

Tips

on
Professional
Attitude

and
Effective
Listening

For the Veterinary Practice Team



A supplement to the AVMA Handbook on TEAMWORK

Tips on
Professional Attitude
and
Effective Listening

**Developed by the AVMA Marketing Staff
for veterinary hospital employees**



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BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

Why Improve Your Listening Skills?

We all listen, but few of us listen effectively. Hearing is not the strongest of our five senses when it comes to accepting new information. Eighty percent of the information we process is received visually; only 20% comes from what we hear. The same is true for remembering information; we recall about 30% of what we see and only 20% of what we hear. *This means we have to work harder at listening if we want to remember more of what we hear.*

There is a practical side to improving listening skills, especially for anyone in a service profession such as veterinary medicine. How well you listen impacts your relationships with clients, co-workers and suppliers. Better listening builds better partnerships. Here's why:

With clients: Studies on client retention consistently indicate that one of the major reasons clients switch practices is because of misunderstandings (i.e. poor communication). Today's animal-owners come to your hospital expecting not only excellent medical care but also quality people care. To give them both, you must be sure there is open and clear communication at all times. In doing so, you increase client retention and practice revenue.

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

With co-workers: Just like clients, employees need to feel confident that they are being heard and understood by their supervisors and co-workers. Good listeners are valued by everyone on staff. Active listening conveys respect for the speaker, as well as a sincere interest in what they have to say.

With suppliers: Successful salespeople are exceptionally good listeners. They have learned the importance of paying close attention to what their customers want and need from them. The same is probably true of your vendors. Try listening by paying full attention to what they have to say. Besides making them feel more significant to the practice, you may benefit from hearing about new products or equipment that you might have missed had you allowed yourself to be distracted.

In addition to having a positive affect on your work relationships, improved listening will be noticed by your friends, family and others outside of the practice. Ironically, as your listening skills sharpen, you will become painfully aware when others are not actively listening to you.

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

How We Fail To Listen Effectively

Most of us have fallen into bad habits when it comes to listening to others. We have allowed ourselves to listen differently at different times to different people. With such inconsistent listening skills, we increase the risk of not hearing everything that is being said or interpreting it incorrectly. Behaviors that are typical of poor listeners include:

Failing to make eye contact with the speaker. We acknowledge a person's presence and signal our readiness to hear them by looking them in the eye. People will assume they are being ignored or devalued when a listener fails to make eye contact.

Not stopping what you are doing to acknowledge and hear what someone has to say. It is rude, distracting and annoying to a speaker when the person being spoken to divides their attention between listening and doing activities unrelated to the conversation. For instance, in a veterinary hospital this could include working at the computer, filing paperwork, cleaning up an exam room, doing lab work, etc. while a client or co-worker is trying to explain something to you.

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

Mentally moving ahead of the speaker and formulating your response before the speaker has finished talking. Not only are you likely to miss hearing important information, but you won't see how the speaker's body language connects with what is being said. You also risk an inappropriate response because you did not wait to hear everything that was said.

Evaluating the content of what is being said before the speaker has finished talking. Our personal biases and prejudices can get in the way of active listening. In our rush to determine that what we are hearing is not relevant or acceptable, we may decide to "tune out" the speaker, missing any new information that follows.

Focusing more on how the speaker looks than on what is being said. It is easy to be distracted by how a speaker looks, dresses, or moves, especially when attending a seminar or other group program. The problem is that it draws our attention away from focusing on what the speaker is saying. It helps to close your eyes for a moment to reduce the distraction and redirect your attention to the words being spoken.

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

The Four Steps To Effective Listening

Most experts list four steps in effective listening. They are:

1. **Decide to pay attention.** Hearing is an involuntary behavior. It is only when we consciously begin to select and process what we hear that we are *really* listening.
2. **Interpret what is said.** Try to understand what the speaker is saying. This is not as easy as it sounds. Our personal biases often make it hard to hear the exact meaning of what a speaker is attempting to convey.
3. **Evaluate what has been said.** Wait until you have heard *all* the information before making a decision about its value. Ask questions to clarify points and confirm that you are correctly interpreting what is being said. Only then should you decide if you agree or disagree with the speaker's message.
4. **Offer feedback.** Let the speaker know your reaction to what was said through the use of words (comments and questions) and your body language (such as nodding your head, folding/unfolding your arms, smiling or frowning).

