

Difficult conversations with colleagues and staff

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Among the many factors that contribute to the success or frustration of new graduates in a veterinary practice are communications with colleagues and clinical staff. What follows is an attempt to review some of the more common situations that are sure to be encountered and possible strategies for dealing with them. The emphasis here is on the new graduate at entry into practice, with a focus on avoiding the reasons for having difficult discussions in the first place.

First, however, a disclaimer; I am not an expert! What I do have to share are the bits of wisdom gathered from 40 years of experience in a mixed animal practice with my professional time devoted exclusively to bovine practice, both dairy and beef. It is said that wisdom comes from experience, and experience comes from making mistakes! I have plenty of both at this point and will attempt to share some insights to better communication with you.

The first question that we need to be asking ourselves is “Why are there difficult conversations with colleagues and staff in the first place?” Most difficulties arise from conflict, and conflict has many origins. In veterinary practice, most conflict arises from issues surrounding mentoring, money, time, equipment and procedures. Learning to articulate your concerns and interests effectively goes a long way to eliminating conflict.

In addition, treating others as you would like to be treated yourself pays big dividends.

Critical to avoiding conflict is your ability to be an effective communicator. You need to understand that people have many different ways and styles of learning, and being familiar with how to connect with your colleagues and clinic staff is essential. Understand that some people are visual and a picture is literally worth the thousand words. Some are literary by nature and want things provided to them in written form, while others are numerate and spreadsheets read for them like a book. Many others are auditory and want to hear about issues. Of course, everyone is some combination of all of those, but the better you understand and use the primary style of communication and learning best suited to your colleagues and staff, the more effective you will be at getting your point across and resolving conflict.

As a new graduate, it is important to spend time and considerable effort in making the best decision possible as to the practice that you will be entering. Careful discussion and agreement with your employer about things that are important to you will assume great significance in terms of your personal and professional

satisfaction and happiness. One of the most important concerns that you need to discuss with a new employer is that of mentoring. If you take a position in a practice where the owner throws you the keys to the practice vehicle and says, “I haven’t had a vacation in the past 10 years, see you in three weeks”, there is a very high probability that you will find yourself unhappy and frustrated in a hurry. On the other hand, having an understanding that you will be mentored in a confidence building and reassuring way during your introduction to practice will greatly ease your professional growing pains.

You should request that your performance be reviewed formally in dedicated scheduled meetings, and know in advance the time frames for review before you are employed. It may be up to you to keep it scheduled as it is human nature, especially when you are busy, to let things slide. In busy clinics, it is all too easy for the doctors to be as ships passing in the night, rarely seeing or talking to each other. Two areas of discussion should be included in each review with your employer. First, you need to be asking “How am I doing?”, and secondly, “How could I be doing better?” Be proactive in requesting timely reviews. You should never ASSUME that these things will be part of your initiation into a practice without first assuring it via specific conversation with your new employer.

It is said that people don’t know how much you know, but they do know how much you care! This is also true with your colleagues and the easiest way to demonstrate that you are both interested and want to improve is to discuss cases you have seen and perhaps been challenged with during the day. Asking a colleague how they might have approached or handled a case you have seen is a clear demonstration of interest in both personal improvement and in their opinion. Discussing what you saw and how you approached it will not cast doubt on your competence, rather it will serve as a demonstration of the value that you place on their opinion.

You should also feel welcome to consult your colleagues if you find yourself on a farm and at your patient’s side with no earthy idea of what the problem is. Know what your limitations are and when to call for assistance. In the ‘bad old days’, there was always the Merck’s Manual and a visit to your vehicle to get ‘something you forgot’ and a desperate search for an idea. Now there are Smartphones and instant messaging, so having a well understood network of colleagues and contemporaries to call for guidance or assistance is

readily available. Shame on you if you do not use these resources. If you don't believe this, just take a look at AABP-L and you will see the wisdom of 2300 or so minds responding to a plea for ideas and suggestions.

