

Confidence comes with time and the time is now!

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Abstract

A lack of confidence is a common concern among recent veterinary graduates. We as professionals can build our confidence through practice, asking questions, discovering more about the client's business, and asking their goals. All of these things add to the building of trust between doctor and client. As trust grows, our confidence grows.

Key words: confidence, goals, consultation, trust, mentor

Résumé

Un manque de confiance est une préoccupation fréquente chez les vétérinaires nouvellement diplômés. En tant que professionnels, nous pouvons bâtir notre confiance par la pratique, en posant des questions, en découvrant plus de choses sur les affaires de nos clients et en leur demandant leurs buts. Tous ces éléments permettent le développement d'une relation de confiance entre le docteur et le client. Lorsque la confiance se renforce, notre assurance s'améliore.

Introduction

A quick Google search gives the definition of confidence as "a feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities" and gender appropriately gives the example "she's brimming with confidence"

Confidence can be described as a belief in oneself, that one has the ability to meet life's challenges and to succeed, and acting in a way that conveys that belief. Being confident requires having a realistic sense of one's capabilities and feeling secure in that knowledge.³ Confidence is the felt sense of a "can-do" attitude.⁴

Projecting just enough confidence helps people gain credibility, make a strong first impression, deal with pressure, and tackle personal and professional challenges. It is also attractive interpersonally, as projecting confidence helps put others at ease.³

So, is 'success' always feeling confident? If so, then you are surely overconfident. There will absolutely be times in your career that you *need* to feel underconfident. Some examples would include seeing a problem or case you have never seen before, a surgery that has an unexpected finding well into the procedure or being questioned on your thoughts/ideas by a very experienced owner. The list could go on and on. Practice tip: when you are asked how many times you have done a procedure when it is actually your first time, simply say, "You don't even want to *know* how many

times I have done this." Adding hand motions will further dramatize your point.

You and the people around you impact your confidence. What can you do to influence how others see you if you want to become an asset to others? What can you do so they may react to you in a positive manner? Some ideas are, be honest, humble, transparent, empathetic, interested and positive. Ask your clients their goals and follow with "how can all of us at ABC Veterinary Clinic help you to achieve your goals?" Say "thank you", make deposits into their 'emotional bank account' and give them a compliment whenever deserved. An example is that after a successful OB call I always turn to the producer, shake his or her hand and say, "This is your success. Thank you for calling quickly so *we* could get a live calf."

Speak up when your voice is needed. Take actions that move you toward your goals and your owner's goals even if it seems hard to take those risks. With both speaking up and taking action, it is not that you have confidence and then speak or do something; instead, it is through speaking and taking action that you develop confidence.⁴ Doing these things allows you to earn the trust of others and this is the key to solidifying your role as a confident advisor for their business.

If we are asking the client their goals, we also need to know our goals. What is your goal for improving your confidence? Our profession has a suicide rate well above average in the US. Female veterinarians were 3.5 times and male veterinarians were 2.1 times more likely to die from suicide compared to the population as a whole.⁶ When people are sufficiently convinced that their lives will not get better, they may consider the possibility that life is not worth living. Of course, the point at which they will be most tempted to end it is the point at which they feel most pessimistic about the value of their lives.⁵ Becoming more confident (if that is needed) will allow us to see that what we do has value, that our life has value.

The cost of underconfidence is the opportunity cost of adventures not undertaken, delights undiscovered, the life un-lived. Therefore, the errors of underconfidence that we make are often invisible because we do not know what we have missed. The careers where we would have been successful do not unfold.⁵ I often told our sons as they were growing up that they will have more regrets from saying "no" than from saying "yes". The point was to stretch them. Yes, get a summer job in Yellowstone National Park. Yes, study abroad in Denmark. Do not have regrets.

If 1 of your goals of developing more confidence is to strengthen your role as a consultant on the farm, here are some tips that have helped me in my career.

