

Effective Communication

The ability to communicate effectively is an essential skill for veterinary practitioners, and a cornerstone of employability in many contexts. Being able to both **transmit and receive accurate information** is a vital element of all interactions with clients and colleagues.

Enhanced communication skills lead to more **effective and efficient interactions**, better coordination of care, reduced complaints and **improved outcomes**, which includes satisfaction for all stakeholders and improved safety of patients.^{1,2}

Communication is not just verbal — written and non-verbal skills are also important for the transfer of information.

Most vet-client communication occurs during a consultation. The Calgary-Cambridge model³ is often used as a basis for a consultation; it consists of a series of steps with structure, **empathy** and rapport running throughout. Importantly, this model explicitly includes not only the **technical skill and knowledge aspects** of communication, but also the **expressive and relational aspects** of communication, as vital — even in this clinical context — the ‘science’ and the ‘art’ of communication.

What they said

*“So if you’re good at communicating with [clients], and good at **establishing relationships** with them, it just makes your first year of being a vet so much easier.” (Recent graduate)*

*“My former vet was **too arrogant and patriarchal to explain things**. He was more ‘do as I say’ and would give bullet points, whereas my current vet explains options and procedures thoroughly; he is also better at **respecting our differences**.” (Client)*

*“Client communication is always something that everyone can continue to improve on, and a lot of it, unfortunately, is also **experience**; being able to look at a person and be like, right, this person is going to appreciate personal anecdotes, this person is going to appreciate being a bit more jokey in the consult, whereas another person, they just want the cold professional thing.” (Recent graduate)*

*“Number one thing we always look for is communication skills, so the ability to be clear and concise and **listen well** ... I think because it’s a **really big area of client complaint**, so being able to get your point across.” (Employer)*

How is effective communication recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are confident with all aspects of communication (verbal, non-verbal, listening, writing) and enjoy talking to people
- You can harness your communication skills to drive optimal clinical outcomes, e.g. accurate histories, client concordance, smooth hand-overs, etc
- You feel confident managing difficult scenarios, e.g. breaking bad news, euthanasia, admitting mistakes, animal welfare, financial aspects, conflicts, difficult interactions with clients
- You can adjust your language for different situations
- You rarely encounter problems (disputes, errors, etc) as a result of poor communication

Perceived by others:

- Harnesses good ‘people skills’ as a clinical tool
- Appears emotionally intelligent; is a ‘people person’
- Actively listens; is empathic and approachable
- Communicates clearly and concisely; is able to get the point across (e.g. case handover)
- Modifies language according to the situation; pitches at an appropriate level
- Gets positive feedback from colleagues and clients

Why is effective communication important to employability?

The VetSet2Go project found that both clients and employers valued communication skills very highly. Importantly, the **communication of more challenging issues**, such as the financial aspects of care, emerged as a strong employability skill. Practices often deliver care to clients from a **variety of backgrounds and cultures** and this can make communication more complex.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the VetSet2Go project found that communication skills were central to an effective veterinarian-client relationship, and the relationship between veterinarians and their practice team. By communicating effectively, veterinarians will build **trust** with their clients and be better able to demonstrate **empathy**. Within the practice team, **collaboration and teamwork** are underpinned by effective communication skills, often in challenging situations. The ability to make decisions about a case requires communication between the veterinary team and client in order to deliver **relationship-centred care**.

*"One of the biggest things we look for in new graduates is **people skills**. We really, over the years, learnt that when someone comes into the clinic, whether it's a vet or a nurse or a groomer or a manager, if they've got good people skills, then they can learn all the technical stuff on the job."* (Employer)

*"We are dealing with a patient who is dependent on its owner for their ongoing care ... therefore, a vet's **ability and willingness to communicate effectively** cannot be over-emphasized".* (Client)

*"Sometimes a vet visit is very traumatic and emotional. A vet needs to make sure that you **understand what is being communicated**."* (Client)

*"The **two-way conversation** is extremely important to me. I live with my dog. I see him every day. I know what is normal for him and what is not. I notice changes. Changes in day-to-day routine can be indicators of certain things, so I think it would be ridiculous for a vet to dismiss an owner's observations or to neglect asking questions ... **the partnership feeling** is very important — part of maintaining that is good communication."* (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your effective communication

Actively seek feedback:

Sometimes it is hard to know how effective you are at communicating and how to improve. It is important to **actively ask clients and colleagues** how effective your communication skills are, and areas where you could improve.

Reflect:

Make sure you stop and think about your communication skills – which consults went well/badly and why? Make a note of your reflections so that you can see your progress.

Try things out:

Take advantage of opportunities with simulated clients during your training to try out techniques that you may not be familiar with. If possible, record your sessions and review them afterwards to make the most of your learning.

Observe:

Make sure you actively observe other professionals communicating – what works well, and what needs improvement?

Do your reading:

Plenty has been written in journal papers and book chapters (indeed, even whole books) about effective veterinary communication – some key examples are provided below.

Use body language:

Don't under-estimate the influence of your body language, and the importance of reading your clients **non-verbal cues**. Try applying the acronym SOLER: square position, open posture, leaning slightly forward, eye contact, relax.⁴

Don't rush:

Taking the time to communicate effectively, to **stop and listen**, can - surprisingly - often be more efficient than narrowly focusing on the clinical task.

Hone your questioning skills:

Practice asking different types of questions, and note their impact on communication. In particular, try practicing a '**funnel sequence**' starting with the use of open questions (combined with patient listening), followed up with more focused questions.⁴

Smile:

One of the best ways to ensure that you are **approachable!**

Further Resources:

- BSAVA Professional Development Phase resources. www.bsava.com/Education/PDP

References:

1. Silverman J., Kurtz S. & Draper J. (2013) *Skills for Communicating with Patients*.
2. Adams, C.L. & Kurtz, S. (2017) *Skills for Communicating in Veterinary Medicine*. Oxford, UK: Otmoor Publishing
3. Kurtz, S., Silverman, J., Benson, J. & Draper J. (2003) Marrying content and process in clinical method teaching: enhancing the Calgary-Cambridge guides. *Acad. Med.* 78(8): 802-9
4. Gray, C. & Moffett, J. (2010) *Handbook of Veterinary Communication Skills*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell