

Developing Communication Skills for Veterinary Practice

JANE R. SHAW · JASON B. COE



WILEY Blackwell

Developing Communication Skills for Veterinary Practice

Jane R. Shaw, DVM, PhD

Professor

Department of Clinical Sciences

College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

Jason B. Coe, DVM, PhD

Professor

Department of Population Medicine

Ontario Veterinary College

University of Guelph

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

WILEY Blackwell

Copyright © 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permission>.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty

While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shaw, Jane R., author. | Coe, Jason B. (Jason Bradley), author.

Title: Developing communication skills for veterinary practice / Jane R.

Shaw, Jason B. Coe.

Description: Hoboken, NJ : Wiley-Blackwell 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022059959 (print) | LCCN 2022059960 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119382713 (paperback) | ISBN 9781119382720 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119382751 (epub)

Subjects: MESH: Veterinary Medicine--methods | Communication | Professional-Patient Relations

Classification: LCC SF610.5 (print) | LCC SF610.5 (ebook) | NLM SF 610.5 | DDC 636.089--dc23/eng/20230323

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022059959>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022059960>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Images: © kali9/Getty Images; Pressmaster/Shutterstock; Juice Flair/Shutterstock; Seventyfour/Adobe Stock Photos

Set in 9.5/12.5pt STIXTwoText by Straive, Pondicherry, India

We dedicate this book to our parents.

Evelyn and Donald Shaw provided me with every opportunity and endless love and support to follow my dreams of becoming a veterinarian. ~ JRS

Bruce and Frances Coe, to whose absolute support I owe everything. ~ JBC

Contents

About the Authors *xiii*

How to Use This Book *xv*

Acknowledgments *xviii*

1 Introduction *1*

Communication Matters *1*

Equip Your Communication Toolbox *2*

Practice, Practice, Practice *3*

Appreciate Communication is An Art and a Science *4*

Build, Maintain, and Sustain Relationships *4*

Enhance Clinical Outcomes *5*

For the Veterinary Practice *6*

Enhance Efficiency *6*

Reduce Malpractice Claims *6*

Improve Practice Performance *6*

For the Veterinary Team *6*

Foster Satisfaction *6*

For Clients *7*

Increase Recall and Understanding *7*

Promote Adherence *7*

Cultivate Satisfaction *7*

For Patients *8*

Boost Health *8*

Foster Veterinary Team Culture *8*

Coordinate Relationships *8*

Make Time to Communicate *9*

Answer Key *10*

References *10*

2 Communication Styles *12*

Introduction *12*

Set the Scene *14*

Adapt Communication Styles to Clients *14*

One Shoe Does Not Fit All *14*

Who Is Doing the Talking? *15*

Role of Appointment Type and Severity of the Medical Problem *15*

Communication Styles *15*

Expert	15
Partner	16
Align Styles to Achieve Outcomes	17
Meet as Experts	18
Embrace Diversity	18
Be Flexible	18
Make a Recovery When Needed	20
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Client Communication Styles	20
Clients Want an Authoritative Expert. Isn't That Why They Come to See Me?	20
I Prefer to Form Partnerships with My Clients. Can't I Stick to That?	21
Client Scenario	21
Recovery Client Scenario	21
Adapt Communication Styles to the Team	22
Communication Styles	22
Expert	22
Partner	23
Be Flexible	23
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Team Communication Styles	23
How Can I Be a Practice Leader and a Partner at the Same Time? They Seem	
Antagonistic to Each Other	23
How Do I Find Time to Achieve Buy-In with the Team?	24
Team Scenario	24
Recovery Team Scenario	25
Put the Communication Styles into Practice	26
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	26
Exercise 2.1 Skill Spot – Communication Styles	26
Exercise 2.2 Self-Reflect – Client Communication Styles	26
Exercise 2.3 Self-Reflect – Colleague Communication Styles	26
Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercises	27
Exercise 2.4 Learn Your Team's Communication Styles	27
Exercise 2.5 Debrief Team Scenarios	28
Take It Away	29
Answer Key	29
Exercise 2.1 Skill-Spot – Communication Styles	29
References	29
3 Opening-the-Interaction	31
Introduction	31
Set the Scene	32
Opening Client Interactions	33
Key Communication Skills for Opening-the-Interaction	33
Preparation	33
Introduction	33
Agenda-Setting	34
Outcomes of Agenda-Setting	37
Agenda-Setting Is a Veterinary Team Sport	37
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Opening-the-Interaction	38
How Can I Request a Second Chance at the Opening?	38
How Do I Address Clients Who Are on Their Cell Phones?	39