- Learn more about your client's business. I use the

open-ended question, “tell me about your beef/dairy business”. “Tell me about _____ is the question that gives me the most information about what is really important to them. You may learn how many generations have been on this farm, why the owner decided on this profession, etc. Take notes so you will have this information for future conversations.

- Ask, “What do you enjoy most about your business?” Notice I always say “business”, not “raising cattle”, “milking cows”, etc. I want to establish the mindset that I am dealing with a business. I need to be a business consultant to them.
- “What keeps you up at night?” This should reveal their biggest frustration. The follow-up question, “What can my colleagues and I at ABC Veterinary Clinic do to help you tackle that concern?”
- “What are your short (1 to 2 years) and long (5 to 10 years) term goals for the business” Write these down and see if there is something on the short term list that you can target for immediate action.
- You need to be the expert in your clinic on something that is important to your client’s business and your veterinary business. Group practices should have experts in different areas.
- Join Toastmasters International. This is a service organization that teaches you to have better speaking skills. The additional benefits are that it teaches you to be a better listener and better speaking and listening skills leads to increased confidence.
- You need to have mentors throughout your career. You need different mentors for different needs. If you really want to grow, become a mentor.
- Read books that stretch you. Some that have positively impacted my career are:
 - How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie;
 - Strengthsfinder by Tom Rath;
 - Start with Why by Simon Sinek;
 - The Power of Positive Thinking by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale;
 - Mindset by Carol Dweck;
 - any book by John Maxwell.
- Books recommended by others:
 - The Magic of Thinking Big by David Schwartz;
 - Think & Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill;
 - Daring Greatly by Brené Brown;
 - Awaken the Giant Within by Tony Robbins;
 - Quiet Strength by Tony Dungy.
- Ask for advice, not feedback. Advice means “how can I improve”, feedback asks, “what did I do well”.

Learn about your clients as humans. These are great questions to ask early in your working relationship:

- “Tell me about your family”
- “Do you have any hobbies?” (could be a trap for an overworked dairyman). A better question may be,

“What do you enjoy doing when you are not working?”

Later in the relationship, ask, “What is a fun fact that I might be surprised to learn about you?” The key to all of these questions is to show that “it is better to be *interested* than interesting” as my Grandfather always said.

On sick animal calls, my first question is always, “When was the last time the animal was perfectly normal?” and not, “When did you notice she was sick?” The former question does not make the owner feel guilty about possibly missing the animal’s plight for a day or two. Our job is not to criticize the owner and make them feel guilty. Our job is to have the best information to solve the case. If we find that we have a client that frequently calls too late, that is something that needs to be tactfully addressed at another time.

Continuing to Grow Your Confidence

William S. Burroughs said, “If you’re not growing, you’re dying”. No matter where you are today in your practice career, if you do not continue to grow you will quickly become obsolete. The pinnacle of your career should coincide with the day you retire. If this is not the case, then you have let someone down. Would you want your physician say, “I am at a point in my career that I feel I can coast from this point forward with no need to continue to learn”?

I am a firm believer that you need to reinvent yourself every so often. I think how often depends on your personality. Do this mean you need to change jobs or change careers? For most people, I would say “No”. It might mean adding a Registered Veterinary Technician to your practice and training her to do all of the jobs she can legally do, maybe you have a handful of clients that want you to do employee training or maybe it is becoming the expert in your clinic on growth implant protocols. I think we can all get in a rut by simply perfecting our already excellent skills. We need new challenges to keep us moving forward, building our confidence in new areas.

Veterinary practice is a wonderful career, but it is not wonderful all of the time. That is normal. When I see someone receive an award and they say, “I loved my job so much that I don’t feel like I’ve ever really worked a day in my life” or “Every day of my career has been great day” I wonder “Are they serious?” I have loved all 3 of my careers in veterinary medicine, but I have had some horrible days! Again, I think most would agree that it is very normal to have some bad days. I told our students that took the food animal ambulatory block at Purdue that the goal every day was to: 1) learn something; 2) help someone; and 3) have fun. Most days we achieved our goal.

