

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the quality of a person that inspires trust.

Trust and trustworthiness are central to 'social capital', the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations; a key element contributing to this goodwill is trust.¹

Trust is a fundamental element of all human relationships, and is equally fundamental to developing and sustaining **effective client-practitioner relationships**, and **high-functioning veterinary teams**.

Trust inspires confidence as a result of two major components, both essential — *character* and *competence*. **Character** includes your personal integrity, motive and intent in interacting with people. **Competence** includes your capabilities, skills, and track record. Together these answer two basic questions:

- Are your intentions good?
- Are you capable of following through with these intentions?

However, clients are rarely in the position to fully judge character or competence, and must interpolate these from your interactions with them — thus it is important to consider how you will be perceived by clients.

What they said

"I find that they will tend to come back to you, because now that they trust you to fix their pet they're less likely to hop around practices ... But getting that initial trust ... it's really important." (Recent graduate)

*"I changed vets until I found one that I trust ... I think the **relationship** is extremely important, as I need to trust they are giving me advice to the best interests of my animals, especially regarding difficult decisions. Rapport and trust is important the other way too – they trust me enough that if I say my animal is unwell, they believe me, even if the animal has no major signs." (Client)*

*"I would prefer to feel able to trust my vet's judgement and to follow their considered and expert recommendation, rather than to be provided with lots of options for my own analysis. But that depends on feeling that **empathy**, and feeling that they have my pet's interests at heart." (Client)*

How is trustworthiness recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You are always honest and open, and tell the truth even when it might come at personal cost
- You are reliable and always keep your word
- You are trusted by others (e.g. they confide in you, value your recommendations, etc.)
- You trust others and value mutual trust

Perceived by others:

- Truthful, credible, accurate, consistent (e.g. not erratic or fickle); reliable, upholds commitments and promises
- Open and transparent manner; answers even difficult questions honestly
- Calm and comfortable body language, easy eye contact, active listening
- Trusted motives and personal ethics (e.g. not self-interest or financial gain)
- Professional in their actions (e.g. respects confidentiality)

Why is trustworthiness important to employability?

Employers and colleagues place a high value on **effective teams**, which depend on trusting, open relationships. Trust is central to both effective clinical care and the veterinary business, particularly through its **influence on client compliance and uptake of recommendations**.

The VetSet2Go project found that trust was pivotal in building an **effective vet-animal-client relationship**. In surveys, many clients commented on the importance of being able to trust their veterinary surgeon. Client comments converged into four major themes, being the importance of:

- character (behaviour) and competence in helping to build trust
- establishing a trusting relationship with the animal, not just the client
- mutual trust and respect, and valuing the clients' opinions
- time and continuity in helping to build trust



"I can't stress enough how important it is to me to build a trusting relationship with my vet." (Client)

"Nothing worse than when you feel that your vet hasn't really got a clue. Better that they are honest rather than making a wrong diagnosis." (Client)

"The vet needs to be able to gain the confidence of the animal so that it trusts the vet." (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance trustworthiness

Don't judge yourself:

Difficulty gaining trust from others doesn't mean that you are an untrustworthy person; it is potentially a fault of communication or simply requires patience in building the relationship over time.

Be a human first:

While trust is based in judgments of both character and competence, trying to impress first with your technical competence may risk coming across as clinical, cold, or intimidating. Be a human first – warm, open, friendly, kind and interested in the other person. Use appropriate language that will be understood.

Keep your word:

If you promise to do something, like phone a client or follow up on a task, then ensure that you do it.

Practise empathy:

Empathy is critical to building trust in client relationships and vet teams. People are more likely to trust you if they feel you have listened and empathised with their perspective.

Trust others:

Trust is a reciprocal process, and people are more likely to trust others if they feel trusted themselves. Empathy and respect prepare the ground for building a trusting relationship with clients.

Be authentic:

People are generally good at detecting insincerity, which undermines trust. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Pay attention to the client:

Practise 'active listening' – pay attention, hold eye contact, acknowledge that you have understood. Focus on what the person is telling you, rather than getting lost in your own thoughts.

Pay attention to the animal:

The VetSet2Go project found that vet clients often base their trust in whether their animal trusts the vet. Thus, sound animal handling skills are important in building trust with both the animal and their owner.

Tell the truth:

Being open and honest when you are uncertain or have made a mistake is most often best. Research has shown that, contrary to most vets' expectations, admitting uncertainty is beneficial to building trust.

Be patient:

It takes time and continuity to solidly establish trust. This can be particularly frustrating for new graduates, who may feel they are 'doing a good job', yet clients may still prefer to see the vet they have been seeing for years. New graduates in particular should not feel disheartened when clients may prefer to see a more senior colleague.

Further Resources:

- Balzer, M. (2015) *Trust and transparency in the veterinary profession*. <http://www.ava.com.au/node/70490>
- Grand, J.A., Lloyd, J.W., Ilgen, D.R., Abood, S. & Sonea, I.M. (2013) A measure of, and predictors for, veterinarian trust developed with veterinary students in a simulated companion animal practice. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 242: 322-334
- Osborne, C.A. (2005) *The 10 attributes of trustworthy people*. <http://veterinarynews.dvm360.com/10-attributes-trustworthy-people>
- Overfield, R. (2014) *The anatomy of trust*. <http://www.provetccg.com.au/Articles/TabId/191/PostId/25/the-anatomy-of-trust.aspx>

References:

1. Adler, P.S. & Kwon, S.W. (2002) Social capital: Prospects for a new concept. *Academy of Management Review* 27(1):17-40