Routine Client Scenario	39
Challenging Client Scenario	40
Talk through Technology – Telephone Communication	40
Opening Team Interactions	41
Routine Team Scenario	42
Challenging Team Scenario	43
Put the Opening Skills into Practice	43
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	43
Exercise 3.1 Skill Spot – Introduction	43
Exercise 3.2 Skill Spot – Agenda-Setting	44
Exercise 3.3 Next Steps for Success	44
Exercise 3.4 Track Agenda-Setting Results	44
Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercise	45
Exercise 3.5 Role-Play: The Hand-Off	45
Take It Away	46
Answer Key	46
Exercise 3.1 Skill Spot – Introduction	46
Exercise 3.2 Skill Spot – Agenda-Setting	47
References	48
4 Information-Gathering	49
Introduction	49
Set the Scene	51
Client Scenario	51
Team Scenarios	51
Gather Patient, Client, and Environment Information	52
Attend to the Process of Information-Gathering with Clients	52
Key Communication Skills for Information-Gathering	53
Open-Ended Inquiry	53
Use the Inquiry Funnel	54
Closed-Ended Inquiry	56
Pause	57
Avoid Interruptions	57
Minimal Encouragers	58
Reflective Listening	58
Attend to the Content of Information-Gathering with Clients	59
Patient Data	61
Client Data or Perspective	64
Environment Data	66
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Information-Gathering	68
Why Make the Time to Gather a Complete History?	68
What about Combining History Gathering and Performing the Physical Examination?	68
Can't I Focus on the History of the Animal Patient?	69
Where in the Interview Do I Gather the History?	69
Who on the Veterinary Team Gathers the History?	69
Why Didn't They Share That with Me?	70
Routine Client Scenario	70
Challenging Client Scenario	70
Talk Through Technology – Use of Computers or Tablets in the Examination Room	71

Gather Situation, Colleague, and Environment Information	72
Attend to the Process of Information-Gathering with Colleagues	72
Attend to the Content of Information-Gathering with Colleagues	72
Situation Data	73
Colleague Data	74
Environment Data	75
Routine Team Scenario	75
Challenging Team Scenario	76
Put the Information-Gathering Skills into Practice	76
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	76
Exercise 4.1 Skill Spot – Question Type	76
Exercise 4.2 Skill Practice – Reflect Back	77
Exercise 4.3 Self-Assessment	77
Exercise 4.4 Next Steps for Success	77
Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercises	78
Exercise 4.5 Twenty Questions	78
Exercise 4.6 Back-Pocket, Open-Ended Inquiries to Ask Clients	79
Exercise 4.7 Revisit the Practice’s History Checklist	79
Take It Away	79
Answer Key	80
Exercise 4.1 Skill Spot – Question Type	80
Exercise 4.2 Skill Practice – Reflect Back	80
References	80
5 Attending to Relationships	82
Introduction	82
Set the Scene	83
Attend to Client Relationships	84
Key Communication Skills for Attending to Client Relationships	84
Nonverbal Behaviors	84
Empathy	87
Partnership	89
Asking Permission	90
Commonly Asked Questions About Attending to Relationships	91
What Is the Difference between Empathy and Reflective Listening?	91
How Do I Use Self-Disclosure Effectively to Empathize with Others?	91
How Do I Empathize without Getting Compassion Fatigue?	91
Routine Client Scenario	92
Challenging Client Scenario	92
Talk Through Technology – Types of Communication	92
Attend to Team Relationships	93
Routine Team Scenario	94
Challenging Team Scenario	94
Put the Relationship Skills into Practice	94
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	94
Exercise 5.1 Skill Spot – Relational Skills	94
Exercise 5.2 Self-Assessment	95
Exercise 5.3 Next Steps for Success	95
Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercises	95

Exercise 5.4 Empathy Challenge	95
Exercise 5.5 Find the Backstory	96
Take It Away	96
Answer Key	97
Exercise 5.1 Skill Spot – Relational Skills	97
References	97
6 Attending to Tasks	98
Introduction	98
Set the Scene	100
Attend to Client Tasks	101
Key Communication Skills for Attending to Tasks	101
Logical Sequence	101
Signpost	102
Internal Summary	104
Commonly Asked Questions About Attending to Tasks	106
How Do I Rein in Clients Who Go Off on Tangents?	106
Routine Client Scenario	106
Challenging Client Scenario	106
Talk Through Technology – Virtual Care	107
Attend to Team Tasks	108
Routine Team Scenario	110
Challenging Team Scenario	111
Put the Task Skills into Practice	111
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	111
Exercise 6.1 Skill Spot – Signposts and Internal Summaries	111
Exercise 6.2 Client Communication Plan	112
Exercise 6.3 Team Communication Plan	112
Exercise 6.4 Next Steps for Success	112
Take It Away	113
Answer Key	113
Exercise 6.1 Skill Spot – Signposts and Internal Summaries	113
References	113
7 Diagnostic and Treatment Planning	115
Introduction	115
Set the Scene	117
Plan with Clients	117
Key Communication Skills for Diagnostic and Treatment Planning	117
Easily Understood Language	117
Chunk-and-Check	118
Attend to the Process of Diagnostic and Treatment Planning	119
Foster Shared Decision-Making	120
Give a Lecture vs. Have a Conversation	121
Achieve Informed-Client Consent	122
Take a Structured, Stepwise Approach	122
Use the Value Matrix	130
Attend to the Content of Diagnostic and Treatment Planning	133