What if the “bad days” are a significant portion of your work life? This is not normal. If things are not going well at your current job, you have 3 options and 3 only.

1. Change things.
2. Accept that you cannot change things and leave.

3. Accept that you cannot change things and learn to be happy with that.

Option number 1 can become a win-win situation and that is the ideal. The problem is that if the culture is so negative, change is very unlikely to happen. Then number 2 becomes the next best option. “You will become the practice” is a quote I like to use and if the practice is not a “fit” for you, that does not mean you are the problem. You may be the problem, but from my dealings with former students, that is the exception to the rule. If you select option number 3 then you are not allowed to gripe to anyone about your job. You selected number 3 and that does not allow you to lament about your mediocre job to your spouse, parents, co-workers or friends. Notice the last 6 words are “learn to be happy with that”.

Earning the Consultant Role

I want to revisit becoming more of a consultant for your herd owners. Your time is now! You have achieved the level of confidence that it takes to earn the trust of the producer.

The key to adding additional service/becoming more of a consultant to your existing clients is to always ask them their goals as has been mentioned previously. Do we regularly do this? Dirks¹ concluded that “Veterinarians that do not clearly seek the views of their clients, often do not fully engage in the advisory process.” Their study showed that only 24% of the time did the veterinarian and producer set herd performance goals. Veterinarians who did not set goals indicated that they and the producer ‘intuitively knew’ what each wanted to achieve, and that the setting of these performance goals was considered ‘too formal’. Veterinarians often could not identify a producer’s main goal. During on-farm conversations, veterinarians did not actively seek to identify the producers’ goals or problems, suggest a co-operative strategy or summarize any advice given.¹ These results should be an embarrassment to any veterinarian that does bovine work. The study also concluded that the veterinarian needs to actively seek out the goals of the producer because the producers did not readily volunteer this information.¹ I am going to repeat this. We must ask the producer their goals! Do not expect the client to offer this information! The awareness of the producer’s goals is paramount to compliance by the producer and successful attainment of the producer’s goals. If we want to become an asset to the producer, we must stop telling them what to do and instead seek to understand their top priorities for the improvement of their business. Focus on perceived benefits and remove or reduce barriers to successful implementation of a solution.² Producers perceive the veterinarian as an appreciated, important, and frequently contacted information source. In this study, producers stated that they appreciated their veterinarian organizing ‘producer study groups’ to collaborate on specific health issues.²

Our practice developed a total beef herd health program and we invited the clients that were a part of that program to

a ‘year-end’ meeting each January. The meeting consisted of a talk on a subject of importance to the group and concluded with a ‘round-table’ discussion where the producers shared their successes and failures of the previous year. Many of the clients stated that it was the best meeting they attended all year. Producers learning from each other and being leaders in specific areas turned out to be one of our best ideas ever for sustaining and growing our beef cow-calf production medicine program.

Communication/Creating Demand for Advice

The prevention of complex problems requires customized communication strategies as well as an integrated approach. Two factors of producer mindset are the most important behavioral determinants for improvement: believing there is a problem in the herd and belief in the effectiveness of management to solve that problem.² These 2 keys become the template on how to initiate a production medicine program. The program needs to be customized to the specific livestock business and the owner must believe that some aspect of their business can be improved with input from the herd health veterinarian. It is imperative that the producer takes ownership in the thought that improvements can be made. To close the loop in production medicine consultation, the solution must be reasonable to accomplish and the owner must validate the solution. The more the owner takes possession of the concern and the solution the more likely the change will happen. If the veterinarian identifies the concern and the producer feels that we are telling them what to do, the chance for success becomes minimal. A DVM friend explains it this way: “If it’s my idea, it’s a bad idea. If it’s your idea, it’s a great idea.” Ask the producer their goals (ensure they share ownership of the concern), admire the problem and only after thorough investigation finally propose a solution and ask if the solution is reasonable. If a solution is unknown at the time, this is not a concern. Many problems will be complex in nature and will take time for the veterinarian to develop a plan to solve the problem. The key is to respond to the client in a reasonable timeframe with a proposed solution. In my experience, the veterinarian is regarded just as highly if they immediately know the solution or if it comes after some research.

