

Animal instincts: To succeed with humans, listen, learn and lead

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Abstract

Newly-graduated veterinary practitioners are equipped with an impressive science education when they step into their first jobs. They're enthused about their new careers and eager to ply their skills. The post-graduate Real World is full of challenges; however, and not all of them were addressed in the veterinary curriculum. Consider the stresses of moving into a new community. Or trying to sort out the peculiarities, people and politics in the practice. There may be clients who are openly skeptical of the new graduate because they are inexperienced and/or unfamiliar to them. The shift to the working world can be daunting. The success-limiting species for veterinary practitioners walks on 2 legs, not 4. The power and practice of applying fundamental 'people skills' like listening, learning and leading will build credibility, relationships and serve as a foundation for success in practice.

Key words: listening, empathy, connection, learning, questions, leadership

Introduction

I was visiting Craig's farm not as a veterinarian, but as a photographer. It's an impressive place – a very tidy enterprise milking 450 Jersey cows nestled in the hills of South Central Wisconsin. This was the first and only conversation I've ever had with the man. I wanted permission to take some photos of his cows and property but I got much more. There were many interesting threads to our chat that day, but the one that's pertinent to this paper had to do with who does his veterinary work. He uses a multi-person practice about 25 miles from his farm. He spoke very highly of a lady vet who's very good with the ultrasound for pregnancy diagnosis. "She's one of the best in the state," he said. Hmmm. Interesting. I wonder how he came to that conclusion. He went on to share, "I don't have much use for new vets, though. They come out here and don't have any experience. They're book-smart but not farm-smart."

Again, hmmm. How does he make that assessment?

Though our extensive veterinary training has focused on four-legged animals, our success as veterinarians is equally weighted on our ability to work with two-leggers. Our happiness, satisfaction, incomes, and outcomes are determined by our skills in communicating, cooperating, and collaborating with people.

People like Craig.

As a recent graduate, what does it take to win a guy like that over? How and when do we transition from being a new vet to being good enough to be on the team? It's a big challenge for new vets – earning confidence and trust - not just from clients like Craig, but from our colleagues in practice and support staff as well.

Is it hard skills, like ultrasonography and surgery that earn their regard or is it soft skills like connecting and emotional intelligence that swing them? Dr. Betsy Charles, DVM MA, Executive Director of the Veterinary Leadership Institute, corrects me when I refer to relating skills as 'soft skills.' She calls them *essential* skills. True. They *are* essential.

Humans are a complicated, emotional animal. We are biased. We're often irrational. We are so different from each other. However, as diverse as we are in our backgrounds, values and priorities, we are very similar in how we are wired. If we understand basic social needs and awaken our essential relating skills to meet them, we can quickly distinguish ourselves as desirable, interesting, and valuable to other people. This may be the faster track to winning friends and influencing people than impressing others with our technical talents¹.

I have titled this paper "Animal Instincts: To succeed with humans, listen, learn and lead". I chose animal instincts because our emotional brain is very influential in our decision-making. Though we have great capacity for processing logic, the more primitive, limbic part of our brain has a very large say in our judgements and actions. Knowing that, we can engage with others by listening, learning, and leading in ways that connect with them at an authentic and deeper level and build relationships that are not based solely on the perception of technical expertise.

Brain chemistry = Animal instincts

I'm sorry to ask you to revisit some basic neurobiology, but a quick review of 3 neurotransmitters and a hormone are in order. Why? Because so many of human behaviors are driven by the actions of 4 chemicals whose first initials make up the acronym DOSE². How we engage with people can activate these chemicals in the brain so as to create a deeper, more memorable connection. *Note: this is not about behavior manipulation.* The actions of these chemicals happen in everyone's brain every day. If we know a bit about how these endogenous 'happy chemicals' work, then perhaps we can utilize this information to make positive impressions on the people we interact with.

D is for Dopamine. This neurotransmitter is associated with motivation and reward. As we anticipate and achieve a goal we get a wee spurt of dopamine as a reward and a marker that this is the right path to achievement. We like it. Dopamine trains us that if we do X we can get a hit of feelgood and that means that if we repeat that action we are again rewarded. At the low end, Parkinson's Disease results from the *absence* of production of dopamine. On the other end, most addictive behaviors and drugs trigger the release of dopamine. They yield a sense of reward without doing the work. What actions can we undertake or engage with others to trigger the release of dopamine? For ourselves, learning or mastering something new can generate an "I got it!" response. Feels good? Blame dopamine. What can we do with others so that they, too, can experience a squirt of achievement nectar? If we're interacting with clients, an open conversation about their goals may lead to putting a plan together to work towards those goals. If big goals are broken down to steps, then recognition and achievement of subgoals results in many shots of feelgood along the way. If we engage in that process as coaches or consultants, we, too, get our own little squirt of satisfaction as we collaborate in others' successes.