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

Ten Ideas for Improving Your Listening

1. On the telephone, tone of voice is *three times* more important than the words that are spoken. Listen carefully to a caller's tone to determine the emotion behind the words. Always be sure *your* voice sounds helpful and caring over the phone.
2. When communicating face-to-face, listen with your *ears* but use your *eyes* to interpret body language and your *mind* to interpret the speaker's emotions and attitudes.
3. Be aware of the types of words, phrases or personalities that immediately trigger a negative response from you. Train yourself to recognize when you are reacting to those words/phrases instead of waiting for the person to finish speaking. When your emotions are aroused, it is easy to distort or misinterpret the speaker's intent.
4. Take notes when you are listening to clients or others who have information to give you. Not only will taking notes help you remember important points but it will demonstrate to the speaker how much you value what is being said.

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

5. Keep distractions to a minimum. Make client calls in a quiet area of the hospital where you won't be bothered by excessive noise. When you are giving clients information, instructions, or explaining charges, try to do so in private, if possible. Active listening requires your full concentration and undivided attention.
6. Since listening well can be exhausting, give yourself a break after you have been listening to someone for a long time. With clients, try to clear your head of the last conversation before moving onto the next one. When you feel you are on overload, relax a few minutes or take a short walk to re-energize.
7. Demonstrate your attention to a speaker by occasionally nodding or tilting your head to indicate you understand what is being said. Also, show your interest by making eye contact and resisting the temptation to interrupt or finish the speaker's sentences.
8. Develop a system for remembering people's names. Always repeat a person's (or pet's) name right away and use it in your conversation. Ask for the spelling of a difficult name and jot it down to aid retention.

BUILDING BETTER LISTENING SKILLS

9. Remind other people to actively listen when you are talking with them. Gently express your concern when you feel they are not concentrating on what you have to say. Use phrases like “I sense that you might not have understood what I just said” or “Let me repeat that since it is so important” to regain their attention.

10. Remember that today’s clients expect everyone on staff in a veterinary practice to be a good listener. An animal’s well-being is in large part dependant upon your ability to communicate effectively with the owners. This means not only hearing their words but listening and watching for their unspoken fears and anxieties.

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ADOPTING A PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

How do you define “Attitude”?

Your attitude is both internal and external. Your internal attitude is how you view the world around you. Your external attitude is how you communicate that vision to those around you; in other words, you express your attitude through your behavior. You control (and can change) your attitude. When it is positive, staff and clients will notice and appreciate your friendly disposition. A positive attitude can lead to a higher level of job satisfaction and a greater ability to put problems in perspective.

A negative attitude is just the opposite. Someone who is frequently depressed, pessimistic or constantly complaining has a negative attitude. People with negative attitudes are a danger in the workplace because attitudes are infectious and a bad one can be “caught” by a co-worker easier than a good one. Also, consumers will stop using a service where the employees appear indifferent or bored.

ADOPTING A PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

What is a “professional attitude”?

A *professional attitude* means that when you go to work each day, you must be willing to leave the cares and concerns of home outside the building. This applies to every staff member, regardless of whether they work full or part time, because clients see everyone in the practice as part of a professionally trained group of people dedicated to animal health. You reinforce this perception with a professional approach to handling both owners and animals. It means your attitude must be characterized by courtesy, compassion, competence and caring throughout the day -- everyday.

While maintaining a professional attitude is not always easy, the reputation of the practice depends upon everyone doing their best to keep their emotions under control and approach each client and patient situation in a positive, productive frame of mind.

ADOPTING A PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

How is a professional attitude demonstrated in client service?

