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BEHAVIOUR MATTERS: TRANSFORMING VETERINARY TEAMS THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Communication failures are a significant contributor to error in healthcare, including veterinary practice. Evidence demonstrates that both the content and behavioural context of communication affect team performance, decision-making, and patient outcomes. This session explores the human factors underpinning communication, the detrimental impact of incivility on cognitive function and task performance, and practical strategies for improving communication and conflict resolution in veterinary teams.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is integral to the provision of safe, high-quality veterinary care. Beyond the exchange of information, communication serves to establish shared understanding, support team cohesion, and enable collaborative problem-solving. In complex, high-pressure environments such as veterinary practice, the behavioural elements of communication play a critical role in determining team effectiveness and clinical outcomes.

Empirical research highlights that poor communication, particularly when coupled with incivility or disruptive behaviours, can compromise cognitive functioning, impair decision-making, and increase the likelihood of adverse events (1,2). Within veterinary practice, similar risks have been identified. Oxtoby et al. demonstrated that communication failures are a leading contributor to errors in small animal veterinary practice, with miscommunication, assumptions, and lack of shared understanding frequently cited in adverse event investigations (3).

Understanding the human factors influencing communication is therefore essential for improving team performance and maintaining patient safety.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Human Communication and its Challenges

Human communication encompasses verbal, non-verbal, and paralinguistic elements. Mehrabian and Wiener demonstrated that a substantial proportion of perceived meaning is derived from tone of voice and body language, rather than spoken words alone (4). Veterinary work environments present specific challenges to effective communication. Environmental noise, frequent interruptions, time pressure, and hierarchical structures can all serve as barriers to clear information exchange. Additionally, increased reliance on digital communication channels introduces the risk of misinterpretation due to the absence of non-verbal cues.

Behaviour and its Influence on Communication

Behavioural elements, including respect, civility, and empathy, significantly influence how messages are received and interpreted. Negative behaviours such as rudeness or incivility can trigger the autonomic

threat response, characterised by physiological changes that impair higher cognitive functions, including working memory and problem-solving capacity (2).

Incivility within veterinary practice refers to low level deviant behaviour that violates societal norms of mutual respect (5). It encompasses behaviours such as dismissiveness, exclusion, rudeness, and undermining remarks, which, while subtle, erode psychological safety, damage team cohesion, and impair individual wellbeing.

Seminal work by Porath and Pearson has provided compelling evidence of the pervasive negative consequences of incivility within workplace environments. Their research, conducted across multiple sectors, demonstrated that exposure to uncivil behaviour impairs cognitive functioning, reduces motivation, and undermines individual and organisational performance (6). Through large-scale surveys and experimental studies, they found that individuals subjected to incivility were significantly more likely to deliberately reduce their work effort, experience declines in creativity and engage in avoidance behaviours. Moreover, 25% of employees exposed to incivility admitted to taking their frustrations out on clients or customers, illustrating the potential for such behaviours to degrade service quality and safety. Porath and Pearson's findings are particularly relevant to veterinary teams, where the impact of incivility can extend beyond staff wellbeing to compromise patient care, communication, and overall team performance.

Research by Rosenstein and O'Daniel reported that 75% of healthcare professionals believe disruptive behaviours contribute to medical errors, with 25% directly associating such behaviours with patient deaths (1). These findings highlight the imperative to address behavioural factors within communication processes to support both staff wellbeing and patient safety.

Emerging research highlights that incivility is a prevalent and significant concern within veterinary teams, with wide-ranging consequences for individual wellbeing, team functioning, and patient care. Irwin et al. identified that veterinary professionals experience incivility from multiple sources, including clients, co-workers, and senior colleagues (5). Notably, incivility from different sources is associated with distinct psychological and organisational outcomes; incivility from senior colleagues predicts reduced job satisfaction and increased intentions to leave the profession, while client incivility is closely linked to heightened burnout levels (5). Qualitative investigations further demonstrate that client-initiated incivility is often driven by underlying stressors, such as financial pressures or heightened anxiety for animal welfare, yet the psychological toll on veterinary professionals is substantial. Individuals exposed to such behaviours frequently report rumination, emotional exhaustion, reduced professional confidence, and in some cases, withdrawal from client interactions (7). To mitigate these effects, both individual and organisational coping strategies are required. Irwin et al. propose the "Listen, Act and Support" model, which emphasises the importance of validating concerns, facilitating structured dialogue, and providing practical and emotional support as essential steps in addressing incivility and protecting both staff wellbeing and the quality of veterinary care (8).