Money issues are a major area of new graduate (and owner) heartburn. When it comes to money, many new graduates are quite justifiably concerned with their wages. From the employer's perspective, the concern is: "When will the new graduate begin to actually turn a profit for the practice?" Given the typical new graduate indebtedness today, money concerns loom very large and often heavily influence which practice offer may be accepted. While this is a very legitimate concern, I believe that it should not be the sole focus of which practice you enter. Just as Rome wasn't built in a day, you will not be able to repay your student indebtedness in a year or two either. Taking time before you accept employment to know and understand just what your long term possibilities are for income and, perhaps, ownership in a practice are actually far more important than starting salary. It is costly to be moving every year or two and starting all over again with a new practice, better to get it right the first time. Re-hiring and training is also expensive for your employer and upsetting for clients. Clients love consistency in service and staff.

Today, virtually every new graduate has been saddled with a mountain of debt, some of their own making and some due to the tuition structure in the US today. While your concerns over money and indebtedness loom large, you need to understand that from your employer's perspective, your indebtedness is not their problem per se, and their likely focus is going to be on your ability to perform your job description and to work well with clients and other employees. That is not to say that they don't care about your financial situation, it is just that they have a business to run. Unlike institutions that may not have to generate a profit, a private practice eventually must turn a profit to be able to stay in business. Your contribution to that profit is indeed important, and will influence your employer's evaluation of your job performance and possibilities for advancement in the practice.

Practice owners are acutely aware of the productivity of new graduates and reasonably expect that over time you will both gain and enhance that productivity. It is important for you to understand that your financial well-being is a long term goal and that you are not going to be able to develop financial security and well-being in the first few years of practice. There is a great deal of variability on how practices compensate their employees. Some practices provide a flat salary/compensation package, regardless of a new graduate's productivity. Other practices compensate based on productivity and this is fine, so long as you are not given just the worst client calls that never generate much of any revenue. Making

certain that you understand how the "system" works in your particular circumstance is critical to avoiding conflict with regard to money. This means that in your interviews and practice selection decisions, you should have a clear understanding (in writing) of your salary and total compensation package, including terms of continuing education, health insurance, and professional licensure. In addition, you should have a clear understanding of what opportunities you will be afforded to share in practice profits, which usually are granted through ownership or production bonuses. Knowing this information up front will help to avoid one of the major areas of conflict that can occur in a practice setting.

I am not certain which of two potential areas of conflict should be ranked higher in veterinary practices, money or time. Clearly the two are inextricably intertwined and often go hand in hand. The more years I was in practice, the greater value that I assigned to *time*, and in particular, *time off*. It is a truism that your children only grow up once and for too many veterinarians, they did not realize that fact until the last child graduated and went off to college. Making certain that you and your spouse are satisfied with the hours you devote to your profession will be a lifelong struggle and balancing act. It is a fact of life that busy successful veterinarians devote a lot of time to their work. If you have not already taken a time management course, then you absolutely should complete one between now and the time you graduate. If you have a spouse, then they should take the course along with you.

We all have 24 hours in a day, but recognizing that reality and working it into a time budget is absolutely critical to your long term satisfaction and happiness, both personal and professional. In our 9 person mixed practice, having a schedule that accorded every doctor the same hours and schedule format probably did more to keep them and their spouses happy/satisfied than any single thing that we did. Veteran doctors and new graduates shared equally in hours worked and time off. That, coupled with colleagues who would readily trade nights, weekends and holidays made life a lot more livable, especially for the things that assumed importance in our personal and professional lives.

New graduates need to recognize that change in most practices often occurs at a glacial pace. Accept that as a reality and don't let it discourage you from working to initiate change for the better. My advice is that until an introductory period in your new practice has passed, and it will vary widely from individual to individual, that you not worry so much about "remodeling" the practice and its procedures, but spend your time learning the who's, what's where's and of course the why's of how your practice operates. This is NOT to imply that you should be complacent about identifying issues that are both a frustration and a bottleneck for you. Make

notes and carefully figure out possible solutions to your concerns. Just going to meetings and complaining does no one any real good. Venting one's spleen may have some immediate therapeutic value, but as my father always told me, "You never have to take back words you never said".

