



JANUARY 17-21 • NAVC.COM • ORLANDO, FL

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# I'm Afraid It's Not Good News... Communicating With Intelligence in Highly Charged Situations

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# CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

I have financial interest, arrangement or affiliation with:

- Idexx: Subject Matter Expert and Speaker w/ honorarium



When did **YOU** receive bad news?

How did that make you feel?

How did the delivery of the message impact how you felt when receiving the news?

What could they have done better?



# Root Causes of Highly Charged Communication

## Emotional Stress

- Pets are family members
  - Creates emotional intensity
- Difficult clients don't respond to logic with logic; they respond with emotion.
  - Must address the emotion first
- Grief, Fear, Anxiety
- Time Constraints
- Perceived lack of urgency / empathy

Happens frequently because we are human.

Give grace when you recognize people have increased emotions.



# Root Causes of Highly Charged Communication

## Communication Breakdowns

- Clients get upset when we don't give appropriate recommendations
  - Clients cannot ask for services that they are not aware of, or services that they don't understand
- Client education is key to minimizing upset
  - Clients who do not fully understand a policy, procedure or service will not comply with recommendations. They will push back.
- Client education fails because of lack of team member time, concern or compassion, and poorly educated staff



# What can we do?

Tools to effectively manage difficult discussions:

- Communication
- Empathy
- Emotional Intelligence

Goals:

- Maintain client trust
- Maintain team confidence
- Maintain a positive culture for our practice and team



# Communication

It all starts here!!!!

- In veterinary medicine we have discussions that are:
  - Highly emotional
  - Involve two different opinions or viewpoints
  - Stakes are high
- Being able to handle these conversations is instrumental in handling difficult clients as well as de-escalating if needed.

Success in critical conversations:

HOW CAN I BE 100% HONEST AND AT THE SAME TIME BE 100% RESPECTFUL





# Communication

- Make sure you are talking about the right thing
  - Choose the right topic
- Is the client really concerned about the cost or are they worried about their pet?
- We tend to choose “easy over hard”
  - Money is easy to fix
  - Someone’s feelings are much harder
- Avoid the “Fool’s Choice”

The thought that you have to choose between telling the truth and making someone happy



# Communication

The team contributes to client discontent by:

1. Inconsistent communication
2. Poor hand-off of information (rounding)
3. Lack of transparency with medical procedures and billing (treatment plans)

## Solutions:

### Vocabulary

- Avoid medical jargon
  - Hypertension – some people don't know what that means
  - 4<sup>th</sup> grade level
  - Root Cause of Upset: lack of understanding

### Consistency

- Do all team members give the same message
  - Root Cause of Upset: Miscommunication or inconsistent communication

### Communication Tools

- Standardized and branded handouts
- Standardized treatment plans
  - These support verbal communication
- Follow-up communication for clarity and reassurance
  - Call clients the next day to see if they have additional questions

# Communication

## Communication Components

Messages have three components: Verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal

- Verbal: word choice
- Paraverbal: the way words are spoken (tone, pitch, enunciation)
- Nonverbal: body language



# Importance of Communication

Impact of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice

## Our demeanor

- Tone of voice, speed, pitch
- Body language
  - Do you have one hand on the door while the client is asking questions?
- Eye Contact
  - Associated with trust and confidence
  - Conveys sincerity
- Tall Posture and Positive Expression
  - Shows engagement



# Importance of Communication

Impact of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice

## Client demeanor

- Folded arms:
  - Suggests a client unwilling to accept the information being given.
    - Correct this by given them something to hold
      - Forcing them to unfold their arms, which will help open them up to better communication.
      - Hand them an educational handout



# Importance of Communication

Impact of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice

## Self-Soothing:

The higher the touch, the higher the anxiety

Wringing hands → Rubbing forearms → Rubbing neck

“pain in my neck”

## Right to fight; Left to love

-what part of the body is the client leaning with?

-See these as opportunities to adjust your behavior



# Importance of Communication

Impact of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice

## Positive Body Language

### Ready to Cooperate

- Sitting toward the edge of your chair.
- Tilting your head towards the person talking to you.
- Moving closer.
- Rubbing palms together.

### Openness

- Keep arms open (not crossed).
- Keep legs flat on the ground (not crossed).
- Keep coat open (not buttoned).

### Evaluating

- Body leaning forward.
- Hand on cheek.
- Relaxed mouth, chin forward.
- Extended eye contact.



