

Communications 101

Amy Newfield, MS, CVT, VTS (ECC)
Veterinary Team Training
VetTeamTraining@Gmail.com

Many veterinary employees were driven to work in veterinary medicine because they more strongly connect with animals than people. Working in a team is difficult. The one thing that we all need to learn when we enter the workforce is how to communicate with different types of people. Just like learning how to take a radiograph or perform an ovariohysterectomy, people need to learn how to communicate with each other since there are various and often daunting numbers of personality traits in the world.

Communication between people still bucks science and data. How science says a communication should have gone, is not how it actually goes many times. There will never be a perfect way to address every person or situation. However, there are some techniques and skills that leaders should learn so they can be more effective communicators. This book merely scratches the surface of communication, so I would encourage you to grab hold of any training offered around communication skills. The better your communication skills, the more trust your team will have in you.

The Make-up of Communication

Albert Mehrabian (1971), a professor of psychology at the University of California, developed the “7-38-55 Rule” when describing the relationship between words and nonverbal communication. The tone of one’s voice and facial expression account for 93% of the meaning of the words that are being said. The tone accounts for 38%. The facial expression accounts for 55%, and the words themselves account for only 7% of the actual meaning and emotion behind the statement being made.

Different Facial Expressions

It’s hard to write about facial expressions when visually, you cannot see me making facial expressions. What does confusion look like? How about anger? Do most people have the same facial expressions for certain emotions? Luckily, the answer is yes. Most people have the same facial expressions for anger, happiness, or confusion regardless of what culture, race, sex, or religion they identify with.

Disgust

The face looks like you smelled something bad. Pretend like you smell something bad right now. You will lift your upper lip. You will wrinkle your nose and squint your eyes. You may or may not lift your lip high enough to expose your front teeth. People make this face when they taste or smell something bad, but also when they are disgusted by a situation or event. For example, when you are watching a movie and are disgusted by a scene that grosses you out or upsets you, you will make the same face. In our veterinary hospitals, we see this expression when a new hire is not working out, and the team feels they are disastrous. If you walk up to someone on the team and ask, “How is that new hire doing?” they might make a disgusted facial expression.

Anger

Pull your eyebrows in and wrinkle the part of your forehead right above your nose between the eyebrows. Usually, there are two vertical lines between your eyebrows. Tense your lips and harden them. You might have even started feeling slightly irritated if you did it correctly. This is called the facial feedback hypothesis, in which your facial expressions have learned how to produce an emotional response. Our face and our emotions go hand-in-hand.

Sadness

This is a hard expression to fake, so if someone shows you a facial expression of sadness, it is often genuine. First, turn the corners of your mouth down into a frown. Next, puff out your lower lip just a bit. Some people can even make the lower lip quiver. Lastly, bring your eyebrows together just a little bit. Your eyebrows will come down just a little so that your eyes are not fully open. People who are sad will not have wide eyes but ones where the eyelids are slightly lowered.

Happiness

True happiness is beyond a smile. The telltale sign of true happiness is where the cheekbones become engaged. Pull your cheeks up to the corners of your eyes. Try to think of something funny and laugh about it right now. You will feel your cheek muscles being pulled up to the corner of your eyes, along with a big smile. When people try to fake being happy, they fail to pull the cheeks up to the corner of the eyes.

Fear

Think about your eyes and eyebrows jumping because they are scared. Your eyes will open wide, and your eyebrows will crinkle inwards just a bit. Most of the time, your mouth will open, even if it's just a little bit. Think about what happens when you gasp out of fear. Look around the room when you are talking to your team and have just notified them that a schedule change is happening. Their eyes will be wide, and their eyebrows will be flat and pulled in slightly. They are afraid of the new schedule and what that means.

Surprise

This is like the fear expression. It is almost identical, except that your lower jaw and lip will be pulled down, and your eyebrows will be pulled up. Think of how to make your face as long as possible. This is considered the longest expression because the eyebrows are pulled up, and the jaw is pulled down. Sometimes the mouth is open in an "O" shape. The eyes are also open wide in this expression.

Contempt

This is an emotion where the individual will have a one-sided smirk with their lip. Any type of asymmetry with the face means contempt, disdain, or hatred in some sort of way. Think about how you look when you are sarcastic, and this is that type of facial expression.

