

Communications and cultural awareness

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Abstract

Disproportionate to the amount of formal training in communications and cultural awareness that students receive through the standard veterinary education curriculum, a large part of a bovine practitioner's time is spent communicating with clients, and often times the intricacies of cultural differences must be navigated through this process. The objective of this article and the associated presentation is to highlight specific examples of some of the cultural differences that are likely to be encountered, and practical approaches to handling these differences. Approaches to effective communication on small- and large-scale bovine operations will also be discussed.

Key words: veterinary, culture, communications

Résumé

Disproportionnée par rapport à la quantité de la formation formelle dans les communications et la sensibilisation culturelle que les étudiants reçoivent par le curriculum de l'enseignement vétérinaire, une grande partie d'un praticien de l'heure, il est passé de la communication avec les clients, et souvent la complexité des différences culturelles doit être navigué dans ce processus. L'objectif de cet article et la présentation associée est de mettre en évidence des exemples spécifiques de certaines des différences culturelles qui sont susceptibles d'être.

Communication

Effective communication with bovine clients requires a distinctly different set of tactics and skills when compared to communicating with non-agriculture clientele. Three pillars for effectively communicating veterinary information with production agriculture clientele include the following: 1) be prepared for communicating with all levels within the operation's hierarchy; 2) avoid ambiguity relative to expectations and execution; and 3) be flexible and adaptable to client's communication media preference.

The majority of large beef or dairy operations have multiple levels of hierarchy, which often includes (but is not limited to) owners, operations managers, labor managers, and laborers. The type, style, and content of communications with each level must be different, and adapted on a case-by-case basis. Communication with owners and operations managers will often consist of complex data and scientific

explanations with detailed economic analyses, all of which are required to make high-level decisions. On the opposite end of the spectrum, when communicating with labor managers and laborers, lay person explanations are necessary and hands-on demonstrations will often be required. In order to maintain credibility among the latter audience(s), it is imperative to remain proficient in day-to-day tasks that occur on each operation to which services are provided.

Whether performing on-site field service work or preparing protocols, reports, or recommendations, no ambiguity should exist in either the client or the veterinarian's expectations for the content and timeline associated with the aforementioned deliverables. As dairy and beef veterinarians, we most often find ourselves in a service-based business arrangement. In this type of an arrangement, the client's needs, wants, and desires must be satisfied, and ambiguity relative to the service they are receiving should not exist. Over communicating is one of the best approaches to circumventing this ambiguity, and should commence upon first contact with potential and current clients.

With the transition of agricultural entities from one generation to the next, we are allowed the opportunity to work with clients that differ widely in not only age, but also in their acceptance of technology. Each individual client and affiliated personnel have individual preferences relative to a preferred communication media. Every effective communicator is equipped with the ability to utilize and quickly adapt to the various method of communication, which include, but are not limited to: face-to-face, telephone, text message, email, and screen sharing.

Addressing Cultural Differences

As operations consolidate and grow in animal numbers, livestock producers become more dependent on hired labor and might expect the herd veterinarian to engage in educational opportunities with employees responsible for animal care. Often the labor force on livestock operations is characterized by different ethnicities, spoken languages, levels of formal training, and degree of acculturation. A multicultural labor force represents a challenge that is rarely addressed in the veterinary education curriculum or in undergraduate science-focused programs.

It is important to note that the cultural differences that may hinder communication go beyond spoken language and include, just to name a few, gender roles, sense of collectivism, degree of non-verbal communication, and power distance. As bovine practitioners, we must be aware of these cultural

differences and tailor engagement opportunities on the livestock operation (e.g., standard operating procedure design and implementation, team meetings, training sessions) to the needs of the audience.

Although awareness of cultural differences might allow us to more successfully communicate with a diverse labor force, it is critical to emphasize the common goals that all involved with a dairy or beef operation share: healthy and productive animals, healthy and productive people and sustainable livestock operations. If we are all to work as a team to reach common goals, we must remember to engage animal caretakers in the process of planning, implementation, and evaluation of health management protocols. This means that employees must understand the context and the “why” of their daily tasks and have the ability to provide feedback. By actively listening to employees’ experiences, viewpoints and concerns, we convey the message that their ideas are valuable and that they are integral to animal health and productivity. Active listening will also allow veterinarians to identify knowledge deficits to address with caretakers. Keeping in mind that animal husbandry experience varies greatly among workers of livestock operations, bovine veterinarians must not assume some level of basic knowledge. Helping workers understand basic concepts related to animal health and behavior can prove extremely beneficial, especially if animal caretakers are to be involved in the decision making process.

Language barriers can make engagement and training of care takers a difficult task. A variety of resources are currently available and in development to equip veterinarians with necessary Spanish language skills to deal with some communication challenges. In addition, veterinarians could employ the help of interpreters and translators, but must use these services wisely. When only one individual in the livestock operation serves as interpreter, they could choose to communicate ideas in ways that benefit only some members

of the team, or they could simply fail to accurately translate the meaning of a conversation. Ideally, several members of the team are bilingual and can help to bridge language gaps and ensure that all involved are represented accurately and benefit from pertinent communications.

Discussion / Top 10 Practical Tips

1. VXi BlueParrott B450-XT noise canceling Bluetooth headset. Buy one today!
2. Acquire and maintain a very strong comfort level with day-to-day tasks to maintain your credibility with the personnel responsible for those tasks.
3. Acquire, maintain, and stay current on commodity prices that directly affect the profitability of clients operation.
4. Reply to client emails, text messages, or missed phone calls within the same day, and target less than 2 hours.
5. Practice, practice, practice talking and listening. Initiate conversation at every opportunity. The more awkward the scenario, the greater the potential for expanding your skill set.
6. Actively listen and engage in small talk- people will perceive you as caring and approachable and you will benefit from understanding the context and details of a problem.
7. Don't forget the basics- don't assume others understand animal physiology, behavior and proper handling.
8. Always be able to explain why and provide context. Make information relevant.
9. Engage caretakers by making them part of the planning, design and implementation, and by following up with constructive and timely feedback.
10. Choose interpreters carefully. Don't give all the power to one individual.