# Communication

## Listening

- We hear roughly 25% of what was said.
- Listening allows us to figure out what the client wants and needs are.
- Prevents misunderstanding and errors.
- Gather clues about ways to improve our service.





# Communication

## Active Listening

- Give them your undivided attention.
  - Maintain eye contact; avoid distractions
- Show that you are listening.
- Provide feedback.
- Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.
  - Delay Judgement



# Communication

## Active Listening

- Explore what you hear
  - Can you tell me more about that?
  - You seem hesitant, help me understand your concerns
  - Ask questions to clarify
- Take a moment to step out of the situation
- Use silence effectively
  - Learn how to pause.
  - “The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause” – Mark



# Emotional Intelligence

## Utilize Emotional Intelligence for Empathy-driven Responses

### Emotional Intelligence Defined:

The ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict.

The act of knowing, understanding, and responding to emotions, overcoming stress in the moment, and being aware of how your words and actions affect others...



# Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence allows you to:

- Accept criticism and responsibility without being defensive
- Say no when you need to
- Have empathy for other people
- Solve problems in ways that work for everyone
- Move on after making a mistake



# Tips for Emotional Client Communication

Keep it together!

Normalize the physiological response to conflict

- Skin gets red
- Sweating
- Accelerated speech

Acknowledge the reaction – normalizes it

“Name it to tame it”

Approach it like a beginner

- You have more knowledge and expertise than they do
- Put yourself in the same point of reference
  - First pet, first ER visit, first surgery



# Tips for Emotional Client Communication

Create a stock list of phrases to defuse the client:

- I hear what you are saying
- Thank you so much for explaining the issue
- Tell me more about what happened during your visit.

Use phrases that convey both positivity AND empathy

- Thank you for bringing this to our attention
- I completely understand how frustrating that must be
- I really appreciate your patience
- Here's what I'm going to do for you
- I'd be happy to recommend...



# Tips for Emotional Client Communication

When finishing with an upset client:

- Is there anything else I can help you with?
- Thank them for choosing you
- Encourage future contact

We want / need to keep clients.

Client retention should be 70-75% over a 3-year period.

On average, clinics lose 10-15% each year by natural attrition.

-death, moving, re-homing, etc.



# Communication Techniques and Strategies for Highly Charged Client Communication





# Handling Difficult Client Communication

Clients become angry and belligerent for a wide variety of reasons:

- Confused or disorganized - doesn't understand ER triage, etc
  - Feeling helpless, “up against the wall”, trapped - financial constraints
  - Invasion of personal space (perceived or real) – won't allow pet to go to treatment room
  - Feeling of being wronged or losing power – Pricing quotes, invoice higher than estimate
  - Hallucinations
    - Mentally ill, substance abuse, under the influence
- 
- Break the barrier by complimenting their pet.
  - Suddenly, the client feels a sense of pride and become more open to suggestion and advice.



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

- Emotional stressors (loss of loved one)
- Organic stressors (lack of sleep, etc)
- Set up by others: Expectations not managed properly
- Entitlement: Income inequity, “loyal” client
- Sense of shame/humiliation: Failure to vaccinate their pet
- Protective rage: Perception that family member/loved one was wronged
- Given up: What the hell attitude...
- Pleasure (rare)



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

- Plan effectively
  - Review client record
  - Over prepare
- Organize your thoughts
- Go in with an open mind
- Be grateful for their concern and worry
  - Thank them for sharing their perspective
- Acknowledge their concern
- Get a second opinion
  - You're human, you're not always right.
- Provide a solution



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

How do we keep the emotions of the conversations to a minimum?

Acknowledge the client's feelings while remaining objective and non-judgmental

- Take control of your stories = take control of your emotions
- Stories provide rationale
  - Our interpretation of the facts
- Any set of facts can be used to tell an infinite number of stories
  - With upset clients our story is almost certainly different from the clients.



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

## Dealing with Client Emotions

### Defensive or embarrassed clients:

When clients feel like they can't afford to give their pet the best care, they act out their frustration to staff

- Break the barrier by complimenting their pet.
- Suddenly, the client feels a sense of pride and become more open to suggestion and advice.



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

## Common Ground

- What can you agree on with the client?
  - “I think we can both agree that we did not meet your expectation.”
  - “We can agree that we want Roger to get relief from his chronic itching.”

## Solutions

- Attempt to be mutually agreeable
  - Perhaps you adjust cost or adjust the plan/medication
    - Don't immediately go to cost!

