

Mentoring Veterinarians' Communications Skills

What, why, and how

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People working in all types of veterinary practices may want to enhance their mentorship skills. Common sense tells us that many types and styles of mentoring are needed to help mentees become savvy, efficient, effective, and productive veterinary clinicians. This article focuses on techniques that will help veterinary mentors improve their personal and professional client communication skills as they teach these skills to their mentees.

The need for mentors

When practice owners hire their first associate veterinarian—or add more later—they quickly realize that their clients' experiences, their patients' care, the quality of medicine practiced, and their hospital's success is no longer in their hands alone. Now, additional doctors are talking to clients, educating, building, or—hopefully not the case—destroying rapport and loyalty.

During this process, the associate veterinarians are either getting clients to agree to the recommended services—or failing to do so—and communicating with other staff by coaching, mentoring, directing, praising, criticizing, and, if all is well, thanking the entire team. Some of these new associates will be great at communicating, whereas others might not be.



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Effective communication is a key factor in achieving success in any field, including the veterinary field. If you, as the practice owner/manager/veterinarian/mentor, cannot effectively communicate with clients, you will have trouble building client loyalty, facilitating client compliance, and mentoring others. You may also have difficulty avoiding client complaints to veterinary boards and civil suits for malpractice.

Unfortunately, there has been a huge disconnect between what veterinarians need to know to be successful in practice in the way of scientific and clinical knowledge, technical skills, business strategies, and ways of thinking, versus what students are taught during veterinary school. Until very recently, most veterinary schools didn't teach any aspect of effective communication. Even now, this key factor for success is not typically a

priority when evaluating candidates for admittance to veterinary schools.

All too often, the topic of effective communication is covered as an afterthought, when compared to the traditional veterinary school subjects, such as anatomy, physiology, pathology, biochemistry, histology, clinical pathology, surgery, and the medical disciplines.

Don't get us wrong—the traditional subjects are extremely important for building competence. However, it seems strange that the most important factor for success—communication—is minimally discussed and superficially taught at most schools. It appears that the more today's youth communicate through text messages, Instagram, Facebook, and email, the worse their in-person communication skills are becoming.

Studies show that 60–70 percent of all client complaints in veterinary practice are directly linked to poor communication. The most common of these are:

- Not asking for or knowing the patient's name
- Using the wrong gender when referencing the patient
- Failing to return phone calls
- Not gaining proper owner consent before proceeding with expensive and/or somewhat risky procedures
- The absence of thorough or, all too often, any written post-operative or post-hospitalization instructions
- Failure to explain and discuss the estimated costs of the medical care plans recommended
- Failure to update and obtain client consents when costs for care exceed documented estimates
- Not demonstrating compassion and empathy, especially at the end of a patient's life

In addition to these common client complaints, poor communication skills are closely associated with such issues as:

- Medical errors (especially regarding dosage)
- Client unhappiness and dissatisfaction with everything that is done
- Noncompliance with recommendations for treatment
- Suboptimal case outcomes

It is noteworthy that people with introverted personalities struggle more with open and comfortable communication than do those who are considered extroverts. An excellent book that helps these two personality types understand each other is *Quiet*, a *New York Times* Best Seller by Susan Cain. This book

corrects many misunderstandings about introverts and illustrates how such people can overcome shyness and excel at communication by learning some skills that do not come naturally to them.

How to mentor communications

Having set the stage regarding the importance of effective communications, let's consider how to develop communication skills in veterinary mentees. A difficult problem here is the fact that many practitioners may not have learned, studied, or practiced effective communication methods themselves. How, then, as practice owners, can we mentor these young associates to become better communicators?

Like most things in life, it starts with you. Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." This is so true in everything we do, but especially when mentoring other people. As we prepare ourselves to be good mentors, we must also understand what constitutes effective communication skills in veterinary medicine.

The members of our VetPartners Career Development Special Interest Group and VCA Animal Hospital's regional managers believe essential communication includes the following:

- Physical examinations should be "talked through" with clients and recorded in the patient's chart as they are performed.
- Standard operating protocols or procedures should be in place as references for similarity and continuity of care for our patients.
- Client handouts must be provided and written in lay-person language.

- Medical care plans, both diagnostic and treatment, need to be coupled with cost estimates.
- Physical exam report cards with a synopsis of what was paid for should be routinely provided to the person who sought the veterinary care.
- Efficient medical recordkeeping systems must be operational.

In essence, we need to help ourselves and our entire veterinary team become better, more consistent communicators. But we must start the process by paying special attention to our own communications skills. This is a lifelong project—one that never ends. The process of developing our associate veterinarians into great communicators can only be effective if we focus on ourselves first.

A good way to begin improving your communication skills is to videotape yourself in the exam room or during an ambulatory call and review it early on a quiet morning with an unbiased eye. You must understand your own weaknesses and work to improve them before you will ever be able to obtain buy-in from your mentees.

Next, select "mentorable" new grads or summer veterinary students who already possess strong communication skills and have positive attitudes. The mentoring process starts with the right candidates, people who possess ongoing curiosity and are amenable to pursuing an honest self-assessment. University of California Davis and Colorado State University veterinary schools are using the Educational Testing Service's Personal Potential Index (see ets.org/ppi) to help select for key characteristics in their admissions process. Maybe it's time we,



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too, used it as we select mentorable veterinary students and graduates.

Finding people who want to be an integral part of the team, are driven to achieve, and are naturally likable makes the mentorship job much easier and more likely to be successful. Many schools are now videotaping their students in clinical settings with clients, so ask your candidates whether their school has done that for them. If so, ask for their thoughts about the value of this process. If not, ask whether they would be comfortable doing this while working for you.

Certain questions during an interview can help you discover if candidates understand the importance of effective communication, are willing to be mentored, and possess positive, outgoing personalities. You can ask such behavior-based questions as:

- How do you measure success in the completion of your job?
- What motivates you in your work environment?
- Talk about mentors with whom you have worked with in the past and how they contributed to your personal and professional development.
- What characteristics and skills did these mentors have that made them successful?
- What did you have to do to make the relationship work?
- What skills or characteristics did you learn from that working environment?
- What would have been required of each of you to make that mentorship even more successful?
- What are the most important things to remember—and

cover—when discussing your recommendations with clients?

Have your applicants write down what they believe they are capable of accomplishing in the first 3 and 6 months of employment with your practice, and also what it will take for you and them to achieve these personal goals. Here is where it important to be aware of the other tools in our Mentorship Toolkit—most specifically, the inventory of medical, surgical, practice management, and communication skills. Examples from the Mentorship Toolkit will be provided in the second part of this article.

After you have hired your mentee, it is important to focus on opening a comfortable dialogue so that you will have open communication every day. As uncomfortable as it may be, the starting point for this process is to lead by example. Make sure that your mentees continually see you trying to improve your communications skills with your team and your clients. Ask your mentees for feedback on how

effective your communication with clients is, focusing on their ability to read their chemistry with clients and respond to your interactions with clients. You must see yourself as a role model for your mentees and your staff members. Without this, they will struggle to discern what they are doing well or poorly with their own communications. ✨

Note: Be sure to read Part 2 of this article in the September issue of *Trends*. Part 2 will explore what it takes to make mentorship work and whom to mentor.



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Mentorship Toolkit

Be sure to check out the Mentorship Toolkit, powered by AAHA and VetPartners, and available online at mentorship.aaaha.org.

The Toolkit contains resources and support for a revised, detailed mentorship program to help associate veterinarians contribute, both financially and medically, to their new team. It also provides an outline that both mentees and mentors can utilize when developing effective and successful relationships to aid in bringing new associates on board.

