

Communication in the veterinary practice

Frank O Sullivan MVB MSc (applied food science) MRCVS; and Cillian O Sullivan BA MSc organisational psychology graduate, discuss communication skills and the vets changing role in society

The veterinary profession is evolving with time and this is best-illustrated by the changing manner of communication. Good communication skills are of value in all aspects of veterinary medicine. The benefits from enhanced communication skills lead to more effective consultations for clients, veterinarians and patients.

The following concepts discussed provide an understanding of the background psychology in good communication science, especially when considering how best to change people's behaviour.

Historically, the veterinary surgeon may have adopted a top-down method of communication emphasising the vet's hierarchy in the transfer of information, the "do what I tell you" approach. The vet was primarily a source of sound-technical information. The ability to regurgitate veterinary knowledge is no longer enough to be credible in modern-day veterinary practice. The vet of the future is evolving, not only with competence in clinical skills, but also the vet needs to be a capable person with commercial and socially responsible ambitions and values.

They need to have excellent communication skills. Therefore, the key contemporary communication dynamic revolves around the question, "what can we do together to find the best solution for your animal (or herd)?" Today's clients (both pets and farmed animals) wish to be closely involved in shared decision making. Relationships are now characterised by collaboration and partnership. These owners already have a significant knowledge, perhaps with multiple advisers to the farm. In addition, a pet owner may have researched the internet both before and after veterinary consultation. The vet therefore, has become an information clarifier where all information including the history is gathered and used to prepare a management or treatment plan for the owner and their animal(s).

COMMUNICATION FOR THE VETERINARY UNDERGRADUATE AND NEW GRADUATE

Vertical integration of communication skills in the veterinary undergraduate programme allows for repeated exposure and practice by the students and with scaffolding, building of their skills as they encounter more complex situations. The deliberate integration into many (clinical and non-clinical) teaching units means that communication skills is considered integral to practising all aspects of veterinary medicine – not just a 'soft skill' to be taught as an adjunct to 'real medicine'. An additional benefit is that it becomes easier to work in teams both as an undergraduate and in subsequent work environments.

FARM VET OF THE FUTURE

In Irish and European farms, agri-advisers and veterinary practitioners struggle to communicate their key messages around herd health and disease prevention including the use of vaccines. In preparation for herds of the future, the role of the traditional farm practitioner is changing rapidly to one of herd-health advocate. Extension advisers, including vets, find it difficult to translate best science and technical advice into action on the farm. Farmers do not always make decisions based on rational technical and economic considerations. Understanding and developing new communication skills towards positive-behaviour change on farms is necessary to make disease prevention a reality.

FEEDFORWARD

The concept of 'Feedforward' (positive and enabling) versus 'Feedback' (negative and critical) is very useful to the veterinary practitioner. Feedforward provides information about what one could do better in the future, often in contrast to what one has done poorly in the past. Feedforward focuses on creating positive emotions and attitudes. Feedforward prepares and enables the farmer for positive action. One of the key concepts in creating real and long lasting behaviour change is Feedforward. The manner in which one provides information to help improve the performance of the employee or client is vital. Consider an example from sports psychology; A performance coach is feeding back to his athlete, a diver competing in a major diving championship. He has just performed a poor second last dive and is trying to prepare himself for his final dive ensuring he gets a medal position. The coach has two options to prepare his athlete for his final dive.

Option one is the traditional approach offering feedback — "You caused the splash by failing to point your feet"; or option two, using a feedforward approach — "point your feet more on your next dive for a smoother entry into the water." The difference is much more important than it appears.