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND REDUCING INCIVILITY

Active Listening

Active listening involves intentional focus on the speaker, use of verbal and non-verbal cues to convey engagement, and reflective responses to ensure accurate understanding. This approach fosters mutual respect and reduces miscommunication.

Empathy and Compassion

The demonstration of empathy, defined as the capacity to understand and share the emotional state of others, enhances interpersonal connections and communication effectiveness. In high-pressure environments such as veterinary practice, where teams frequently encounter emotionally charged situations, demonstrating empathy helps to de-escalate tensions, build trust, and create a supportive atmosphere. Compassion extends beyond empathy by incorporating a motivation to alleviate distress and actively support others. Research highlights that compassionate interactions within teams are closely linked to psychological safety, a key factor that enables individuals to speak up, ask questions, and raise concerns without fear of embarrassment or retaliation (9,10). This, in turn, fosters a culture of openness, continuous learning, and improved clinical outcomes (11). Importantly, cultivating empathy and compassion also acts as a protective factor against burnout by reinforcing social support and promoting a sense of shared purpose within veterinary teams (12). Shanafelt et al. emphasise that healthcare organisations that prioritise compassionate leadership and embed empathy into team culture experience higher engagement, reduced emotional exhaustion, and improved staff wellbeing, outcomes that are equally relevant to veterinary settings (12).

Courageous Conversations

Addressing unhelpful behaviours through peer-to-peer feedback has been shown to be highly effective. Rather than relying solely on formal disciplinary processes, structured feedback provided by respected peers can prompt meaningful self-reflection and behaviour change. Data from the Vanderbilt Center for Patient and Professional Advocacy indicates that such interventions result in measurable behavioural improvement in 95 to 96% of cases (13). This approach leverages the principle that most individuals are unaware of the impact of their actions and respond positively when concerns are raised constructively and privately. Peer-to-peer conversations not only address the immediate behaviour but also help preserve working relationships, maintain team cohesion, and reinforce organisational expectations for professionalism and civility. In veterinary teams, where psychological safety is critical for effective communication and patient care, empowering staff with the skills and confidence to engage in timely, respectful feedback conversations represents an essential strategy for reducing incivility and fostering a positive workplace culture.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture plays a pivotal role in managing incivility within veterinary teams. Shanafelt and colleagues emphasise that fostering a positive workplace culture, one that prioritises respect, psychological safety, and open communication, is fundamental to reducing disruptive behaviours and promoting staff wellbeing (12,14). When leaders model civility and set clear expectations for respectful interactions, it creates an environment where incivility is less likely to be tolerated or perpetuated (12). Moreover, embedding civility into the core values and daily practices of an organisation encourages proactive conflict resolution and collective responsibility, which are essential for sustaining team cohesion and ensuring high-quality patient care (14). Without such a culture, incivility can become normalised, leading to increased stress, burnout, and compromised clinical outcomes (12,15). Therefore, cultivating an organisational culture that actively supports civility, clear behavioural expectations, and structured, non-confrontational communication techniques is a critical strategy for veterinary practices aiming to improve communication and safeguard both their staff and patients. Organisational strategies such as social contracts and team agreements reinforce these expectations (6).

CONCLUSION

Communication in veterinary practice extends beyond information exchange to encompass behavioural factors that significantly influence team functioning and patient outcomes. Recognising the human factors involved, addressing incivility, and implementing evidence-based communication strategies are essential steps towards enhancing veterinary team performance and delivering safer, higher-quality care.

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