Meet as Experts	133
Tailor the Plan to Each Client and Patient	134
Enhance Client Health Literacy	134
Avoid Medical Jargon	136
Communicate Value	137
Manage Client Uncertainty	138
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Diagnostic and Treatment Planning	138
What Happens If the Client Cannot Afford to Provide Care for the Patient?	138
How Do I Simultaneously Present Myself as Both an Animal Healthcare Expert and a Partner?	139
Who on the Veterinary Team Discusses the Cost of a Diagnostic or Treatment Plan?	139
How Do I Find Time for a Complete Diagnostic or Treatment Planning Discussion?	139
How Do I Present the Treatment Options before I Have a Confirmed Diagnosis?	139
Routine Client Scenario	140
Challenging Client Scenario	140
Talk through Technology – Self-Informed Clients	141
Client Education Tools	143
Plan with the Team	143
Attend to the Process of Team Planning	143
Attend to the Content of Team Planning	144
Routine Team Scenario	144
Challenging Team Scenario	145
Put the Planning Skills into Practice	145
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	145
Exercise 7.1 Rewording Medical Jargon	145
Exercise 7.2 Back Pocket, Check Questions to Ask Clients	146
Exercise 7.3 Skill Spot – Insert a Check	146
Exercise 7.4 Self-Assessment	146
Exercise 7.5 Next Steps for Success	147
Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercises	147
Exercise 7.6 Role-play	147
Exercise 7.7 Practice Using the Value Matrix with a Clinical Case Scenario	149
Exercise 7.8 Practice Using the Value Matrix with a Practice- or Team-Based Scenario	149
Take It Away	150
Answer Key	150
Exercise 7.1 Rewording Medical Jargon	150
Exercise 7.2 Back Pocket, Check Questions to Ask Clients	150
Exercise 7.3 Skill Spot – Insert a Check	151
References	151
8 Closing-the-Interaction	155
Introduction	155
Set the Scene	157
Closing Client Interactions	158

Key Communication Skills for Closing-the-Interaction	158
End Summary	158
Contracts for Next Steps	158
Final Check	159
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Closing-the-Interaction	159
Do I Need to Summarize Yet Again at the Closing? It seems Redundant.	159
How Do I Handle an “Oh, By the Way” Moment When It Arises?	159
Routine Client Scenario	160
Challenging Client Scenario	160
Talk Through Technology – Emails and Texts Following an Interaction	161
Closing Team Interactions	161
Routine Team Scenario	162
Challenging Team Scenario	162
Put the Closing Skills into Practice	163
Do-It-Yourself Exercises	163
Exercise 8.1 Skill Spot – The Closing	163
Exercise 8.2 Self-Assessment	163
Exercise 8.3 Next Steps for Success	163
Take It Away	164
Answer Key	164
Exercise 8.1 Skill Spot – The Closing	164
References	164
9 Communication Coaching	165
Introduction	165
Set the Scene	168
Attend to the Process of Communication Coaching	168
Communication Styles	169
Expert	169
Partner	169
Coach Communication	170
Provide Specific, Descriptive, Balanced, and Relevant Feedback	170
Receive Feedback with an Open Mind	172
Learn to Be a Communication Coach	173
Take into Account Various Coaching Contexts	173
Use Role-Play to Provide Coaching Opportunities	175
Prepare the Team for Coaching	175
Ascribe to Coaching Philosophies	176
Implement a Coaching Model	177
Offer Opportunities to Practice	181
Attend to the Content of Communication Coaching	182
View Colleagues as Experts	182
Elicit Colleague’s Perspective	183
Commonly Asked Questions Related to Communication Coaching	183
What If My Colleague Becomes Defensive?	183
What If My Colleague Cries?	184
Colleague Scenario	185
Team Scenario	186

- Talk Through Technology – Video-Recording 187
- Put the Coaching Skills into Practice 189
 - Do-It-Yourself Exercises 189
 - Exercise 9.1 Skill Spot-Communication Styles 189
 - Exercise 9.2 Self-Assessment 189
 - Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercise 190
 - Exercise 9.3 Reflect, Share, and Discuss Your Preferred Coaching Experience 190
- Take It Away 190
- Answer Key 191
 - Exercise 9.1 Skill Spot-Communication Styles 191
- References 191

10 Transferring the Skills to Various Contexts 193

- Introduction 193
- Scenarios 194
- Client Conversations 194
 - Tackle Tough Topics 194
 - Support Grief and Address Anger 196
 - Deliver Bad News 197
 - Facilitate Euthanasia Discussions 199
 - Disclose Medical Errors 201
 - Discuss Finances 203
- Team Conversations 205
 - Promote Inclusivity 205
 - Elicit Colleague’s Perspective 206
 - Set Boundaries 208
 - Motivate Colleagues 209
 - Create a Toxic-Free Practice 210
 - Address Workplace Bullying 212
- Take It Away 213
- References 214

11 Now What? 216

- Twelve Recommendations 217
- Put the Communication Skills into Practice 218
 - Do-It-Yourself Exercise 218
 - Exercise 11.1 Challenging Conversations 218
 - Engage-the-Entire-Team Exercise 221
 - Exercise 11.2 Communication or Video-Review Rounds 221
- Take It Away 224
- References 224