It is worthwhile to consider the psychological science behind feedback and contrast with feedforward. Feedback focuses attention on what individual has done wrong. It is heavily biased towards performance shortfalls, problems with the individual's actions and highlights unwanted behaviour. Often feedback creates emotions like fear, anxiety, stress and anger which mean we struggle to think clearly, co-ordinate well with others or take in new information. This isn't the best state of mind to have an employee or client in if you are trying to generate behaviour



change in them. Kluger and DeNisi carried out a meta-analysis of 131 studies and found that one-third of individuals who had received feedback experienced a deterioration in their work performance, so individuals were in fact worse off having feedback than not having any feedback at all. The veterinary practitioner often uses feedback (with its negative connotations) during farm visits. "There are three reasons that your calves are sick. Firstly you are using dirty buckets and utensils. Secondly the bedding is wet and the calves are overcrowded and thirdly the ventilation in your calf house is very poor. Sort these out and your calf health will improve!" says the vet. The farmer becomes defensive, stressed and his self esteem is threatened. A positive behaviour change is unlikely. Feedback can become an 'information dump' and tends to come from the top down, not always offering a plan for change. Feedforward, on the other hand focuses on the future, provides the client or farmer with hope and possibility rather than worry and impossibility. Feedforward is future focused providing future-oriented options or solutions which research shows evoke positive emotions and mood states. What happens in the brain during feedforward is that the prefrontal cortex, essentially the CEO of our brain, which is largely responsible for our thinking and problem solving

abilities is engaged. These positive feelings and mood states are linked to a number of positive outcomes in individuals such as increased creativity, greater willingness to co-operate and openness to receiving new information. The client is ready to plan with the vet and feedforward prompts the farmer to contribute to the solution.

AVOID THE RIGHTING REFLEX

Traditionally, agri-advisers and vets display a very strong, but often misplaced, 'righting reflex', attempting to provide immediate solutions and corrective actions to the farmer that never trigger any behaviour change on farm. Solving problems for others can take away autonomy, deplete another's sense of self efficacy and deprive an individual of lessons that can be learned through failures and successes alike. When a vet solves a problem for a client, the solution imposed onto the client tends to be more generic and less of a good fit. The client is less likely to follow through with the solution.

SETTING SMART GOALS

Once you have farmers on board you need to then set smart goals. Described as the most effective performance enhancement technique within behavioural sciences, goal

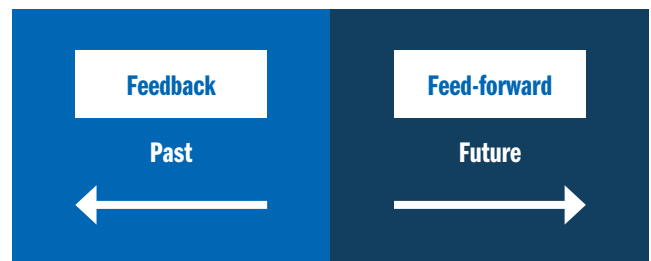


and will therefore will be more likely to result in positive behaviour change. This is why the righting reflex does not work – the farmer feels no sense of attachment to the goals as they have just been thrust upon him.

ESSENTIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. ASKING OPEN QUESTIONS

An open question is like an open door. Open-ended questions allow you to learn more about your client through conversation rather than interrogation. If you are trying to foster a client-centred approach one should avoid questions that can be answered with brief yes or no answers. Open questions invite clients to “tell their story” in their own words without leading them in a specific direction or pigeon-holing them with a question to which they can only answer yes or no, which can put people on the defensive and unwilling to take on new information. They focus attention in a particular direction. Open questions such as “How can I help you with ___? Help me understand ___? Tell me more about ___?”, help to gain a more accurate understanding of their experiences and elicits discussion of the reasons for making desired change. It also elicits more information, allowing one to make a better-informed decision about how to address the client’s problems. In addition, it helps to build a rapport with the client as you are showing interest in what they have to say.



setting helps to direct our energies towards a desirable outcome. Studies have shown goal-setting focuses our attention, increases self-confidence, provides incentives and grows commitment.

