

REPAIR KIT FOR COMMUNICATION MISTAKES

Thomas E. Catanzaro, DVM, MHA, LFACHE
Dipomate, American College of Healthcare Executives
CEO, Veterinary Consulting International
DrTomCat@aol.com; www.drtomcat.com

*Leadership is a matter of having people look at you
and gain confidence, seeing how you react.
If you are in control, they will stay in control.*

Tom Landry

Whether you are engaging in casual conversation with fellow staff members on your first day of employment, or are a manager trying to get the Medical Director's undivided attention, or talking to a client about a prospective sale, you need good communication skills in the practice. Everyone experiences awkward moments, such as being caught being tongue-tied in a hot/competitive, fast-paced, brainstorming session. Do not worry mate, even if you are an introverted newbie, being a good communicator is a learnable skill.

Here are some common pitfalls that can work to your disadvantage in most professional settings, and ideas on how to navigate around them:

Effective Listening: Listening is one of the most important aspects of effective communication. Successful listening means not just understanding the words or the information being communicated, but also understanding how the speaker feels about what they're communicating. Effective listening can: Make the speaker feel heard and understood, which can help build a stronger, deeper connection between you; Create an environment where everyone feels safe to express ideas, opinions, and feelings, or plan and problem solve in creative ways; Save time by helping clarify information, avoid conflicts and misunderstandings; Relieve negative emotions. When emotions are running high, if the speaker feels that he or she has been truly heard, it can help to calm them down, relieve negative feelings, and allow for real understanding or problem solving to begin.

The Fix: If your goal is to fully understand and connect with the other person, listening effectively will often come naturally. If it doesn't, you can remember the following tips. The more you practice them, the more satisfying and rewarding your interactions with others will become.

- **Focus fully on the speaker**, his or her body language, and other nonverbal cues. If you're daydreaming, checking text messages, or doodling, you're almost certain to miss nonverbal cues in the conversation. If you find it hard to concentrate on some speakers, try repeating their words over in your head—it'll reinforce their message and help you stay focused.
- **Avoid interrupting** or trying to redirect the conversation to your concerns, by saying something like, "If you think that's bad, let me tell you what happened to me." Listening is not the same as waiting for your turn to talk. You can't concentrate on what someone's saying if you're forming what you're going to say next. Often, the speaker can read your facial expressions and know that your mind's elsewhere.

- **Avoid seeming judgmental.** In order to communicate effectively with someone, you don't have to like them or agree with their ideas, values, or opinions. However, you do need to set aside your judgment and withhold blame and criticism in order to fully understand a person. The most difficult communication, when successfully executed, can lead to the most unlikely and profound connection with someone.
- **Show your interest** in what's being said. Nod occasionally, smile at the person, and make sure your posture is open and inviting. Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like "yes" or "uh huh." Repeat key points as summary statements.

Forgetting to speak body language: You may be distracted at work and merely mumble a hello when a co-worker arrives or walks past you. Or when you meet someone new, you simply announce your name and that is the total of your greeting. Body language is as important as verbal language when it comes to making first impressions (7% is in the words, 38% is in the tone, and 55% is nonverbal body language and eye contact), giving your message effect and winning people's trust.

The Fix: When greeting someone, look up from what you are doing, set down your pen, make eye contact, and smile! This tells a person you are tuning in, and they are "worthwhile", as well as conveying they are important to you. When meeting someone for the first time, say your name while extending a firm handshake, then share your business card (even staff); research has shown that the person is 75% more likely to remember you after the handshake, and 95% more likely to remember you after the business card is shared.

Reading a tone into a text or e-mail. Believe it or not. there is NO TONE in the electronically transmitted words you receive. Reacting to the tone of an e-mail or text message just tells people you have a bias/prejudice against them or the idea, and it kills all follow-up discussions. The other killers are the "But if . . ." and/or "That won't work . . ." responses without ensuring an exchange of information.

The Fix: An open response such as, "That is an interesting perspective, let's meet and discuss it." Get it out of electronic exchange and into open discussion where body language can be observed. It is a true "I need to hear you to understand you" effort by a caring leader.