Appendices – Tools to Support Coaching and Communication Skills Learning Sessions 225

- Appendix A: 20 Communication Skills 226**
- Appendix B: Coaching Process Card 229**
- Appendix C: Communication Skills Checklist 233**

- Index 235**

About the Authors

Neither of us knew when we first met in 1999 that two-and-a-half decades later, we would be writing a book together on veterinary communication. At the time of our first meeting, Jane Shaw was a graduate student enrolled in the Department of Population Medicine at the University of Guelph with a veterinary degree from Michigan State University, and Jason Coe was a third-year student veterinarian at the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC), University of Guelph. We met fortuitously one Saturday morning in OVC's Veterinary Teaching Hospital Wellness Clinic, a student-centered primary care service, where Jane was practicing, teaching, and supervising students, and Jason was volunteering to gain more clinical experience prior to graduation.

With a focus on clinical communication, we both completed doctorates in veterinary epidemiology under Cindy Adams, MSW, PhD, who implemented the first veterinary communication curriculum in North America at OVC. In addition, we spent time in clinical practice, which informs our teaching and research in veterinary communication. Jane spent 10 years in academic and private practice in companion animal medicine, whereas Jason's 9 years of clinical experience were rooted in mixed animal followed by food animal practice.

We also have decades of experience as dedicated educators, teaching students in two of the leading veterinary communication programs in North America. In these roles, we continue to develop skills-based, learner-centered clinical communication curricula, which received commendations from the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education for innovation. We are committed to student veterinarians' and, more broadly, veterinary professionals' success in practice by **equipping them with a toolbox of communication skills** to manage both routine and challenging client and team conversations. The result is reflected in positive alumni ratings of our programs and the career performance and testimonials of our graduates.

As leaders in the field, we often venture out of the classroom to speak nationally and internationally to veterinary professionals at conferences and continuing-education events. We participate in and offer intensive interactive communication workshops with strong reputations for **transforming the practice of veterinary medicine**. We coach veterinary professionals in their examination rooms as they communicate with their clients and care for their patients. Through these experiences, we are privileged to witness individuals and entire practice teams taking their communication skills to the next level. Veterinary professionals reap benefits in the form of increased practice performance, client satisfaction, client adherence, patient health, and career fulfillment.

In addition to teaching and coaching, a significant component of our professional identities is developing and conducting evidence-based research in veterinary communication. As trained epidemiologists, we implement research in the field, often video-recording client interactions in veterinary practices and interviewing key informants, including veterinary professionals and their

clients. In writing this book, we **translate our research findings into hands-on recommendations** to enhance interactions in veterinary practice. In all these endeavors, we maintain a pragmatic view where we strive to be practical, skills-focused, and outcome-based. In doing so, we hope to enhance uptake of new approaches, change habits, and maximize results.

In veterinary practice, much meaning stems from day-to-day conversations with veterinary team members and clients. **Veterinary professionals empowered with communication tools enjoy more satisfying interactions and relationships** and affirmation of their day-to-day work in veterinary medicine. And when discussions do go awry, as they will, veterinary professionals with the skills and capabilities to manage difficult conversations experience less stress and derive more fulfillment.

For 25 years, we took note of what we learned individually and together and packaged it up for you. This book offers proven methods that withstood the test of time in academic and clinical settings among diverse veterinary professionals. Now it's your turn. Are you curious to see where the rubber meets the road in your interactions? If so, throughout this book, we help you develop your communication toolbox to enhance your daily exchanges with clients, colleagues, and beyond.

How to Use This Book

We would like to begin by sharing our underlying intentions for developing this communication resource and by highlighting a number of unique aspects of the book. We strove for this book to be user-friendly, accessible, practical, and applicable to all members of the veterinary team. We hope the book is used as a communication skills operating manual; we expect the cover to become coffee-stained, sections to be highlighted and underlined throughout, and pages to be marked and dog-eared.

The book is organized into tasks of the **clinical appointment**, with chapters flowing from opening-the-interaction, information-gathering, and attending to relationships and tasks to diagnostic and treatment planning, and closing-the-interaction. In each chapter, we showcase key communication skills integral to achieving these tasks. We define the communication skill, demonstrate techniques, and provide examples. Over the course of the book, we introduce a **communication toolbox** including 20 communication skills.

We emphasize the importance of **effective communication with clients and colleagues**. In each chapter, we present routine and challenging scenarios in day-to-day practice, and we model how to use the communication skills in both caregiver and collegial interactions. How you communicate with your clients is the bread and butter of your business and establishes long-term client relationships and a strong client base. How you communicate with your colleagues defines the veterinary practice culture, which is integral to creating a healthy, functional workplace environment in which employees thrive.

At the end of each chapter, we offer **learning activities** to work through, individually or collaboratively, in a small group or with the entire practice team. Through these exercises, we outline a developmental curriculum to build a strong communication toolbox. The book provides ample opportunities to practice the communication skills through either a self-led or guided experiential learning process. The tasks progress from easier, structured, low-risk approaches (e.g. skill spotting exercises, guided reflections, and individual role-play) to more challenging, small-group, high-stakes methods (e.g. in-the-moment coaching or communication and video-review rounds). Over time, the focus shifts from personal communication skill development to coaching and mentoring colleagues.

