Introduction

Modern veterinary practices are increasingly adopting equipment and management procedures that rely on technologically advanced components and integrated systems designed to perform diagnostic evaluations or support clinic business functions. Examples of modern technology support systems used in veterinary practices include visual imaging, clinical pathology diagnostic services, computerized data based medical records, financial and business operating systems, and wireless communication systems. While the systems become more sophisticated, the essential component still remains the human resource required to operate the equipment and provide the veterinary medical care prescribed for patients.

Successful practices employ and depend on para-professional veterinary technicians or technical assistants as members of the patient care and hospital support team. While an individual staff member’s contribution to a team may be difficult to quantify, it is generally acknowledged that performance and efficiency (organizational as well as personal) will be lost if the team fails to interact in a positive manner or loses collective focus on the primary objectives of the clinic. When personal conflict erupts (and it will), the cause will often be due to the lack of communication between individuals. This section will discuss work related conflicts between employees, and identify the behavior that will help to mitigate or prevent loss of performance.

Workplace Communication and Conflict

Veterinary practices, especially private practices, assume responsibility for a number of operational functions that are complex and require close attention to detail. The responsibilities range from business management and human resource development to veterinary medical diagnostics, treatment, and surgery. As veterinary medicine continues to advance, and medical
technology continues to become more sophisticated, the modern veterinary practitioner becomes increasingly more reliant on others to help manage the clinic and perform the many tasks required to operate the equipment and provide medical care to the patients.

The ability to meet the expectations of the animal owners, and successfully treat the patient, requires a team approach to distribution of duties and responsibilities within the clinic. Successful teams incorporate the ability to share authority, assume responsibilities, communicate effectively, and delegate duties while maintaining a common focus on the primary objectives of the practice. The challenge for the veterinary practitioner (i.e., the manager) and the staff (i.e., team members) is in fostering a working environment that is inclusive and respectful of one another. This allows each team member to demonstrate their technical skill and knowledge in the performance of their job duties. When individuals have difficulty transitioning into a team environment, misunderstanding and conflict may arise.

Traditionally, within the technical and hard science disciplines the emphasis of worker performance has been placed on job knowledge and technical skill. Recent surveys indicate that personal interactive, non-technical soft skills contribute significantly to the success of a project or corporate mission. Personal productivity, team collaboration, and team synergy increase whenever personal soft skills are developed to complement the technical hard skills required for completion of the broader mission. Communication skills are ranked highest among the soft skills requiring development in the technical workplace. Communication skills include a wide array of interactions that include face-to-face verbal exchange, non-verbal communication (body language, facial expressions, behavior), written communication, and job performance.

Conflicts are classified as being relational, process oriented, or task oriented. Relational conflicts are focused on interpersonal relationships between team members. Process conflicts are focused on disagreements about how work assignments and priorities should be accomplished and how to attain the organizational goals. Task oriented conflicts occur when parties disagree about the basic goals of the organization.
Probably the greatest risk to performance and achievement of organizational goals is a result of miscommunication; believing in what is perceived rather than what is being said. Studies indicate that 80% of communication between individuals is non-verbal. Successful interactions between people rely on the spoken message being received with the same intent that it was spoken. If a person receiving a message perceives that the verbal communication fails to agree with the non-verbal communication, miscommunication or confusion is likely to result. Awareness and personal sensitivity to the possibility of contradiction between verbal and non-verbal communication is considered essential to the establishment of successful interpersonal communications and relationships.

**Implications for Veterinary Assistants**

The pace at which modern society and technology is evolving creates a significant challenge for anyone in a service-oriented profession (e.g., veterinary medicine) to stay ahead and anticipate trends successfully. Today’s society is better educated and better informed than at any other time in history; because of this they have higher expectations for professional services. Within the veterinary profession, the veterinary practitioner’s ability to meet the expectations of the client (the animal owners) by providing high quality, empathetic, personalized care is in large part contingent on the efficiency and competence of the team members of the clinic support staff.

Veterinary technicians and assistants are considered to be technically skilled knowledge-based workers. Working within the team concept, they are expected to interact professionally, communicate effectively either verbally or non-verbally, and display attitudes and behaviors that promote or result in a positive outcome or successful completion of the organizational objectives. These skills are descriptive of soft skill competencies and are identified as essential attributes of members of the engineering, technology, and veterinary medical professions. Veterinary technicians and assistants in the work force today must be aware of and willing to exhibit behaviors and attitudes that promote team cohesion.

*Veterinary professionals work together as a team.*
References


Questions

1. Describe soft skills.
2. Describe three forms of non-verbal communication.
3. What percent of communication between individuals is non-verbal?
4. Describe a form of miscommunication.