

# Why is change so hard? Communication as a tool for optimizing producer adherence to veterinary recommendations

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## Abstract

Awareness of the importance of communication in veterinary medicine has been heightened in the last 2 decades. Formal communication instruction is now a core requirement for all AVMA-accredited Colleges of Veterinary Medicine. The profession as a whole is realizing the importance of communication as it relates to business success, professional satisfaction, and patient outcomes. Clinicians, clients, and patients benefit from the use of evidence-based clinical communication skills; assuring accurate, efficient, and effective transfer of information. While the initial efforts for communication in veterinary medicine seemed to focus on companion animal practice, few would dispute that communication is critical for production animal veterinarians. The complexity of the contexts in which production animal veterinarians work to effect change requires even greater understanding of how people make decisions and how to influence those decisions effectively. Veterinarians are encouraged to be curious: Take the time to understand your clients and stakeholders; what extrinsic and intrinsic motivators are present? How does their organization run and why is it run that way? To ensure accurate understanding, consider demonstrating an understanding of the client through summarizing and empathy. Once there is clear understanding that has been communicated, only then can the veterinarian begin to make recommendations.

**Key words:** client adherence, veterinary communication

## Résumé

Depuis les deux dernières décennies, l'importance de la communication en médecine vétérinaire est de plus en plus reconnue. Une formation en communication officielle est maintenant une exigence fondamentale dans toutes les facultés de médecine vétérinaire accréditées par l'AVMA. La profession dans son ensemble réalise l'importance de la communication car cette dernière est reliée au succès d'affaires, à la satisfaction personnelle et aux résultats pour les patients. L'aptitude à bien communiquer les résultats cliniques de la médecine factuelle bénéficie les cliniciens, les clients et les patients. Ceci assure un transfert d'information juste, efficace et performant. Initialement, la communication en médecine

vétérinaire semblait surtout viser les pratiques de petits animaux mais il y a peu de doute que la communication est aussi essentielle pour les vétérinaires en production animale. Les vétérinaires en production animale opèrent dans plusieurs contextes souvent complexes pour faire avancer les choses et cela nécessite une plus grande compréhension de la prise de décision par les individus et jusqu'à quel point il est possible d'influencer ces décisions efficacement. On encourage les vétérinaires à être curieux : Prenez le temps de comprendre vos clients et les intervenants, quels sont les incitatifs internes et externes en jeu? Comment l'organisation est-elle gérée et pourquoi est-elle gérée de cette façon? Pour s'assurer d'une juste compréhension, on peut essayer de démontrer au client qu'on le comprend bien en résumant les choses et en montrant de l'empathie. Lorsqu'une bonne connaissance est établie, le vétérinaire devient maintenant en mesure de faire des recommandations.

## Introduction

Biosecurity, food safety, extra-label drug use, adherence to standard operating procedures and treatment protocols, lameness identification, animal welfare considerations, limiting and managing antimicrobial resistance, employing optimal healthy calf rearing, and protecting the environment; the challenges facing producers and production animal veterinarians are complicated and numerous. There is ample information intended to guide practitioners, consultants, and producers on how to address these challenges. And yet, guidelines and recommendations go unheeded by producers and veterinarians alike.<sup>2,3,5,7,12,14,16</sup> With all the know-how and creativity going towards meeting these challenges, why do we seem to fall short of the goal of implementing change so often? What seems to be an obvious plan for an operation may be met with ambivalence or even hostility from a client or quiet sabotage from workers.

In the struggle to understand resistance to changes that are in a producer, animal, or society's best interest, we may fail to realize the choices we are asking a producer to make. The way they see their role, the heritage of an operation, or how they work with their employees may be impacted by a change in protocol. The loss or sacrifice that may result from this change may not be apparent to the veterinarian. The pro-

ducer may not be consciously aware of the complexity of their decision-making process: where economics intersect with producer's sense of worth, values, personal and professional satisfaction, and sense of self-efficacy; where stakeholders hold competing interests and expectations from society; and where the desire to produce a wholesome product and consider the impact of their actions on future generations may work against ensuring short-term profitability.

Scholars in leadership and change have divided these challenges into 2 categories. They have contrasted the idea of a technical solution (1 where there is a clear answer and path forward) to adaptive challenges (where the complexity of the situation means there is no 1 clear path to follow).<sup>11</sup> Too often, we make the mistake of assuming we are dealing with a technical problem when we are really being confronted by an adaptive challenge. The challenges facing production animal medicine fall into both categories. Technical solutions might include writing a treatment protocol for a given condition, translating that protocol into Spanish, developing an educational handout, and changing the configuration of a foot bath. Each has a clear objective and can be directly measured for compliance and outcome. Adaptive challenges offer less clarity, requiring more conversation and understanding of another's point of view. For example, identifying as a self-reliant producer who is fiscally responsible may run counter to paying for appropriate DVM services that may enhance profit margins. Adaptive challenges have far greater implications for producers and veterinarians, are often more difficult to reach common ground on, and are ubiquitous.

