

## **Effective Team Communication**

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### **Take Home Message**

Effective team communication can improve patient care, staff morale, and workplace culture. It is necessary to understand the communication styles of individuals in the workplace and work towards using effective communication tools for the situation and people. Finally, we need to develop a culture of open and transparent communication that can be developed through consistent training.

### **Introduction**

At Oculus Insights, we have performed employee engagement surveys on over 30 veterinary practices in Canada, the USA, Europe, the Middle East and even New Zealand. The surveys help to evaluate various aspects of what makes an engaged employee. We define an engaged employee as one with a strong commitment to the business, demonstrated by the employee going above and beyond what is expected of them. They are passionate about the company, and their co-workers, and will go the extra mile in their jobs. Companies with highly engaged employees tend to see higher growth and more profitability than those that lack engaged employees. This is seen all over the world and in all types of industries.

Between the various countries there are some differences. For example, vets in some regions are generally happier than in others, and employees in large practices tend to be less engaged than those in smaller practices where everyone closely knows each other. But there is one factor we have seen in all surveys that all vet practices seem to struggle with, and that is communication in the workplace. This can range from under to over communication, the inability of staff members to have difficult conversations with each other, to a simple lack of feeling appreciated because nobody every says thank you for a job well done.

There are several reasons for these communication challenges; a lack of time, inconsistent methods, a hierarchical culture, generational or gender differences, or simply giving negative feedback is uncomfortable. The result of poor communication in the work place tends to lead to poor medical care, tension in the workplace and decreased staff morale.

Effective communication removes the barriers that impede progress, and is sincere, transparent and timely. Ultimately, we want all staff at all levels in an organization to feel comfortable communicating directly with anyone even if the subject matters are uncomfortable or challenging.

### **Solutions**

Developing a culture of effective communication entails four key areas.

1. Knowing the communication styles of co-workers
2. Providing the right communication tools
3. A culture of transparency
4. Training

### *Communication Styles*

A great team needs a diversity, but the drawback can be the variety of communication styles that can interfere with effective communication within the team. There are four communication styles that are the most commonly associated with individuals; analytical, intuitive, functional and personal.

Analytical people prefer to have data and facts. They want specific and precise language. Vague descriptions or discussions frustrate these people. They can be similar to functional people in that they enjoy digging deep into a situation and completely understanding a situation. Veterinarians and technicians often share these traits.

On the other hand, there is the intuitive communication style. People who communicate in this manner prefer the big picture and don't like to get bogged down with details. These are "ideas" people who tend to discuss generalities.

Next, we have the functional communication style that is process driven. These people like to think through plans step by step. They don't tend to focus on the emotions or relationships with others, which is a feature of those with a personal communication style. This latter group places a strong emphasis on relationships and personal connections to understand what others are thinking.

### *Communication Tools*

In a world with immediate access to anything or anyone in our phones we can drown in excessive and inappropriate communication. Not everyone needs to be party to all discussions so effective communication needs to determine what are we trying to communicate, who needs to know it and which tool is most effective to relay important information.

One of the biggest culprits of bad communication are staff meetings when they are used to solely relay information. Our time is important and many of us resent disrupting our day to sit in a crowded room while someone drones on about updates in policies or regulations. Rather, staff meetings are better used to solicit feedback and conversation from staff members on important issues that would benefit from the input of others. They are also better used as educational forums. If we are going to take 30-60 minutes of our staffs' time lets us it to train them on customer service, new medical diagnostics or therapies or communication training.

When we are trying to share information that everyone needs to know we are challenged by how to make sure everyone has heard the same message. Group emails are rarely read by everyone and staff meetings are better used for other purposes, so what can we do? Our

recommendation is to institute daily or weekly huddles at the beginning of the day or shift. These follow the same format every time and should take no longer than five minutes. It's very similar to patient rounds, except we are discussing specific parts of the business. This is when we announce who is sick, or has to leave early, what equipment is malfunctioning, or a brief overview of a new policy. Huddles are quick, to the point and don't use up valuable time.

Emails are fine for sending longer and more in-depth that are informative or explanatory in subject matter, but in the moment communication is better done with some of the new messaging platforms like Slack, or even face to face meetings when you want to avoid the back and forth black holes we can end up in trying to figure out something minor. Sometimes meeting a person face to face can resolve a problem far quicker than anything else.

Finally, as suggested before. Training in communication is very helpful to develop the skills and culture of open communication. Subjects can range from how to have difficult conversations, to how to show appreciation to others. The idea of putting together a training program can be daunting, but you can have a very effective training sessions by having staff member research a subject and present to the group what they have learned. It is critical that the group have a discussion on how this new knowledge can be used in your practice.

Effective communication in the workplace requires that everyone recognizes their emotional intelligence. This is the ability to recognize our emotions as they happen, and the effect they can have on others. Being emotionally intelligent means that you recognize your triggers and have a system in place to recognize when you are being triggered and how to quell your reaction to the trigger.

One of the most important skill that a team needs to learn to have effective communication is how to have a difficult conversation. This is when we have to tell another person something that they may not want to hear in a way that they can receive it so that a positive change can happen. Often the stakes are high, and emotions can be strong. Opinions and perceptions on the subject can vary and are difficult to pinpoint. An example of this is how a supervisor or DVM talks to support staff. The staff might feel that the other person is using a tone of voice that is condescending and hurtful, while the doctor or supervisor thinks they are just emphasizing the importance of something. Perception is reality in these cases, so how do we move beyond the hurt feelings and confusion?