One key takeaway is that the **communication toolbox is transferable** to all areas of veterinary practice, to any career path, and to one's own personal life. Although this book is situated in companion animal primary care, the communication tools are critical to success and fulfillment in both general and specialty practices, and in equine, livestock, avian, exotic, zoo, and wildlife medicine. They are equally important for working in laboratory medicine, governmental and non-governmental agencies, public health, regulatory medicine, and industry – not to mention supporting the inter- and intra-professional communication that is instrumental in the referral DVM-specialist relationship, as well as in developing partnerships with vendors, behaviorists, groomers, doggie daycare providers, breeders, and crematorium directors. Finally, these are life skills, and they work well with spouses, partners, children, other family members, and neighbors and at book clubs, on ballfields, or in volunteer organizations.

We take into consideration the **myriad of ways in which we communicate** with our clients and colleagues. Face-to-face interactions still predominate, followed by telephone and then electronic communication (e.g. email or text) or virtual care. Each method has its own purpose and special considerations and can be highly effective in getting a message across. Unfortunately, if used inappropriately, each modality can result in miscommunication and challenges.

Furthermore, we weave in aspects of technology that can enhance or detract from communication. As with any tool, technology has its time and place. It is critical to know when and how to use each type, from the telephone, whiteboards, and printed care instructions to treatment plans sent via email, or interactive video consultations. In the “Talk through Technology” section of each chapter, we outline best practices for **complementary use of technology**.

As leading researchers in veterinary communication, we also share **Research Spotlights** that highlight relevant findings from our veterinary communication studies. Two strong evidence-based books, one on medical communication (Silverman et al. 2013) and the other on veterinary communication (Adams and Kurtz 2017), provide a more thorough and extensive review of the broader clinical-communication literature. Our emphasis is on translating our research into practice – how to apply the findings to real-life scenarios that will inform and enhance client and colleague interactions, develop the veterinary practice, and further veterinary careers.

Here are our **12 recommendations** for how to get the most out of this book:

1. **Capitalize on strengths.** Be aware of your communication assets on the table. Know what they are and how they work. Then use this book to fine-tune, dust off, or sharpen communication skills that may be currently underutilized.
2. **Stretch outside your comfort zone.** Try on the communication skills, even if they do not “fit” at first. Start with learning the stem phrases, then implement the scripted examples, and, finally, improvise and own the skills. It may feel fake or artificial at first; however, with continued application and adaptation of the skills to fit individual styles, over time the skills will feel natural, authentic, and genuine.
3. **Be forgiving, and let go of perfection.** Practice makes better, not perfect. Communication competency has a high ceiling, like many other clinical skills – clinical reasoning, surgery, or interpreting test results. Strive to be a good communicator, know that mistakes will be made, and make a recovery when it does not go as liked. The resulting relationship is often stronger after repairing a mishap.
4. **Self-reflect, and be courageous.** Be fearless, vulnerable, and open to taking a good hard look at the current communication skills in your toolbox. Regrettably, our perceptions of our communication competence are far from accurate. So, self-reflect on client and colleague interactions, and be bold and request feedback from mentors and peers to identify blind spots.
5. **Engage with this book.** Each chapter includes a traditional knowledge component to foster awareness and understanding of communication concepts. And an interactive section with learning exercises that provide opportunities to practice the skills, identify strengths and challenges, and set learning goals for continued development.
6. **Keep a journal, and document progress.** Before embarking, start a communication journal to capture insights, lessons learned, and communication goals and to mark growth, progress, and milestones. Look back in the pages to see the headway made and be accountable for achieving objectives.
7. **Apply the skills with clients and colleagues.** Use these communication skills to transform day-to-day client interactions, address challenging conversations, and lend a compassionate ear to clients. Do the very same thing with colleagues to create a veterinary team culture characterized by strong communication, morale, teamwork, and retention. Enhance self-esteem and confidence. Enjoy going to work. And make a difference in the lives of colleagues, clients, and patients.
8. **Read this book multiple times with different intents.** For example, on the first read, work on building your communication skills toolbox. Then, the second time, lead your team or veterinary practice through the exercises, developing their skills and coaching techniques. On the

third read, mentor others on the practice team while they coach their colleagues. The goal is to create a critical mass of individuals to build, lead, and sustain a communicative and collaborative team culture.