O is for Oxytocin. Yes, the same molecule that we use for milk letdown and uterine contraction. Oxytocin is associated with how people bond and trust each other. There's the love and intimacy side of those activities, but with colleagues and customers if we are accountable, empathetic, and demonstrate integrity we will have oxytocin to thank for helping us to build a solid relationship and trust. Relationships take time and this molecule helps seal the deal.

S is for Serotonin. Serotonin is often referred to as a mood neurotransmitter. Most antidepressant medications are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), whose action is to retard the uptake of serotonin, elevating its concentration and our mood. Endogenous serotonin is released when one feels important and confident. A personal strategy for bolstering our serotonin levels is to remind ourselves of our good work and our importance (of course, we're taught from an early age that bragging is not good; I suggest it's a great strategy if we're talking to ourselves.). Others experience a squirt of serotonin when we recognize their improvement or achievement. Serotonin is down-regulated when we 'compare-and-despair,' which can lead to a sense of inadequacy, depression, and imposter syndrome.

E is for Endorphins. Often referred to as endogenous opioids, endorphins are neurotransmitters that, when triggered, mask physical pain. The 'runner's high,' a state of mind that accompanies extended physical exercise, is often attributed to endorphins. From that, exercise is a positive feelgood trigger. As is laughter. Laughter makes us feel good. Now we know why. It's no wonder that funny people are popular people. If we can laugh with others we are engaging more than just their sense of humor.

Neurobiology is fascinating and complex. My intention here is to highlight that some very basic human interactions

are stimulating chemicals in the brains of those around us that can have positive, lasting effects. A few years ago the AABP conference theme was 'Be Indispensable.' In my keynote speech, I riffed on the dopamine theme and suggested that as practitioners we should strive to 'Be Rewarding.' Considering the general effects of DOSE, if we want to be perceived as good people, we should reach out to others' animal instincts.

Listen

Psychologist William James once said, "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

At our core, we all want to feel important. Validated. Recognized.

Knowing that, how can we demonstrate appreciation to another?

I'll suggest it's simple (but not easy): listen well.

If you take nothing else away from this session/paper, please note this: the greatest impact you can have on another will come not from something you say but how well you listen. People who are good listeners are uncommon. Develop and practice good listening skills and you will have more impact with people than you can imagine.

You've already got a head start. Even though your 4 years in veterinary school have been spent learning about animals, you've also had to grow your observational skills. You are a Trained Observer. True story. You can't put that on your driver's license, but you can know that your impressive diagnostic skills can be used to good effect with humans, too.

Back up a step or 2 in this conversation. Carnegie et al, say that people want to be acknowledged and appreciated. Like all of us, they wish to be *interesting* to other people. You and I are wired that way too, you know. How do we attract that elusive attention? As a card-carrying introvert (consistently so on Myers-Briggs personality assessments), I've had to develop a cunning strategy for becoming more interesting without expending more energy with people. My secret? If I (you/we) wish to be more interesting to others, I should be more *interested* in others. If they, like me, crave appreciation and I am clever enough to give it to them in conversation by simply being interested in what they say, I, in turn, am a most unusual and interesting fellow. All I had to do was ask good questions.

It's. That. Simple.

Fundamentally, most people love to talk about themselves. If we invite them to do so and are genuinely interested in what they have to say, then we are handing them a precious gift: our attention. That will trigger a cascade of neurotransmitters for them and put us in a grand spot for learning new information and building new relationships.

The conversation can be intentional at the listener's discretion. I love this line from Jeffrey Mayer's book *Time Management for Dummies*: "People who talk a lot can dominate a conversation but people who ask good questions control it⁴."

We can learn a lot from good interviewers. They put their interviewees at ease – there is trust that comes from respectful curiosity. They ask open-ended questions that generate interesting and expansive answers. Open-ended questions cannot be answered by yes or no and often begin with what or how (eg, What is the biggest challenge you face? What are your goals? How are you dealing with the shortage of corn this year?). **As a trained observer, listen carefully for clues in the conversation that could lead to the story behind the story** (Note: there is *always* more to the story). THAT may be the direction you need to go. That you're listening well enough to pick up on it and courageous enough to ask for more detail honors the speaker that you're engaged and interested in their story. Takeaway point: clues in the conversation are often the trail to the treasure.