## Set appropriate boundaries

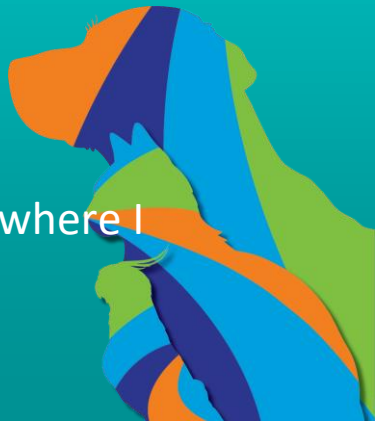
- Business: Clients not allowed in surgery
- Personal: Disengage from truly verbally abusive or physically threatening clients



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

Learn how to accept feedback

- Collect Yourself
  - Breathe deeply and slowly; remind yourself that you are safe
  - “This can’t hurt me”; “If I make a mistake, it doesn’t mean I am a mistake.”
- Understand
  - Ask questions and ask for examples
  - Then.....just listen
- Recover
  - Take time to reflect and respond AFTER
  - Give yourself permission to feel and recover from the experience before evaluating the feedback
  - ‘It’s important to me that I get this right. I need some time. I’ll get back to you to know where I come out



# Handling Difficult Client Communication

- Ending the conversation
  - Doesn't always have to end with a decision
  - Should always end with a commitment
- Who?
- Does What?
- By When?
- How will you follow up





# Handling Difficult Client Communication

Stay calm and maintain your composure

If you need to.....tap out!

Isolate the client: create a private, calm, safe space

ONLY IF YOU FEEL SAFE TO DO SO

When we feel threatened, we tend to want to fight back, raise our voice, and get excited.

DO THE OPPOSITE!!!



# Delivering Bad News

1. Tell them as early as possible.
2. Tell them in person or over the phone. Personal touch is key.
3. Don't hem/haw: get to the point quickly.
4. Foster good will; be fair
5. Be sincere with your apology. Thank them for their patience.
6. Ask for a second chance.
7. Do not take that experience to the next client.



# Delivering bad news / difficult conversations = change for the client

Why change is hard

- Introduces uncertainty
- Threatens the familiar
- Feeling a lack of control
- Emotional
- Unrealistic expectations
- Fear of failure



# Küebler-Ross Curve

- Derived from Elisabeth Küebler-Ross's work on the five stages of grief
- Outlines the emotional stages individuals experience during periods of significant change
  - Shock/Denial
  - Anger/Frustration
  - Bargaining
  - Depression
  - Acceptance
- Recognition of these stages helps to anticipate client reactions to bad news or upsetting conversations



# Client Upset Level

Respond to the client based on their level of upset:

Neutral: hard to read

These are the ones that may walk out the door upset, and we don't even know.

Upset: enlist the client in generating the solution

Raging: allow venting, create calm, plan follow up



# Implementing Preventative Measures

Avoid emotional trigger words.

## Triggers

Policy

Can't

Sorry

No, I don't know

(Yes,) But

You should have

The only thing we can do

## Calmers

Here's what we can do

Can

Thank You

I can find out

(Yes,) And

I understand why you...

The best option I think



# What do clients want?

Appreciation, listening, help, honesty, care, and understanding

- Clients want team members to listen to stories about their pet and be appreciated for telling them.
  - Team members can be poor listeners when they think of only the next question or task.
- Clients want help without asking for it.
- Clients want honesty.
  - They do not want to be lied to or only be advised of one treatment option.
  - They want to receive education about all options and referred to a specialist if needed.
- Clients want understanding about their situation whether it is financial or personal



# Positive Affects of Managing Difficult Conversations

- Increased client trust
- Team confidence
- Improved practice culture
- Meaningful dialogue – sense of helpfulness





# Positive Affects of Managing Difficult Conversations

- Improved wellbeing for communicator
- Reduced tension / less stress

Compassion fatigue is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to the stress of caring for suffering individuals.

- Veterinarians and animal care professionals are susceptible due to the constant exposure to animal suffering and challenging situations.

There is no AVOIDING compassion fatigue

You only can ANTICIPATE and MANAGE



“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

Dr. Naomi Rachel Remen

jessicadolce.com



# Key Takeaways

- Clients sacrifice a lot to come to us:
  - Money
  - Time
  - Stress

Minimize the sacrifice. Make yourself easy to do business with.

- Key Takeaways
  - Active Listening is Crucial
  - Emotional Intelligence is Required
  - Stay on topic
  - Find common ground
  - Q.T.I.P. = Quit taking it personal







# THANK YOU

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