9. **Teach the team the communication skills.** It takes a village in a veterinary practice to serve clients and care for patients. Set colleagues up for success by equipping them with the communication skills they need to excel in their positions. Set the practice up for success by expanding the team of effective communicators and delegating appropriate conversations (e.g. agenda-setting, preventive care education, follow-up progress calls, or sharing diagnostic test results).
10. **Be creative in involving the team.** Depending on the personality, character, and culture of the team, make it fun by designing communication role-plays, *Jeopardy*, or “choose your own adventure.” Or, as the team implements skills, set goals, assess metrics, and monitor trends, such as changes in appointment efficiency, veterinarian average client transaction, or client reviews. Ask teammates who model exemplary communication skills to mentor and coach colleagues.
11. **Get a leg up or a new lease on practice.** For new employees or early-career veterinary graduates, the communication skills ease the professional transition. Entering with a well-equipped communication toolbox promotes victories and reduces failures associated with trial and error. For late-career veterinary professionals, these communication skills reignite and reinvigorate “the why” – to enjoy meaningful interactions with colleagues and clients and to care for patients.
12. **Take the communication skills home.** Use these communication skills when interacting with clients, colleagues, family members, neighbors, and friends, and see how they change life in and outside the veterinary practice. Reap the rewards in client and collegial interactions, as well as in family and social life, leading to more fulfilling conversations and deeper connections.

Suggested Timeline

To set realistic expectations and maintain momentum, we suggest the following timeline as guidance for how long it will take to complete each chapter and the associated learning exercises individually or as a practice team:

1. Chapter 1 – Introduction – 1 week
2. Chapter 2 – Communication Styles – 3 weeks
3. Chapter 3 – Opening-the-Interaction – 2 weeks
4. Chapter 4 – Information-Gathering – 6 weeks
5. Chapter 5 – Attending to Relationships – 3 weeks
6. Chapter 6 – Attending to Tasks – 3 weeks
7. Chapter 7 – Diagnostic and Treatment Planning – 8 weeks
8. Chapter 8 – Closing-the-interaction – 2 weeks
9. Chapter 9 – Communication Coaching – 6 weeks
10. Chapter 10 – Transferring the Skills to Various Contexts – 2 weeks
11. Chapter 11 – Now What? – 2 weeks

Total: 38 Weeks – Approximately 9 months

References

- Adams, C.L. and Kurtz, S. (2017). *Skills for Communicating in Veterinary Medicine*. Parsippany, NJ. Dewpoint Publishing.
- Silverman, J., Kurtz, S., and Draper, J. (2013). *Skills for Communicating with Patients*. London, England. CRC Press.

Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of decades of trials and tribulations and collaborations and contributions. First, we thank our mentors in veterinary medicine, Dr. Cindy Adams and Dr. Brenda Bonnett, and colleagues in human medicine Dr. Suzanne Kurtz and Dr. Debra Roter; they are pioneers in their fields and laid a rigorous foundation. Second, we are grateful to all the student veterinarians, graduate students, simulated clients, communication coaches, coordinators, and co-instructors we worked with through the years. They taught us more than we taught them and left lasting fingerprints on our knowledge and programs. Third, we recognize the support and advocacy provided by our colleges, deans, associate deans, and department heads, who envisioned the future, invested, and committed to equipping veterinarians with communication skills for success. Finally, many veterinary clinics opened their doors, hearts, and minds to participate in live learning laboratories to put our teachings into practice.

Specifically, we appreciate individual contributions to this book. We are indebted to Dr. Susan Ring deRosset, who served as our editor. Her combined veterinary and literary background provided instrumental suggestions that shaped this book. Courtney Hensel contributed to formatting and layout; Maddi Funk created the figures; Catherine Groves assisted with final edits; Dr. Naomi Nishi who provided counsel on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion; and Dr. Tracey Jensen, Dr. Elizabeth Alvarez, and Lorna Wyllsun reviewed early versions of chapters and provided feedback.

And far from last, our families who nurtured us in becoming and supported us as veterinarians and academicians; it would not have been possible without their unconditional love and care. The support of friends and social outings and adventures provided respite and fueled creativity. Our own companion animals provided unconditional love, poignant life lessons, and lived meaning of the human-animal bond.

1

Introduction

Abstract

In this chapter, we lay the groundwork for why it is worth investing in developing a strong communication toolbox consisting of 20 communication skills with proven success. We begin with recognizing that communication skill-building takes practice and time. Then we argue that communication is both a science and an art. The science of communication entails using the skills with purpose and intention. The art of communication requires using the skills adeptly not only in straightforward interactions but also in nuanced, complex, challenging, and high-stakes situations with diverse individuals. We acknowledge the stressful context of a busy veterinary practice and the daily challenge of attending to tasks (i.e. getting work done) and relationships (i.e. building trust with clients and colleagues). Being successful and striving for the right balance requires establishing long-term relationships with clients and colleagues. And we emphasize that team communication makes the difference between a healthy practice environment and a dysfunctional one. We conclude that embracing both roles – as animal health-care experts as well as partners to our clients and colleagues – promotes positive outcomes for the veterinary practice and our colleagues, clients, patients, and, importantly, ourselves.

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (True or False) See the end of the chapter for the answer key.

1. Effective communication can be learned through practice, feedback, and coaching.
2. Effective communication is critical to achieving significant outcomes for the veterinary practice; with colleagues, clients, and patients; and self.
3. Effective communication is integral to maintaining and sustaining a healthy practice culture and interprofessional relationships.
4. Effective communication takes more time.