Prior to a difficult conversation both parties should reflect on the meeting. They need to consider each other as partners working towards a solution and not adversaries. They should consider the goal of the meeting and what the ultimate outcome looks like. Next, they need to consider their own part in the miscommunication. We all know that there is more than one truth when two people are in conflict, so honest reflection and considering the other persons point of view are essential. We should also reflect on what we know, and what we think we know. Too many bad feelings result from communication mishaps that are based upon what people think, rather than what they know. Is that doctor truly arrogant and condescending, or are there other factors in play? Is there something going on in their personal life that lead to an

isolated incident? Is it true that the receptionist doesn't like me, and that is why he never does what I ask her to do? Assumptions in a diagnosis of a medical case can be dangerous without the facts, and they are when we communicate too. Finally, we have to recognize our own triggers and understand why they happen and what you can do to control them. A difficult conversation with a successful outcome requires that both parties leave their egos at the door and humbly listen and understand the concerns of the other person. Again, we are partners in a solution, not adversaries.

A great way to start a difficult conversation is to acknowledge your pre meeting thoughts. State that you want a solution and that the other person is a partner in that solution. Admit that you get triggered and what the trigger is. Tell the other person that if you get triggered you might ask for a break so you can compose yourself. Admit that you are there to learn from the other person so that you both can move forward together.

Once we are in the difficult conversation, we need to be careful with the language we use. Instead of saying "you always", or "you never" it is better to say, "it seems like", or "I feel". The later are not accusatory and place the emphasis on ones' own feelings rather than assuming what the other is doing. Once you have outlined your concerns, sit back and listen without interrupting, challenging, or disagreeing. If emotions get the best of you or the other person, call a time out and regroup. There is nothing wrong with that and it is far better than letting a situation get out of control. It is important to acknowledge that you are listening to the other person. Just because you acknowledge them doesn't mean you agree with them though. Rather it tells them that you appreciate that what they are saying is very important to them. Finally, summarize what you think you have heard so that they can identify where they haven't gotten their message across correctly.

As you progress in the conversation ask the other person what they think would be a good solution. Even if you don't agree with everything, they say find one thing that you do agree with and use that as the building block to a joint solution. If the interaction becomes heightened go back to asking questions to bring the conversation back to a safe place and encourage the other to share.

Difficult conversations are never easy but can be very satisfying knowing that you broke through a barrier with the other person and have a plan in place for success. The more that you do of them the easier they get, but the learning curve never starts if you never open yourself up to the process.

One of the biggest, communication challenges found in our employee engagement survey is the lack of appreciation felt by staff and associates by the leadership team. When we talk to practice owners about this, they often ask "Why should I thank someone for doing their job?" While a lack of appreciation is a constant in our surveys, this response from owners and managers is another constant.

When we finally convince practice owners and managers that employees really value feeling appreciated, they ask what the benefits are other than making someone feel better. As if that isn't reason enough, we begin to list the many benefits of saying thank you. For one thing, it creates a lasting impression on the recipient that leads to a boost in confidence. Appreciation also creates trust and collaboration between employees and managers. It is also motivating knowing that the effort put forward by an employee is valued. Nothing can crush the moral of a person more than having their day to day efforts be ignored. It is human nature to think that if someone doesn't care about what you are doing then why bother trying so hard. Finally, it also makes the giver of the praise feel good. I know that I feel better after I thank an employee and see them smile. It feels nice to make someone feel better.

The key to success for showing appreciation is for the praise to be specific, sincere and meaningful. Give specific examples, such as "Thank you for helping Dr. Smith by staying 30 minutes late when she had to deal with that emergency." You can expand on this by highlighting a positive quality or strength they have. After thanking the employee for staying late, you can then add, "Your dedication to our patients and to your co-workers makes everyone work better together as a team." Two simple sentences can have such a positive and meaningful impact on another person. Finally, make sure you mean what you say. We can always sniff out someone who is being disingenuous.

Another impact of showing appreciation is that over time your business will develop a culture of appreciation that begins at the top. Everything from the top flows downward and it is up to us as practice owners to demonstrate the desired behavior we want everyone to demonstrate. The choice is very black and white. We can show appreciation and have a group of people that praise and thank each other with everyone basking in a feel good glow that results in increased engagement, less people quitting and just a happy vibe at the workplace, or we can ignore the great efforts of our staff and have everyone giving decreasing amounts of effort so the whole workplace is congested with bad attitudes and people not trying very hard.

If you are still not a believer in the value of showing appreciation, think of your favorite clients. Inevitably, these are the pet owners who are so appreciative of your great veterinary work, even though you think all that you did was routine. On the other hand, nothing frustrates us more than a client who takes it as a given after you have saved their dog from a GDV or treated their horse with a mystery lameness. We like it when our clients thank us for helping their pet! Treat your staff as you want to be treated by your clients. It is that simple.

Effective communication is essential for a well-functioning business. The veterinary profession is based upon team work and seamless communication amongst the team ensures that the delivery of medical care is optimal, staff morale is high and a more enjoyable work place.