Succumbing to lazy talk. Lazy talk consists of clichés or fillers that we repeat so often, and we really do not hear ourselves saying them. Examples include "you know", and "like". Overusing the words "thing" or "a lot" when another word would be more descriptive, and vague expressions such as "etc.", "whatever", and "stuff like that" are also lazy talk.

The Fix: Imagine that your words have value, where vague and meaningless words carry negative values, while specific, interesting words have an additive value. Make your speech patterns more valuable by minimizing lazy talk.

Creating conversational dead ends. If conversation does not include getting and giving information, if it does not go back and forth, it serve little purpose. We create conversational dead ends by making value judgments without discussion, by asking

questions that have a single word answer expectation, or by jumping to a judgmental statement that is out of context.

The Fix: When engaging in small talk, ask open-ended questions that spark meaningful explanations. Examples: "What did you do this weekend that was exciting?" or "How do you stay so cheerful on a Monday morning?" or "Could you share how you came to that set of assumptions?"

Letting a subject pass. People we chat with almost always offer an opening, conversationally speaking, but if you not looking for these, or you have started formulating a response early in the opening discussion, an opportunity to go deeper may pass you by.

The Fix: If someone says, "Thanks for noticing I lost weight. It is always a battle to stay in shape since I love to cook," instead of nodding and saying nothing (or neutral in passing), you could follow-up with a question or personal self-observation about dieting, fitness, or cooking. While empathy and/or interest in the topic is good, the "Why don't you . . ." response is a self-serving turn-off.

Offering an opinion as fact. We have all be guilty of making declarations that sound as though they should be carved in stone. For example, "That is the best Italian restaurant around." This style of "yum, this is the best" is a normal Gen-Y communication style, but is not really great in cross-generation communications.

The Fix: To avoid being labeled a know-it-all by your co-workers, colleagues, and clients, all you have to do preface such statements with, "It seems to me . . ." or "I've come to believe . . ." or "I think . . ."

Trying to be overly charming. Do you feel the need to tell jokes, throw around fancy professional jargon, and be the life of the consult room? Being charming can backfire in a healthcare setting.

The Fix: Good conversationalists talk about plain, simple, subjects when trying to get to know and get along with others. Forget about being super eloquent, clever or pretentious. Keep your exchanges simple and direct. Trying to impress others will only come across as disingenuous and fake. It is alienating to others.

Exiting Awkwardly. It is common to have difficulty ending conversations graciously with someone you've just met, not to mention those annoying people who corner us in the supermarket where we cannot escape easily. Please, never make up an untrue excuse, such as a phone call you're (not) expecting, or say, "Well, uh, I gotta go." If you do, it will likely create a feeling of bad will.

The Fix: make the other person feel good before you say goodbye. Remember their pet's name or even their kid's name. "Ms Rossi, it's been a pleasure (smile and extend your hand to shake good-bye), but I have to get back to the clinic. Hope to see you and White Fang in the near future."

Spoiling a compliment. Many of us have a difficult time accepting compliments. Two of the most common mistakes people make are contradicting the person who tells you that you look great, as with "Nah, I'm a mess today," or discounting the words by bouncing it right back, as with "You too."

The Fix: take it in, and let the other person know that their gesture of generosity is meaningful. Smile and say something like, "Thanks, you have made my day!"

Texting, not talking. How many times have you been in the break room or fast food joint where people who know each other are focused on their smartphones? This sends rude message to the other person (especially non-Gen-Y people) that they do not matter. In business and healthcare settings, it is also a missed opportunity to connect and possibly learn something.

The Fix: Save the texting and e-mailing for times when you are alone, or actually in the presence of total strangers, such as long commuter rides. Practice the art of small talk by asking people polite questions about an animal-centered topic, or sometimes a current event. You may even be able to ask a specific detail about that person's family, interests, or their pet's status. "How has that new diet been working for your puppy?" or "Did you get to fish this past weekend?"

Taking criticism poorly. There is nothing worse than a staff member or co-worker who refuses to hear feedback, gets defensive, and thus impedes communication progress at the practice.

The Fix: Try to listen to what the other person is saying; hear their caring intentions before responding. Remember, seldom is it an attack on you personally. Then respond with a simple question that shows you were listening to the core issue(s). Follow-up with a simple statement that shows appreciation, such as "Thank you for pointing that out," or "That is really a great observation - you just did us a great favor."