When setting goals if they are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time bound (SMART) studies have shown that they improve performance in both business and sport settings. The SMART acronym might be perceived to be outdated, however is based on sound psychological principles and a practical way for people to set goals. It is really important to agree the goals with the farmer and that these goals are achievable. This aspect requires a move away from the traditional hierarchical approach or righting reflex most practitioners within the veterinary medicine world engage in. It’s often the first reaction of a veterinary surgeon out of their desire to help the farmer to instantly outline what the farmer needs to do to fix their problems and improve the farms overall performance. However, research has shown us that if the individual, in this case the farmer, is not included in the development of the plan and the setting of the goals they are unlikely to put in the required effort to implement the goals set out. The farmer needs to be engaged and included in the generating of solutions to his on-farm issues. In doing so this will create a sense of ownership of the goals

Open-ended questions also act as a release valve for clients as they are able to voice their concerns and doubts openly. One is providing the client with some degree of control in the conversation so they don’t feel as if they are being interrogated. They also place the onus on the client, provoking them into thinking about the problems they are experiencing and explain them coherently. Through this, you are helping the client themselves to recognise the need for change which is more effective than simply being ordered by an external body that they need to change their behaviour.

2. AFFIRMATIONS

Affirming is about noticing and commenting on the positive aspects in a client. The use of affirmations identifies client strengths and acknowledges the clients’ efforts in their struggles.

Are affirmations the same as praise? Not exactly. To praise is to raise a roadblock as it subtly implies that the praiser (the vet) is the arbiter of praise or blame. “You tried hard this week”

“Look at this! You did a really good job of keeping those

fertility records.” The vet is ideally reading the body language response of the client. The skill is to discover how best to convey to the client your genuine appreciation and positive regard.

3. REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Reflective listening involves responding to a client by concisely restating the patient’s own statements. The purposes of reflective listening are to ensure that the veterinary practitioner understands what the client means. Therefore, on-farm if the vet reflects something the farmer did not mean, the farmer can then clarify. What reflective listening also does in the small animal consulting room is diminish the clients resistance by communicating that one understands and acknowledges the patient’s thoughts and feelings. This also builds rapport as the client feels understood and listened to. Reflective listening also encourages discussion of the patient’s reasons for wanting to make changes. This is done by selectively reflecting the statements the client makes in favour of change, thereby eliciting further statements in favour of positive change.

4. SUMMARISING

Summarising reinforces what has been said, and shows you have been listening carefully. Summaries are usually brief, three to four sentences and decisions need to be

made about what to include. Use summaries throughout the consultation or farm visit as well as at the conclusion. It is a good way to check that both the vet and the client are on the same page. The client hears a rundown of their concerns and has the opportunity to correct any errors in understanding. A summary can also be used to help shift direction in the session and move the conversation forward. “So, let me see have I got this right; the calf health issues on the farm are not only hurting you financially but the sick calves are causing a lot of stress...and you would like our vet practice to help fix these issues?” or “To summarise, you are concerned about the weight gain in Sheba, especially since she was neutered and you are concerned it’s going to affect her joints or her general health. Tell me if I have missed anything?”

Summarising helps to ensure that there is clear communication between the vet and client. Also, it can provide a stepping stone towards change and instigating a collaborative plan.

Veterinary communication skills are a cognitive skill that must be learned and is essential to becoming a successful veterinary practitioner in all fields. Communication skills is an important pillar in veterinary medicine alongside problem-solving abilities, physical procedural skills and science-based knowledge. The client, their animals and the vet all benefit from good communication.

Did you know bulk tank milk testing is a useful way to monitor worm levels in dairy cows?



Treatment of cows with high milk antibody levels for ostertagia leads to increased milk yields of a litre or more per day. Patent worm infections are rare in adult cows, making faecal testing less useful. Make money for your client, enroll them on a monthly milk testing programme at FarmLab. Sample kits available on request.



The Gateway to Animal Health
Elphin, Co. Roscommon www.farmlab.ie 071 96 30792