

IMPORTANCE OF INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

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For most people, Emotional Intelligence (EI) is more important than one's learned intelligence (IQ) in attaining success in their lives and careers. EI is the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, with an ability to read signals from other people, and use this information to guide one's interpersonal relationships, actions and thinking in an appropriate manner.

Steve Bressert & Kendra Cherry

We have heard it before, but it bears repeating: Studies show at 90 percent of veterinary practice leadership failures are attributable to shortfalls in interpersonal competencies - factors such as leading team-based healthcare programs, developing a positive work environment centered on clear Standards of Care, retaining inspired staff, developing respect and trust, and coping with change. The message is clear - if you are going to excel as a leader in a multi-doctor, team-based, veterinary healthcare delivery system, you must master the "soft skills" of caring leadership.

In veterinary healthcare management, where the basic unit of business is the person (stressed client or caring staff member), these skills are even more important, it is a shame that it was not in the basic curriculum of veterinary school. If the veterinary healthcare providers on your practice staff are spending time replaying a conflict in their minds, their energy is directed away from patient care and client-centered service. If you lack the "soft" interpersonal skills to motivate your frontline healthcare delivery staff members, including fully accepting the written well-care Standards of Care (SOC), as well as the optimally using the new information technologies, your practice could be missing revenue opportunities and/or negatively affecting patient outcomes and client perceptions.

CLIENT PERCEPTIONS

Research shows that an unhappy client will tell about 13 others, each of which will tell 5 more (that is a 60+ potential client negative impact), while a satisfied client will convey their pleasure to only about 6 others. The traditional internal practice justification "they do not understand" does NOTHING to change the practice's downward spiral reputation in the community (primary catchment area).

While in most communities we expect about 30 new clients per month per FTE veterinarian, and we measure "word of mouth referrals" from satisfied clients to ensure we are getting over 50% of new clients from satisfied client referrals, this yardstick is seldom used as a gauge of "soft skill" effectiveness.

Emotional intelligence - however "soft" it may seem - has a direct effect on aspects of the practice as concrete as patient safety, client perceptions of clinical outcomes, staff pride (which client's perceive as quality) and profitability. The following is a closer look at the FIVE CRITICAL interpersonal competencies.

KNOWING YOURSELF

It sounds easy, but in fact, self-knowledge is challenging for most veterinarians; we were all raised in a "no error" academic culture, so blaming and rationalization seem to reign supreme. To truly know ourselves, we must become aware of our blind spots, those situations we don't handle as well as we should for optimal business performance. For some practice owners, this involves failure to listen to the viewpoints of others, for some it involves making tough decisions with appropriate urgency, for others it concerns difficulty motivating their own staff. One tendency I am seeing more often is the GEN-Y leader sharing her thoughts out loud (as if they were on Facebook or a smartphone network with peers), which staff members perceive as a plan in the making, and when the thought/dream disappears, the staff become disillusioned; false starts actually cause reserved acceptance of all new initiatives by staff members. Most veterinarians, especially in Australia, have a tendency to sweep shortcoming, as well as personal weaknesses, under the rug rather than cause a confrontation. Yet inevitably this backfires, the rug gets too lumpy and people start to trip over the accumulated shortfalls being ignored. When weaknesses are ignored, we are also ignoring how they affect others, whether we are overtly aware of the challenges or not. Self-knowledge enables you to recognize your weaker areas and take corrective action.

MAINTAINING CONTROL

Most veterinarians believe that they maintain control; they were trained in case management where all control must lie with the attending provider. Yet challenge is that the staff members may not agree with the practice owner's self-definition. The key here is to be aware of when you are losing control. Do you pause and reflect when you are entering that territory that is difficult, or does your voice get louder and your understanding of others diminishes? Is your tendency to overreact or under-react? In a large facility I had developed, we also did the community animal impoundment (and adoption), and one of my credo positions was NEVER will I see inhumanity in my practice culture. We had a new kennel staff member decide it was easier to power wash the run with the animal still in it rather than change the animal to another run when cleaning (per protocol); when I caught this individual power spraying a run with a dog still in it, I shut the system down and physically escorted him through the clinic and out the front door. The word went out - do NOT ever be inhumane to an animal in this practice! While the occasional outburst can be attributed to being human, if your personal pattern is seen as more extreme - if you are perceived as becoming overly upset or shutting down - you are undermining your own effectiveness.

MAINTAINING MOTIVATION

Motivation is a combination of optimism and perseverance from inside an individual; again, our professional education has usually based on a "bell-curve" academic logic and fear of failure. Studies have shown that most people have a biologically based

"set point" for optimism; when selected to veterinary school, that optimism is very high, and during the professional years, fear increases by an average of 25%. Some people look at a glass as half full, others think it is half empty; very few accept that the glass is full, and only the ratio of the contents may vary. Reality encompasses all three perspectives, yet the more positive the assessment, the better leverage the leader has. Optimism cascades down to those you are leading, enabling them to stay motivated and positive; the more positive a team member is, the more motivated and tenacious they will be in reaching for enhanced outcomes. When managers are habitually pessimistic and primarily critical, the followers become less innovative and more risk-adverse. Perseverance is the second part of the motivation equation. A leader must demonstrate the ability to stay on course through thick and thin, setting a clear vision of where the practice is headed in the long run.