Confusion

Usually, for this emotion, one eyebrow is higher than the other. The nose becomes wrinkled, and there is a crease between the eyebrows. One corner of the mouth is usually raised

just a little bit, opposite of the eyebrow that is raised. Many individuals will look up and away as if they are thinking about what was just said. When you are talking to a team member who says they understand, look at what their face is doing. If one eyebrow is raised and they are looking into their own head, they probably don't understand and need a little more clarification.

Look at Their Eyes

When you communicate with someone, you should look at their face and eyes while they are speaking with you. Maintain a soft gaze so that you are not staring at them to intimidate them but rather just calmly focus on what they are saying. This conveys you are listening intently.

When someone is speaking to somebody, they will often look directly at their face to see how the information is being received. Too much blinking usually represents nervousness. Try not to move your eyebrows, as they will give away your inner emotions as the individual is speaking.

What to Do with Your Body

Should you cross your legs? Where should you put your hands? Should your body position change based on the other person's emotions? What to do with one's posture and body can be a difficult but important decision when communicating.

Open Posture: This means that you are open to receiving information. This is a posture that conveys friendliness and willingness.

Closed Posture: This posture conveys that you are closed off and struggling with the information you are receiving. This conveys hostility, unfriendliness, and anxiety.

Should I Flap My Hands Around?

One of the best ways to use your hands is to utilize movement between changes of a scene or emotion you are trying to convey. Start at a neutral position. As you start the conversation, you may move your hands a little to convey a poignant part of the story. If your hands start taking off in flight, try to be aware and ground them back down to earth.

Much like universal facial expressions, there are universal hand gestures that can be used to convey emotion. Here are some of the more common ones:

Movement

The movement of your body can convey flexibility, sadness, anxiety, command, or anger. Just be aware of what your body is doing. Much like my hands, my body is usually also flailing about. I'm a naturally fidgety person, so when I talk to a team member who is having a serious conversation with me, I make it a point to sit still in a neutral position. Here are some other main movements and what they convey:

- Moving Forward: Conveys dominance, assertiveness
- Moving Away: Conveys avoidance, submission, end of conversation
- Fidgeting: Conveys anxiety, fear (flight or fight)
- Frozen: Conveys fear, anger

Tone of Voice

Once you master your facial expressions, body, and hand position, the tone of your voice is next. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most difficult things to improve. Years of your voice having certain tones for certain emotional communication makes it difficult to change. Sometimes I come off sounding aggressive, particularly when I become passionate about a particular topic. In my mind, I have a passion for why something should be done a particular way. It's not to say I believe it should be "my way or the highway," but I'm passionate and hope others buy-in to my vision. Unfortunately, my passion causes the tone of my voice to sound excited, and it increases in volume. The increase in volume with the matter-of-fact excitement comes off as aggressive as if I'm pushing only my way onto the project. My tone and behavior often betray my words. Those who know me are aware it's just how I talk. They know if they say, "Amy, what do you think about XYZ," I would respond with, "I hadn't thought about that. Tell me more about that idea." My tone betrays me, causing people to believe that I would respond with, "I think it should be done my way!"

Tone of voice is largely centered around the pitch of your voice. Be slow and methodical with how you say something. However, if you are too slow in speaking, it will come across as strange or like you have a problem with receiving the information. Try to hear what you sound like. Try recording yourself talking to a friend. As you speak, make sure you listen to what you are saying.

Touch

I'm just going to say it. There is good touching and bad touching. There are four main categories of touch: friendship, professional, social, and intimacy. The rule for professional touching should be on a shoulder or arm and be brief. Touches in a workplace environment should never be rubbing or grabbing. A gentle touch on a shoulder or arm can go a long way to stronger communication.

Polite, Kind & Honest Conversation:

It sounds so simple. If you can manage to be polite, kind, and honest in any communication, you will likely be successful. It is a great communication style to choose in almost every situation because it's how everyone wants to communicate. Think about how you would like someone to speak to you. How do you want your boss to talk to you? How about a friend? Your answer is likely the same as everyone else's. People want to talk to someone who is polite, cares about them, and tells them the truth. While this is the style of how we want to be communicated to, it's not so easy. If this communication style was easy to do, more leaders would be doing it. In fact, more people would be doing it.

This form of communication consists of caring deeply on a personal level, but only after developing a mutual trust between the individuals having a conversation. I want to break down each component so that you can understand the power of PKH and how to implement it in your daily life.

It Starts with Trust & Mutual Respect

While I will say that this is one of the best ways to communicate, I will also say you need to proceed with caution. You need to learn how to perfect this communication style for it to work

best. While you may be great at delivering PKH communication, the receiver may not be used to this style, and it may fall flat. Practice, practice, practice.