You express a *client service attitude* when you --

- * Treat each client with courtesy and respect, even at those times when you are extremely busy.
- * Keep your composure when a client is upset or demanding and are careful not to react emotionally to problems but focus your energy on problem-solving.
- * Don't prejudge clients on the basis of how they look, dress, speak or by the types of animals they keep.
- * Are careful not to embarrass clients or infer that they are bad owners. No one wins in such a situation and those clients will seek veterinary care elsewhere.

ADOPTING A PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

Is my attitude apparent to others?

Even if you don't actually tell people whether you are in a positive or negative mood, your attitude is clearly visible in the following ways:

- * Your facial expressions reveal your emotional state (smiling, frowning, scowling, etc.)
- * The tone of your voice lets others know if you are angry, happy, impatient, excited, etc.
- * Your posture, gestures and dress also express your attitude. A sloppy appearance reflects a careless, indifferent attitude toward work while a well-groomed, professional look tells everyone that you are serious about your job and proud of what you do.

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What can happen to put a professional attitude at risk?

Lots of things can threaten to turn a positive, professional attitude into a negative one. Think about the last time a client complained to you either on the phone or in person. Did that have an impact on your attitude? Did it upset you for the entire day? It takes practice to learn how to put such an event in perspective and not let it influence your attitude. Some other risks to a professional attitude include:

- * Unexpected problems at home -- a financial upset, disputes among family members, or any other sudden negative change in your personal life.

- * Poor health -- when you don't feel your best, it is hard not to let it affect the quality of your work or relationships with clients and co-workers.

- * Unexplained anxiety -- it happens to everyone at some time. A sense of dread, fear or anger for no apparent reason. These are difficult emotions to control at work.

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How can you strengthen a professional attitude?

No one can be expected to be optimistic and enthusiastic about their jobs all the time -- that's unrealistic. However, with so much at risk (client relationships, patient care, the dependence of co-workers), it makes good sense to strive to have a positive, professional attitude everyday. Here are some general guidelines for staying more positive:

- 1) When faced with a difficult situation at work, don't let it affect your attitude for the rest of the day. If possible, take a short walk or run an errand to get a change of scenery. Try to put the problem in perspective. Is it really as serious as it seems? If it is, don't delay in talking with someone about it and getting help in finding a solution.
- 2) When possible, avoid being around negative people or situations. Attitudes are contagious, so gravitate toward people who are enthusiastic and positive. Their good feelings will be infectious.

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- 3) Keep a balance in your life between work and play. Bad attitudes are often the result of overwork, stress and too little “down time”. You need quality time with friends and family without feeling guilty that you are not spending more time at work.
- 4) Exercise will improve your state of mind. It has been proven that regular exercise releases chemicals that help restore the correct chemical balance in the brain. This, in turn, helps to reduce stress, improve outlook, sharpen thinking skills and even curb your appetite.
- 5) Always remember that you control your attitude. It is up to you to make the daily decision to take a positive approach to your work and your life!
- 6) Each day, make an effort to:
 - * compliment clients and co-workers when they do something exceptionally well.
 - * practice little acts of kindness like helping a co-worker finish a project or carrying a client’s pet

ADOPTING A PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

supplies out to his/her car.

- * smile often, especially when talking to clients on the telephone.
 - * say “thank you” to both clients and co-workers.
 - * remind clients how important they are to you and to the hospital.
- 7) Learn to laugh at home and at work. Not only is laughter a great stress reducer, but it also helps you put problems in perspective. Laughter is contagious -- by sharing a humorous moment, you help others to relax, too!

CONCLUSION

No one in business today can afford to take customer loyalty for granted. Consumers have high expectations of the services they use -- especially professional, medical providers -- and they will quickly change doctors (both human and animal) if they do not feel they are being appreciated and treated fairly.

Practicing active listening and cultivating a professional attitude are two important elements for ensuring success in a veterinary practice. Both will help veterinarians and their staff strengthen the bonds with the people the practice depends upon most -- its clients. When clients are given the respect and attention they need to feel that they are an important part of the practice "family," they will not hesitate to give both their loyalty and their referrals in return.

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