Further complicating a veterinarian's agenda is the challenge of multiple people working on operations with diverse education levels, disease/health/agriculture literacy, ideas about animal welfare, agendas, and backgrounds. Everyone on an operation is an individual with their own motivations, goals, barriers, and ideas. How each of these people works together and within an organization also impacts adherence of veterinary recommendations. The flow of information and assignment of work tasks can directly impact the bottom line for a producer. It is fair to say that in most production animal contexts; there are high levels of uncertainty, a considerable level of interdependence, and resource constraints. Jody Hoffer Gittel offers important explanations and guidance for these types of high-stakes environments.<sup>9</sup> Relational Coordination came out of studies of aviation, but quickly expanded to human healthcare.<sup>8,10</sup> In a hallmark study, post-operative pain, length of hospital stay, and return to function in joint replacement patients are impacted by the quality of relational coordination exhibited by a healthcare team.<sup>8,10</sup>

Relational coordination relates to the quality of relationships and the type of communication that occurs between work groups and offers some useful insights to production operations.<sup>4,8-10</sup> The following 7 elements have strong influence on the effectiveness of an organization or work group:

1. Shared goals
2. Shared knowledge

3. Mutual respect
4. Frequent communication
5. Timely communication
6. Accurate communication
7. Problem-solving communication

Work groups that share these attributes within the groups and between groups function at a higher level than work groups that do not share these attributes.<sup>4,8-10</sup> At Washington State University, we have begun to use this construct with our students as a way to look at the working relationships within a producer's operation. Consultants and practitioners alike may find that determining the flow of information and methods of communication on an operation may reveal as much as a good post-mortem examination on a sentinel animal. Practitioners and consultants may want to consider how their own approaches would be interpreted by their clients in relation to these 7 elements. A tool along these lines has been developed to assess organizational communication on dairy farms.<sup>18</sup> To learn as much as possible about an operation, veterinarians need to hear from a number of stakeholders within the operation. To have that type of access and to get accurate information from stakeholders, trust between the producer, stakeholders, and veterinarian is imperative.

To build that kind of trust it is useful to understand the workings of the human brain. In recent years, findings in neuroscience have supported many of the ideas put forth by educators, psychologists, and leadership scholars. Behavior changes when people have the following: 1) a trusted relationship with someone who understands and is attuned to their wishes, ideas, etc.; 2) an appropriate level of arousal; 3) activation of both thinking and feeling; 4) method of self-reflection; and 5) a sense that what is being asked of the person is possible.<sup>6,11</sup>

Skills that allow us to develop a trusted relationship with clients and stakeholders include active listening skills; eliciting and clarifying individual's ideas, expectations, concerns, and potential impacts of any action; demonstrating empathy; and using appropriate non-verbal behavior.<sup>16,17</sup> Active listening involves hearing what the client is and is not saying, hearing them out completely before interjecting, and confirming understanding of what you heard prior to moving on. Listening is as much an art as a science and is perhaps 1 of the most under-used skills available to veterinarians and producers alike. Veterinarians and physicians alike are notorious for interrupting clients within seconds of beginning to speak.

Not only is it important to get all of the facts as accurately as possible from the client, but is also important to understand their perspective. Articulating what we understand of the problem parameters, including what the client's experience is with the situation and the impact it is having on them as well as any limitations helps clarify our own assumption. These skills ensure we acknowledge the client's unique perspective on the situation. Understanding their ideas, concerns, expectations, and the impact the problem is

or may have on their life is an important contributing factor to how we will need to approach clinical reasoning.

Determining the client's perspective, concerns, and any potential impacts is another area that does not necessarily come naturally to people. A person's knowledge and belief is a powerful force. To effect change, the veterinarian must understand the starting point of the person whom you wish to influence. Because disease literacy, agendas, etc., can vary, it is crucial to start with stakeholder's understanding, barriers, etc. Know where to start based on what the client knows and thinks they understand is important for buy-in and for effective education. Understanding that clients are often more concerned about avoiding losses than achieving gains,<sup>11</sup> it is vital to understand the clients point of view to determine how to frame recommendations in a way that is most likely to achieve adherence. Clarifying questions and summarizing are great ways to ensure the client knows they have been heard while allowing them to correct any misunderstandings. Focusing on listening to hear and understand, rather than to make early assumptions and quickly reach a diagnosis, may be a challenge for many of us in our busy lives.

Empathy is a word that can evoke discomfort for many veterinarians. What is important to understand is that there are many types of empathy: reflection, legitimization, support, partnership, respect, and acknowledgement.<sup>17</sup> The fear with empathy may be that we would need to "fix" any problems we find. That is really not the point. Again, turning to neuroscience, we know that people who feel connected and understood are more able to make changes.<sup>6</sup> As veterinarians work to truly understand where a client is coming from and expressing that understanding, neurochemicals are released leading to greater trust.

To keep the appropriate level of arousal (manage the temperature) there must be an on-going honest dialogue between producer and veterinarian. The veterinarian needs to ensure they understand the producer's motivations and priorities as well as losses that might be incurred. For many producers, the ideals we strive for may not match their own. While it has been reported that practitioners believe one-on-one communication is the most effective for effecting producer change,<sup>5</sup> there is mounting evidence that the social dimension of learning may be crucial for the challenges to be met. Benchmarks, workshops, and think tanks allow producers to compare their thoughts and approaches to those of their peers with the structure of the clear goal or objective. Learning is a social process of constructing and internalizing an interpretation of one's experience to guide future action. Done well, this type of learning can cause radical changes in paradigm. It uncovers distorted assumptions or errors in learning. Stages of transformative learning: 1) initial learning development, 2) learner critical self-reflection, 3) transformative learning, and 4) increased empowerment.

## Conclusion

Veterinary medicine is in a time of change. The challenges facing our production animal clients are considerably different than they were only a few decades ago. While information is available to anyone with a web browser, producers stand to benefit from a collaborative relationship with their veterinary team. The challenges and opportunities are shifting the role of a veterinarian to one who must have an excellent grasp of human behavior and communication. One of the biggest challenges for the profession is that communication skills are not easily developed without coaching.<sup>1,13,19</sup> There is often a misconception of what we intend to do compared to what we actually do and the impact our efforts have on other people. The most effective communication training programs are experiential using simulated clients and expert communication coaches to raise awareness and impact skill development.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit." Aristotle

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