When you need to challenge someone on your team and have not yet built up the trust to be able to communicate honestly, using this communication style can be a struggle. If the two individuals don't have mutual respect for each other, this style can come across as abrasive. Mutual respect and trust are needed for healthy conversations. If you don't show that you care deeply about the individual you are trying to challenge, you will come off as a jerk. If you don't respect the other individual, you won't listen or react well. All components must come together simultaneously to make PKH communication effective.

If you think you came off as polite, kind, and honest, but the receiver feels like you were direct and rude, you have failed. As a leader, how you communicate is only as good as how the person receives the communication. There are two reasons this communication style will fail you:

- 1) You missed being either polite, kind, or honest.
- 2) The receiver did not trust you enough to assume you came from a place of kindness or honesty.

Polite

Being polite maintains stability in the conversation. If you give politeness, you are more likely to receive it in return. On the other hand, if you come in with a lot of emotion and try to win an argument, the other individual will likely follow your lead.

These things are, of course, easier said than done. The reason why it's so hard to utilize these ten tips on how to maintain politeness is because of emotions. If someone is criticizing you, most likely, you get defensive. It is common nature to want to defend yourself. Most defensive people will snap back using the word "you." "You are..., you need..., you caused..., you are too..." Minimize, if not remove, the word "you" from the conversation so it is not seen as attacking someone.

Along the same lines, remember that over-personalization can be an issue. When you center everything around yourself, you take on a defensive posture. "I need..., I want..., I think..." Remember, the conversation has two sides, and it's not all about you.

Another trick that I have found that has increased my politeness in conversations is to think about a sentence that I am struggling to make polite before I actually say it. Generally, it's a good rule to slow down your speech to allow your brain time to think about sentence structure. Unfortunately, this is exceptionally difficult for me. I am an extremely fast talker. Whenever I am lecturing at a conference, I give a disclaimer to the audience that they need to strap in for a fast-paced lecture. I started this disclaimer more than a decade ago after countless conference reviews stated that "she is knowledgeable and engaging but talks too fast." Despite trying to slow down my speaking style, I have learned that it is just part of who I am.

If I find myself wanting to say something that is clearly not polite and borderline inappropriate, I will pause. There is no shame in saying to the other person, "Let me just think about how I want to say this." This gives you time to formulate a polite response in your head. If you fail to be respectful and considerate, the very definition of what polite is, you can throw the rest of the conversation in the trash. You will never get any buy-in to what you are trying to communicate.

Kind

Show that you care immediately when you are also polite. Being polite is going to occur over the entire course of the conversation. Being kind also needs to happen for the entirety of the communication.

You should care deeply about how your team member will receive the information you are about to give them. You want to make sure that you do your best not to offend. Certainly, it gets the best buy-in from the individual receiving the criticism if you do not offend them. But it goes beyond just trying to get them to buy into wanting to improve or agree with you. Your heart and mind should get upset if they perceive you as cruel or inconsiderate. You should want them to know you care because you do.

Honest

There is such a thing as being too honest. It's called being a jerk. You can't just simply go up to anyone you want and provide them with honest feedback. Individuals who walk around providing honesty to anyone they want to are often seen as exceptionally arrogant. They pride themselves on their honesty and often tell people, "People don't like what I have to say, but at least I'm honest," or "I tell it like it is." Often the direct candor of brutal honesty comes from a place of malice or authoritarianism. People who are too honest continue to do so because most other individuals are afraid to speak up. However, when an individual forgets about being polite and kind, the honesty turns to blunt candor, damaging the relationship and destroying trust.

My suggestion of slowing down and thinking about what you will say will help you organization sentences in a way that incorporate all three of these components. When you start with kindness, it's much easier to follow up with honesty that is not cruel. When you start off being polite, it's much more likely they will believe your kindness. Whenever you face a tough conversation and wonder how it could have gone better, write down a few PKH statements you wish you had made.

Trust Before PKH Conversations

Trust, Trust, Trust. Are you sick of me saying it? Remember that you won't have PKH conversations if the individual receiving the communication does not trust you. If they do not trust you, they could think the honesty is rude or manipulative. The reality is it may take years to build up a trusting relationship with every individual member of your team.

Conclusion

Communicating is hard, but having the basic skills and knowledge about communication basics is important to being successful even the most difficult conversations. Practicing is important. Apologizing when needed and learning from past conversations will improve future ones.