Communication Matters

Communication is the most common clinical procedure performed daily in veterinary practice and prevails in every client and colleague interaction. For client service coordinators specifically, their entire day is spent communicating with others. A veterinary professional involved in 20 appointments per day will engage in more than 200,000 client interactions over a 40-year career

(Shaw et al. 2012). This does not account for the too-numerous-to-count colleague-to-colleague conversations. The final sum is an astounding number of exchanges.

Everyone on the veterinary team plays a vital communication role. It takes a village to run a veterinary practice, care for people and their animals, and establish a functional practice team culture. Every conversation with clients and between colleagues impacts outcomes for the veterinary practice, and the resulting social dynamic affects veterinary practice team members, the clients served, and the patients cared for. Communication makes or breaks practice financial metrics, teamwork and morale, client satisfaction and adherence, and patient health. The return on developing veterinary team communication competence is multifold and an investment in patient care, client service, and team coordination. It literally pays dividends to invest in communication skills.

Equip Your Communication Toolbox

This book highlights 20 communication skills with proven success in navigating diverse clinical scenarios (Sidebar 1.1) (Appendix A). Taking a skills-based approach means we do not need a specific strategy for each routine or difficult conversation. Instead, we carry our toolbox to each scenario and pick the appropriate tools to accomplish the task. As a result, we are ready, agile, and adaptable to meet all day to day communication circumstances that present in veterinary practice.

Sidebar 1.1 Skills in the Communication Toolbox

- Preparation
- Introduction
- Agenda-setting
- Open-ended inquiry
- Closed-ended inquiry
- Pause
- Minimal encouragers
- Reflective listening
- Nonverbal behaviors
- Empathy
- Partnership
- Asking permission
- Logical sequence
- Signpost
- Internal summary
- Easily understood language
- Chunk-and-check
- End summary
- Contracts for next steps
- Final check

We rely on our communication toolbox to guide most routine client interactions, from preventive care topics, such as vaccinations, weight management, and dental hygiene, to complex end-of-life conversations, medical errors, and financial discussions. Equally important, bring our tools to collegial conversations; use them when interviewing potential employees, hosting team

meetings, and conducting performance reviews. These skills are indispensable and an important part of every veterinary professional's development. Although all communication skills are highly pertinent and critical for success (Adams and Kurtz 2017; Silverman et al. 2013), effective communication requires a lifetime of mastery. So, as a starting point, we chose 20 foundational communication skills to stock the toolbox: once acquired, expand upon them.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Just like learning any clinical skill, such as navigating new practice management software, performing a surgical procedure, or interpreting radiographs, communication skill-building takes practice and time. We obtain the baseline knowledge through reading, attending a lecture, or completing an online module. Where the rubber meets the road is testing our competency in everyday practice. Once we get the underlying principles and concepts under our belt, the best way to learn communication skills is to “just do it.” This allows us to apply our understanding of effective communication and form good habits through practice and experience.

The learning ladder (Figure 1.1) depicts four stages of learning new communication skills, from raising awareness to reaching mastery (DePhillips et al. 1960, Wackman et al. 1976). We do not know what we do not know. The first step is obtaining knowledge to raise awareness, answering for ourselves such questions as “What is the communication skill?”, “What does it sound like?”, and “When, why, and how might I use it?”

Awareness (we know what we do not know) is followed by a period of awkwardness as we put the new skill into practice. This stage is messy, feels inept, and demands courage, patience, perseverance, and a big, heaping dose of self-acceptance until we are consciously skilled. Like learning anything new, communicating differently feels strange and sounds unnatural; the words do not always come out right at first. This necessitates a shift in mindset away from expecting perfection to embracing the awkward.

With more feedback, practice, and reflection, communication skills fall into place. Initially, using a communication skill requires a great deal of mental effort, concentration, and purposeful intent, like when we learn to ride a horse, pedal a bike, drive a car, or ski. Eventually, proficiency is achieved, competence becomes unconsciously integrated, and the skills are automatic and habitual.

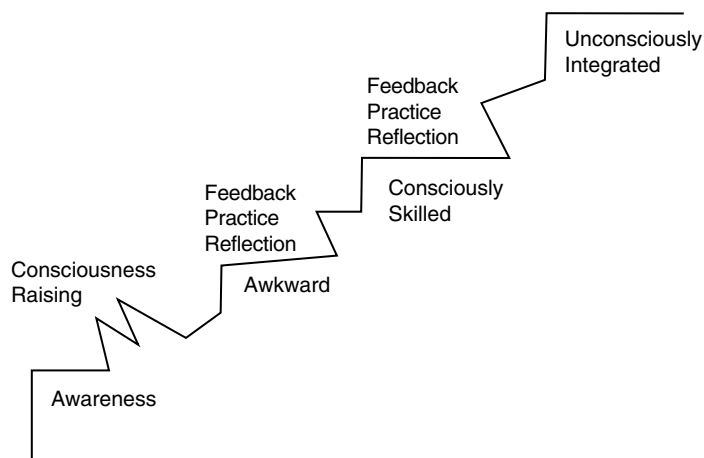


Figure 1.1 Learning ladder. Adapted from Wackman, Miller, and Nunnally, (1976) *Student Workbook: Increasing Awareness and Communication Skills*-with permission from Interpersonal Communication Programs, LLC, Evergreen, CO. USA.

