory “you” statements. When explaining the situation, only reflect your own feelings about it. Accusing can put the other person on the defensive right away and stop meaningful resolution.

When a situation requires confrontation communication, begin with self-awareness and identifying any emotions currently felt. Resist acting out right away but take necessary steps to calm down before saying anything. Focus on the facts of the situation and what is known. While difficult, listen to the other person and attempt to understand their facts and their truth. Ask clarifying questions in order to respond appropriately and not just to argue. Avoid accusing statements and take responsibility when necessary. If new information is brought forward, take a break to research or to collect new thoughts based on the new information. This will allow not only for the most appropriate response, but also can diffuse tempers before the conversation continues. If a resolution is not reached by the end, create action items so that both parties know their next steps.

Clients certainly add stress to the day, depending on the clientele they can be the sole source of stress for the CSR team. It is important to remember compassion above all else when dealing with clients; even a routine wellness exam can be stressful. Money, fear of bad news, and anxiety from the pet can make people behave less than their best. If the front desk staff is also on edge, communication can be poor and both parties left stressed. It is important to remember the following when dealing with clients:

- Gain their trust. This can be simple if it is a long-standing client who has had good experiences with you, but new clients or those with a sick pet will take more focused attention. Make eye contact, explain what is happening, listen to them, and show genuine concern. Empathizing gains trust.
- Set their expectations. We see multiple clients every day, and we perform the same tasks for these clients over and over again. We can get through an appointment with our eyes closed. We need to remember that our clients may be experiencing us for the first time, or this particular vet for the first time, or a sick pet for the first time. Let them know what to expect. If that changes, communicate that with them. If they look lost, ask them if they need anything. A lobby full of clients does not have to be a bad thing! If they are comfortable and know what to expect next, they will help to calm the nerves of someone going through a rough day.

- Over-communicate with people. In times of stress, people do not retain information. Give them the benefit of the doubt and default to compassion.

The realization that each client brings with them their own past experiences (positive and negative), expectations, and personality quirks should lead you to start each conversation with an open mind. Making assumptions can lead to miscommunication and lost opportunities to provide service. Empathy is the act of looking at a situation from someone else's perspective and then adjusting the response to prove your understanding. Some days, and with some people, this can be the most difficult task of the day. Assume good intent from everyone and interactions will not be as exhausting.

The veterinary hospital is a stressful place. Even when clients and their pets come for what perceive as a simple preventive care appointment, there is stress and anxiety associated with that visit. The owner may be concerned about cost, about causing pain to their pet, or the potential for hearing bad news. The pet may be fearful of new situations or remembering a past negative experience. The stress between pet and owner can feed on itself making both feel worse. As veterinary employees, we must remember that what is a normal day at work for us can be an incredibly stressful experience for our clients.

One of the most important steps to communicating with people who are under stress is to gain trust. If we expect clients to leave money and their pet with us, it is vital that we gain their trust during short interactions. The front desk team has 30 seconds to engage clients and cement their judgement of caring. When assessing trust, three quarters of the information gained is contained in non-verbal communication. This means facial expression, body language and voice tone accounts for much more than the words said. This caring and trustworthy attitude cannot be faked; it is vital that as veterinary staff we have a genuine concern for our animal and human clients.

These unplanned stressful conversations can quickly be energized by anger. As veterinary employees, it is important that we not only recognize when a client is angry, but that we understand how to de-escalate the situation. Stephen R Covey once said "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply". Listening is the first necessary skill in gaining control of a charged conversation; make sure the client feels heard. Do whatever needs to be done to feel genuine empathy for the client which will show in your body language. Do not take their ranting personally; this is what can escalate the conversation to anger on both sides.

People undergoing stress often only remember what they heard first and last; in any hospital this means the front desk is the first and last impression and often what people will remember. If their only interaction with the front desk is about money and finances, it is not hard to see how some clients have the impression that we only care about money. While finances must be discussed, make an effort to connect with clients on a level other than money. Bring the technicians into the conversation and ask that clients can visit pets after paying, or have discharge instructions discussed after paying their bill. Because paying the bill is high on the list of stressors, we should be doing what we can to ensure that is not the only thing our clients remember.

When people are under duress, they cannot understand lengthy messages or make complicated decisions. When a pet is experiencing a life and death emergency, clients need short sentences containing options. Attempting to explain complicated hospital policy regarding emergency treatment authorization, different levels of CPR, or financial policies are not likely to

go well. Short yes or no questions such as “Do you want the team to start CPR” may seem rude, but asking “We are concerned that your pet is not doing well. If you would like, the team can begin CPR. The cost is generally about \$500 and the money must be paid at the time of service. Is that something you would like us to do?” provides too many options and too many subjects. People in that type of situation can absorb about 10 seconds worth of information. The rest of the interaction relies on non-verbal communication. Medical staff must remember this as well, taking time to repeat questions and instructions to ensure as much information as possible goes home with the client.

While we understand the importance of empathy and compassion for clients when their pet is stressed or ill, we often see a breakdown in this relationship, on both sides, when it comes to discussing finances. Clients, used to the human medical model with insurance and bills sent through the mail months later and payment options available, experience sticker shock in the veterinary hospital. Veterinary staff, working long hours in stressful situations and usually with their own financial worries, are often sensitive to the financial conversations and can come across as apologetic when discussing money. In order to avoid staff inadvertently agreeing with a client who believes they are being cheated out of money, all team members should be involved in the pricing structure.

When conflict continues unresolved or team members are constantly faced with conflict, a natural response is to complain. Couched as sarcasm, letting off steam, shared experience, or what it is, complaining, it is detrimental. Complaining can not only ruin the good day a team member is having, it can slowly bring down an entire hospital. Synapses between neurons grow closer together the more they are used. Each time we complain about a client, about a patient, or about a coworker, we are shortening those synapses. Within the brain, the shortest course wins the race, and the next time we are faced with a client or patient we are more likely to complain about them since that is what we have trained the brain to do.

Complaining about clients and each other poisons morale and can quickly bring down others. Gossip does not just include “guess what I heard” stories, but includes talking poorly about clients and coworkers alike. If we all make it a goal not to engage in complaining and gossip, we can all work towards a more healthy, happy, and productive workplace.