The use of open-ended questions such as “what are your short-term and long-term goals for your agricultural business?” If there are multiple decision makers in the business, these goals need to be universally accepted. Be sure to ask the entire management team so that you can get buy-in from everyone on the team. After the producer states his or her goals, the herd health veterinarian should ask, “How can our veterinary business help you achieve these goals?” It has been my experience that when you ask about goals and how your business can be an asset to your client’s business, you develop a stronger relationship. Other businesses that deal with this producer are not asking these questions. The fact

that we are asking them these questions puts us in a stronger position to become an asset to the producer's business.

An improvement in communications skills may be necessary to become more of an advisor to beef and dairy producers. According to dairy producers, veterinarians have difficulties in being proactive advisors and applying essential communication. Jansen et al found that producers say that veterinarians are persistent in their curatively oriented, prescriptive, reactive expert role that prevails in veterinarian-farmer contacts. These producers' advice is that veterinarians should take on the role of coach, sparring partner, and facilitator instead of being merely a technical expert.²

Just as veterinarians have different ways of learning and using information, so do producers. Communication strategies need to be customized to the specific learning style of each client. Producers may be segmented into information seekers, do-it-yourselfers, wait-and-seers, and reclusive traditionalists according to Jansen.² While 1 beef producer may be quickly convinced to make a herd management change if informed, "you will save \$5000/year by limit feeding your hay vs supplying it *ad lib*", another producer might decline because he does not see how the change is possible. While not every producer will heed the advice given, others that initially decline will make changes if you ask additional questions. Asking probing questions will provide a deeper understanding of an issue or topic.

Another key to the communication strategy is to utilize a team of experts, e.g. nutritionist, forage specialist, banker. These outside experts can bring a level of knowledge that the veterinarian does not possess and the veterinarian can then more thoroughly concentrate on areas of their expertise. Another advantage of having additional advisors is that the outside expert may repeat something that was mentioned by the herd health veterinarian in an earlier visit. This suggestion may be made in a similar or different way, but now it is seen or heard in a different light. Even though the advice may be 'old' to the client, the advice may be heard through 'new ears' and may now be taken. The goal is to help the producer achieve success and who gets the 'credit' for helping should not matter. If you are the veterinarian that invited the outside expert in to help the producer reach his or her goals, you will be seen as a more humble and confident leader to the producer. They now see you as the person that 'checked your ego' and was the key to solving the issue.

As a consultant, we must not be impatient when it comes to herd improvements. Even when a client identifies a need and we provide a solution, it may take years to implement the change. Herd concerns are generally long-term

problems that may have taken years to develop. A problem that took years to develop will likely take months or years to be fully resolved.

Developing confidence is learnable and actionable.⁴ Improvement comes just like any other skill that you wish to develop; you need to practice. Next week, make it a goal to practice developing confidence.

If you have a Monday morning herd check at a dairy where the owner is frustrated with transition cow issues, ask if you could assist with this issue. Let him or her know that you just attended a CE meeting and learned some new information from Dr. K. Fred Gingrich, an expert in this issue. Ask to make an appointment later in the week to thoroughly discuss the issue.

If you have a beef cow-calf herd owner that mentioned that their vaccination protocol seems to be haphazard, call the owner on Monday morning. Ask if you could schedule a time to help them develop a minimalistic but thorough protocol for their herd for the upcoming year. Share that you learned the latest from Dr. Christine Navarre who is known across the US as an expert in beef herd health. Let them know you want to be an asset to their herd and you want them to have the most up-to-date plan for disease prevention possible.

Practice developing confidence again on Tuesday and Wednesday and practice building your confidence every day and your satisfaction with your career will continue to grow.

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