This learning process demands being forgiving of ourselves, letting go, and being all right with not getting it right the first time around. Dr. Tracy Jensen, a primary-care veterinarian, consultant, and communication coach at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says, “If you are not falling, you are not skiing hard enough.” If we are not stretching ourselves outside our comfort zone, we are not learning. So, lean into the challenge of learning these communication skills and welcome the initial clumsiness that is often on the path to competence.

Appreciate Communication is An Art and a Science

Communication is about establishing trust **and** achieving outcomes. The field of medical communication was founded in 1968 (Korsch et al. 1968) and veterinary communication in 1988 (Antelyes 1988), and research touting the benefits of effective communication in healthcare is robust and persuasive. Thousands of studies in medical communication, including randomized clinical trials (Silverman et al. 2013), and hundreds of studies in veterinary communication (Adams and Kurtz 2017) inform best practices. The communication toolbox provided in this book is fortified by a database of literature and evidence-based recommendations.

You might recall a role model sharing, “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it”; truthfully, it is both. Communication content is **what** we say (i.e. the science), and it comprises the biomedical background and experience required for effective information-gathering and client education. The communication process is **how** we say it (i.e. the art), or how we come across when we ask questions, provide explanations, or support decisions. For the message (the content) to be received, it comes down to our delivery (the process), which requires paying close attention to the communication skills used.

The science of communication entails using the skills with purpose and intention. Many of us did not receive formal training in communication skills and were schooled painfully by trial and error. With knowledge of communication skills and their impact on clinical outcomes – like choosing instruments from a surgical pack – we select the best communication tool or tools at the appropriate time to target and achieve our sought-after outcomes.

The art of communication reflects our ability to apply the skills adeptly not only in straightforward interactions but also in nuanced, complex, challenging, and high-stakes situations with diverse individuals. One size does not fit all. An indication of communication mastery is the ability to be fully present in the moment, quickly assess the scenario, and implement our communication skills accordingly. A high level of proficiency is also demonstrated in keen self-awareness, noticing when an interaction goes off the rails, and the ability to make a prompt repair and recovery.

Build, Maintain, and Sustain Relationships

A common retort we receive during communication workshops is “I’m not a counselor.” So, let’s get this straight up front: we are not asking, expecting, or training you to be or become a therapist, as you, a veterinary professional, are not equipped or licensed to provide psychological counseling. However, we are strong proponents of building relationships and supporting clients and colleagues for success in veterinary practice. Dr. Matthew Johnston, an avian, exotic, and zoo veterinarian and communication coach at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says, “If you use effective communication, you won’t need to be a counselor.”

Veterinary medicine was established in the eighteenth century with a focus on animal healthcare. With the cultural shift in our views and uses of animals and the transformation of the human-animal

bond, it is now a “people profession.” Veterinary medicine serves animals **and** the people who care for them. The daily challenge in a busy practice is balancing attending to tasks and relationships. It entails embracing both roles – as animal healthcare expert as well as partners to our clients and colleagues.

The desire to help our patients using the scientific mind leads us naturally down a path of “find it, fix it.” There’s a downside, however, to this apparent efficiency. We miss things. Make assumptions. Make a mess of an interaction, even misdiagnose. When drilling clients, like a detective interrogating their suspect, we drive our agenda forward and neglect to invite client contributions. With insufficient information-gathering and understanding, we prescribe treatments that a client cannot administer, afford, or get on board with. In our rush to finish the appointment on time, we unintentionally run over the animal’s advocate. The result is a time-consuming snarl to untangle, and efficiency goes out the door.

Retired emergency veterinarian and Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences communication instructor, Dr. Sam Romano says, “Go slow to go fast.” This means listening more, being curious, and acknowledging client perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. Doing so pays off with efficiencies later in the interaction. We are often fearful of opening a can of worms and not knowing what to do with them, or how to respond to, what is shared. And we are always afraid of running behind. It seems paradoxical, but slowing down now with a client and showing patience and the courage to listen reaps rewards and time savings in the end. Take the time to be present. Empathize and collaborate to build trust, buy-in, and commitment – these are the critical ingredients for client adherence, satisfaction, and long-term client retention.

Enhance Clinical Outcomes

Communication impacts clinical outcomes at every level – for the veterinary practice; our colleagues, clients, and patients; and, importantly, ourselves (Sidebar 1.2). From generating a sustainable client base to retaining talented team members to ensuring that our patients receive the care they need, it all comes down to communication. Be purposeful and intentional, focusing on communicating, to achieve desired outcomes with colleagues, clients, and patients.

Sidebar 1.2 Clinical Outcomes of Effective Communication

Veterinary Practice

- Enhance efficiency
- Reduce malpractice claims
- Improve practice performance

Veterinary Team

- Foster satisfaction

Clients

- Increase recall and understanding
- Promote adherence
- Cultivate satisfaction

Patients

- Boost health