Everyone has problems, but the real trick to successful difficult conversations is to not only be able to accurately describe them, but also to have creative solutions to them. Just like in the practice world, when you see a client's body language and words that tell you that they *can't* or *won't* comply with your suggested protocols, then you need to give enough time and thought to alternatives that can resolve the problem to each sides satisfaction. If you have not given thought and planning to possible solution /resolution of problem in your practice, then it is surely unrealistic to expect your colleagues or office staff to have a satisfactory solution/resolution for you. If you have been in the habit of regular conversation with your colleagues and staff, in contrast to the proverbial ships passing in the night, then you will be far more comfortable with such conversations in the first place. The idea is to approach these difficult topics with a commitment to calm and adult discussion, with suggested end points in mind. Confrontation and yelling do not provide a sound format for satisfactory outcomes. As a new graduate, it is all too easy to want and expect everything to change at once. Human nature simply doesn't work that way.

You cannot be expected to be a successful contributor to your practice if you do not have both the training and the tools to be proficient in your work. This often means that you must develop skills and techniques that were not a major part of your formal veterinary education. Dr. Ken Nordlund, one of the sages of our profession, set a goal of learning and developing on new professional skill per year. You need to recognize that one veterinarian cannot be all things to all people, but within a practice, each doctor can learn specialty skills in areas in which they have aptitudes and interests, so that everyone brings something to the table for the clientele that is above the ordinary. Approaching colleagues about training and tools (i.e. continuing education, computers, software, testing equipment, etc.) is a tedious and often difficult process. You can expect skepticism regarding both the costs and paybacks of such endeavors. Coming to such conversations with well prepared and thought out proposals greatly increases the chances of a successful conversation. A note of caution, it is generally best to provide a proposal and its rationale and then leave it for thought and action after some reasonable interlude that is agreed on by both parties.

This same caveat applies to the new graduate that struggles with a practice setting where he/she has been told that each and every procedure and practice is done

just one way, even if the graduate has direct knowledge of better and more efficient ways of doing things. Wait until you have been around long enough to understand how to most effectively communicate with your colleagues before you start making waves. Gain confidence in your own competence first, and then work effectively to show how and why your *'better way'* is actually *'better'*. The potential for conflict can be greatly reduced through effective communication.

The new graduate needs to remember that the veterinary team is made up of more than just the professional veterinarians who will be your practice colleagues. The team also includes support staff of veterinary technicians, office manager and receptionist. Recognize that many clinic staff employees have long experience and employment at the clinic. In all probability they know a lot more than you do at this stage in your career, and it is wise to lend a good ear to what they have to tell you. They can be your best friend or your worst enemy depending on how you treat them. They are not your personal servants. There are two words that should begin and end every conversation you have with staff and the best part is they cost you nothing to speak them: Please and Thank You. Inevitably there will be scheduling conflicts, missed calls, lost lab results, and other miscommunications with staff. Just as with your professional colleagues, if you are having problems or frustrations with clinic staffers, a measured and private conversation, carried out in a calm and reasoned voice, has far greater chance for a successful resolution than yelling and threats. Again, it all boils down to treating your clinic staff as you yourself would like to be treated. It is both as simple and as complicated as all of that.

Your professional future is virtually in your own hands, and what you do with it is almost entirely up to you. Your skills at communicating with colleagues and staff are equally important as your skills in performing routine veterinary procedures. There will be days when you will be handed lemons and you will have to figure out how to make them into lemonade. Those are the days that make the easy ones all the more appreciated and savored. You are entering a wonderful and dynamic profession with an ever changing event horizon, so it is virtually impossible to find it dull or static. It is up to you to keep it from becoming humdrum. This is accomplished through a lifetime of continuing education and networking with colleagues that continually challenge you to do more and to do it better.