RECOGNIZING OTHERS' INTERESTS

Good leaders have the ability to take a win-lose situation and craft at best a win-win solution, or at the very least, a tolerable outcome perception for all involved. When seeking a transactional attorney for my consulting team, it was almost impossible to find an attorney who understood WIN-WIN - attorneys are raised in a WIN-LOSE culture - but for partnerships, I needed a win-win mind set on our transactional attorney; I eventually found one and we developed him in veterinary medicine, where he has been recognized a yardstick of excellence, and was eventually elected to the Presidency of the USA Consulting Association, Veterinary Partners. To recognize the interests of others, you must know the needs and perspectives of all the parties involved (perceptions play a large part in the formation of perspectives). Only with this level of insight can a leader create buy-in and get the team members behind the practice agenda. Rather than attempting to control the process every way, which only alienates the followers, a savvy leader defines the **WHAT** with clarity and provides the **WHY** in a logical client-centered patient advocacy manner. The great leader then gives the team members ample time to develop the **WHO** and **HOW**, as it pertains to their practice zone(s) and their perceptions of client-centered patient advocacy. Then the legendary practice culture allows ample time for leaders and followers to come back together, set the **WHEN**, including training time, starting point, realistic milestones, and measurements of success. Remember the famous adage, "I must know where my people are going so I can run ahead and lead them to a successful completion."

COMMUNICATING FLEXIBILITY

Flexible communications is the hallmark of great leaders. When developing the Leadership Training Course for Belize, we introduced the concept of "ARF" in the interpersonal relations leadership skill, and participants really grasped the concept. You could hear "ARF" coming from campsites throughout the jungle; "ARF" stood for **Absolute Rigid Flexibility**. Leaders must be able to adjust their communication style according to the needs of the situation. This involves being aware of the effects of your words, as well as the tone of your voice, on each specific audience you encounter. For example, managers often misjudge the powerful impact of their words and emotions on their team members, communicating with them in the same way they would with a well informed peer. But new and unsure staff members are less likely to push back, challenge, or even seek clarification from their leaders,

which all too often leads to miscommunication and feelings of alienation. This one-way "communication attempt" is not true communication; communication is the getting and giving of useful information. Talking "at" someone inevitably increases the relational "static" and slows practice progress, often derailing effective outcome results and smashing any feelings of personal pride.

BUILDING INTERPERSONAL SKILL SETS

Good interpersonal skill sets are built over a lifetime, but there are several steps you can take to start building these skills faster and more effectively:

TALK WITH YOUR TEAM

Teach those around you to give you open, honest feedback about your leadership style. That means NOT disagreeing with their assessment, but rather, saying thank you in a caring manner. Tell them what areas you are working on and enlist their help. You might not always get the whole truth, but just demonstrating that you are trying to improve your emotional intelligence skill set can help your team improve their performance as well.

READ

I like to start practices with Bracey's book on *Managing from the Heart*, Paterson's text on *Crucial Conversations*, and a few of my *Signature Series* monographs from the VIN Bookstore (www.vin.com), but there are a myriad of articles and books on communication skills and emotional intelligence. Many of these references provide strategies for real world situations such as resolving conflict or motivation of the team. The simple act of reading about emotional competencies will increase your awareness of behavioral expectations for becoming a "best practice".

DEVELOP MIND MAP BRAINSTORMING METHODS

Tony Buzon has the easiest texts to understand mind mapping, and my text, *Building The Successful Veterinary Practice: Innovation & Creativity* (Volume 3), Blackwell/Wiley & Sons Publishing, not only describes the process for veterinary practices, but also ends each chapter with a mind map for the reader's completion. Remember, when brainstorming, there is NEVER an assessment in an idea or input item, and if it sounds "off the wall", it goes into the parking lot in the corner of the mind map so it can be recalled for later (even if it is home phone call to "bring home the milk"). Mind maps are built and expanded upon by the group, and then people get to sleep on the ideas, and readdress the mind map on the following day. Eventually, the mind map is transferred to a project sheet (format is provided in the *Leadership Action Planner* monograph, VIN Bookstore).

COMPLETE FEEDBACK EVALUTATIONS

The concept of the 360-degree feedback has often gone astray since they migrated from positive to negative feedback items. If you desire a 360-degree feedback system, keep it sweet, short, and to the point, addressing the positive attributes of the individual and what could be improved with expansion. There are many on-line sources, but as a caution, do NOT use a negative feedback format; this is the time the primary stakeholders get to build on what is good about someone. Other type

assessments include personality and behavior self-surveys; behavior can be a term of employment and effected by the practice culture, but personality cannot be changed from the outside. Self-assessment surveys can often help alert the caring user to blind spots and opportunities for development.

WORK WITH A SAVVY VETERINARY CONSULTANT/LIFE COACH

External feedback can help you develop perspectives that you might not have addressed previously, and if it is a savvy veterinary consultant, add some team-based training awareness to enhance productivity within the practice operations. A life coach is usually not veterinary savvy, but they are insightful in helping you identify areas where your emotional intelligence skills can have the greatest impact on those around you. While the life coach will help you identify strategies for self-improvement, a veterinary savvy consultant can tailor programs to enhance team strategies to enhance communications and awareness for improved client-centered patient advocacy programs. Whether you have a life coach or a savvy practice consultant, or both, there needs to be follow-up for plan implementation as well as evaluation of progress.

Ultimately, your success in interpersonal competencies is determined by the experience of your stakeholders, whether than be stressed clients, concerned staff, or caring family members. No matter how effective a communicator you believe yourself to be, if your front line providers, your management team, and as applicable, your board, do not feel the same, you are NOT maximizing your leadership potential.