

THE TREATMENT FLOOR IS NOT THE SUPREME COURT

Megan Brashear, BS, RVT, VTS (ECC)

Purdue University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, West Lafayette, Indiana

We judge. It is part of being human. We are raised with certain values and expectations and our opinions of how to act and treat people are set at an early age. When we allow these judgements to overwhelm and consume our ability to feel compassion and energy at work, they can interfere with team's ability to work well together.

While clients are often a source of frustration and compassion fatigue, they are the reason we have patients to treat and are an important member of the medical team and should be viewed as such. In the emergency/ICU setting there is the added challenge of client anxiety and fear. Each interaction must begin with gaining the client's trust. This is tricky when the client is new to the practice, their pet is in an emergency situation, and there is minimal time to talk. Make eye contact, explain what you are doing (especially if the animal is there with you), listen to them, and show genuine concern for them and their pet. Empathizing gains trust, not talking over their head and treating them as an outsider.

It is also important to set client expectations. While hospital employees process multiple patients over the course of a day, think of each client as experiencing the practice for the first time. Let the client know what to expect next, who will be coming to talk to them next, and what is expected for them. If something changes, communicate that change with them. Do not make assumptions of understanding especially in emergency situations. Talk to clients at every step and ask multiple times if they have questions. People under stress are not able to absorb all of the information thrown at them during the course of an emergency appointment. Ensure they have written instructions and feel comfortable enough to call with any additional questions. What may feel like over-communication from the technician is often the minimal understanding for the client.

It is important to understand who you are before you can connect and communicate with someone else. How do you receive information? How do you filter that information and then share it with the next person? There are many different tests that one can take to help determine their personality type and the most important part of any test will tell how YOU communicate. Once you better understand how you interpret the world, you can start to understand how others see a situation differently and you are better able to tailor your approach for a positive outcome.

Employees and managers alike should work to become self-aware of their emotions and what triggers those emotions. The goal is not to try to stop these emotions, but to be aware of them and control them. The initial reaction to a situation may be negative such as fear, anger, or embarrassment. A self-aware employee will recognize the negative emotion but be able to control that initial response while listening and attempting to gain a better understanding of what is happening. Resist the urge to act on initial emotions. Take a deep breath before responding. In written communication, write out a first draft and come back to it when the initial anxiety has dissipated. Decisions should be made based on facts and not based on reactionary emotion. Medical decisions are based on medical facts; communication should be viewed in a similar fashion.

It is important to realize communication differences in people and not be so quick to judge when they communicate differently than you. One way we can segment people's personalities is to

divide them into Thinkers and Feelers. Thinkers process information and facts. They are logical and often can efficiently move through a conversation with 'just the facts'. Feelers filter everything through their emotions and may perceive someone as callous if only the facts are communicated. Know what you are, and realize that you communicate better with those similar to you. Once you understand better how you interpret the world, you can start to understand how others see a situation differently and you are better able to tailor your approach for a positive outcome.

When approaching any situation, it may be cliché but also important to view the situation from the other person's perspective. Empathizing with someone else's stress, fear, and lack of knowledge can help one explain things more thoroughly, better set expectations, and save the task of having to repeat the same information over and over again. Always assume good intent of everyone. Be careful of negative assumptions, as they will impede the ability to remain open minded.

These unplanned stressful conversations can quickly be energized by anger. As veterinary employees, it is important that we not only recognize when a client or coworker 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.

Gossip is a problem we encounter from a very young age and unfortunately, seems to increase in frequency and malignancy as we get older and join the workforce. The simplest definition of gossip is talking about something neither person has the ability to change or impact. When we complain about a coworker's tardiness to another coworker, when we discuss the argument we overheard between the practice owner and the new associate veterinarian, or when we can't wait to share embarrassing stories about the new crazy client we are gossiping. Some of the time gossip is harmless chatter, but it can quickly escalate into a larger culture problem and cause rifts between coworkers and teams.

It is unrealistic to think that any hospital will be completely free of gossip, but it is important to pinpoint problems before they escalate and invade a hospital. Leadership must be aware of their employees and how they are feeling. This happens when employees feel empowered to discuss issues and feel they are heard by their manager. If employees feel ignored or feel that nothing ever changes no matter what they say, then they turn to their coworkers to vent frustrations instead of having constructive conversations. Challenge yourself and your coworkers to have constructive conversations as opposed to destructive gossip sessions. Gossip has nowhere to go if people simply do not participate. There may be one or two employees who love to get everyone riled up; but these employees have nowhere to go if no one chooses to listen. If you can, walk away. If you cannot leave the area, change the subject and don't let gossip poison you against your coworkers or your clients.

While we have discussed some of the negative cultures than can grow in veterinary hospitals, there is hope! One of the most important steps in creating a positive practice is to pay attention to the new hire process. Are you interviewing for personality, skills, or both? Do you know enough about your work culture that you know how to find the right fit? If your hospital employs a large group of passive aggressive indirect communicators, hiring a brash, up-front, direct communicator can spell disaster. Know your team's strengths and weaknesses and work to

your strengths. There is nothing wrong with wanting to become more direct, but warn the team and the new person about potential pitfalls.

It is important to create structure for new hires and set an expectation for their progress. This not only helps new employees see where they are going, it also improves trust between coworkers. When the entire team participates in creating a new hire checklist or skills assessment, they are all ensuring that employees are learning the same skills and will learn to perform them the same way. This can cut down on information withholding and new hires feeling left out of the process. Ensure that new hires are given the opportunity to train and learn; do not throw them to the wolves on their first day. Success comes with confidence and it is everyone's role to make sure we feel confident in our roles.

One of the first steps to creating a positive culture within the practice is to find mutual ground. Service, whether to clients, patients, or each other, should be a common theme. Bring all employees together for a discussion on service. Begin by defining service. Solicit stories and feedback from the entire team regarding the basics of good service. Define service on the phone, in person, and decide the basics that every client will receive while in the clinic. Through this exercise, create a list of responsibilities for each team and each team member. By including everyone in the process, the teams see that client service is not the responsibility of only one team, but a key requirement of every employee.

Another helpful activity for the hospital is to ask each employee their reason for working in that practice. What are their core values? When the team members have discussed their personal values, discuss the core values of the practice. Allow everyone the opportunity to see the value of service and communication and to understand their role in carrying out the values of the practice. Team members should take the opportunity to see how their reasons for working mesh with the values of the practice. These values should be discussed with each new hire and reiterated at yearly reviews or if any service issues arise at any time.

Practice members need to place a premium on helping each other. While it is beneficial to foster comradery among small groups working together, do not let it turn into hostility for other teams. This can happen between shifts as well as between varying roles. Challenge employees to see each other as internal customers. Treat coworkers with as much respect as a client deserves. Encourage employees to participate in the training process. If a technician is having problems with a process that involves the front desk, a customer service representative can step in and help with the training process rather than waiting for the technician manager to respond. The technician team, rather than complain that the check in process is taking too long, can offer to help by taking phone calls or entering information into the computer.

Create a hospital culture that appreciates and empathizes with clients. Do not allow complaining about or making fun of clients. While this may seem like an activity that bonds the staff together, it bonds them as a group against the clients. Gossip should not be tolerated, and that includes gossip about clients. Once that behavior is allowed to occur, it can quickly lead to inappropriate conversations overheard by clients both in person and over the phone. Speaking badly of clients will also erode morale and can create feelings of anxiety about being at work. Encourage all employees to treat clients with the same empathy as their pets and do not dwell on confrontational experiences.