A non-threatening way to ask for expansion on a clue is to use the mirroring technique that Chris Voss advocates in his good book *Never Split the Difference*.⁷ Mirroring is repeating 2 or 3 words in the sentence that you want more information on. For example, the producer may say, "We dewormed those calves a month ago and one half of the group is scouring." You mirror by simply asking: "one half?" Then go quiet so she can answer. This process can be repeated as often as necessary to drill for more detail.

In his book *The Coaching Habit*, Michael Bungay Stanier suggests using the AWE question as another way of expanding clues⁶. AWE is shorthand for "And What Else?" and again, it is a means of seeking the story behind the story. If there seems to be more to the thread that needs pulled out, simply ask "and what else?" Conversational clues mark the trail to the treasure...

I once heard a colleague say that vets get very good at making decisions with insufficient information. We're talking about listening well and collecting more information. We can never have too much information. The double benefit of data collection is that it adds to our diagnostic picture and at the same time gives validation to the person who we are talking with.

A few additional thoughts for you, my young veterinary friends. One, we are programmed to FIX things. Resist the temptation. Listen, don't advise, unless it's requested. Follow the clues. Don't interrupt. Distinguish your young inexperienced self as an outstanding and engaged listener who mightn't yet have a handle on farm management but you've certainly shown interest in the farmer and his/her problem. It takes time to listen. It takes an active interest in doing it well, but it will pay off.

Here's a bonus tip: every human craves being listened to. EVERY one. There may be hired help or staff in the farming enterprise who may have other valuable information. Reach out to them, too. Imagine being asked out to talk about rising somatic cell counts. The owner/manager is the decision-maker and you're getting good conversation from him/her. Who's actually at the interface 2 and 3 times/day? You may want to get down in the pit and have a chat with the milkers,

too. More information is more valuable! Those people are rewarded with your attention, too.

One introvert strategy that I use when I encounter strangers is to know that they've got a story inside of them that I want to hear. I just need to crack 'em open and let it spill out. Take an interest in everyone you talk with – your colleagues, your staff, your friends. Ask good questions and wait for the answers. We can rehearse these techniques in every conversation. Lives will be changed because of it – ours and theirs. Give the gift of good listening. It costs you nothing!

Learn

The by-product of good listening is we learn from others. Ours is a complex and rich profession. The pressures of veterinary school and board exams are now behind you but the educational aspect of your work has really just begun. Craig, the Jersey farmer in Richland County, Wisconsin, said that young vets don't know much. That's a pretty broad statement.

There is a teaching opportunity for him if we ask good questions. Seek out positive people who are willing to educate us. Ask great questions, Trained Observers. Dig in on subjects outside of your expertise and expand your view of their world. Build a network of people who are knowledgeable and are impressed by your humility in coming to them for information.

I chose that word humility for a reason.

My days as a clinician are long behind me. Today I work for the University of Wisconsin Extension in a role that is mostly unrelated to veterinary medicine. One aspect of my role there has been to be part of a substance abuse recovery program. I went through a five-day recovery coaching training a few years ago. I had an 'aha!' moment in the program when the facilitator talked about the Spectrum of Attitudes⁵. This has direct application for us as we endeavor to connect with and learn from other people.

The Spectrum of Attitudes is about the attitude that we bring when we encounter another person. The Spectrum references 3 categories of regard for other people: Object, Recipient or Resource.

When we treat people as Objects, one group of people "know what's best" for the other group and they determine the circumstances that the second group will exist. At an extreme, this is an incarcerated population.

When we treat people as Recipients we have given them an upgrade. Group 1 still knows what's best for Group 2, but the latter is given the opportunity to participate in decision making. There is still a profound power differential.

The last category is when the Other is seen as a Resource. Group 1 respects that Group 2 is the expert of their own experience and can make autonomous decisions. "This is the way to do it" gives way to "How can I help?"

The only category that works is the Resource attitude. Empathize with how the first 2 groups must feel. I suggest

that humility means learning about what makes your clients, colleagues and teammates tick. Listen to them, learn from them, and endeavor to work with them as valued resources.

I worked with vets in New Zealand several years ago and one of them asked me “What’s the difference between God and a veterinarian?” I waited for the punch line: “God doesn’t think he’s a vet.”

Humility means we can always learn more.

There are 2 things I wished I had done better when I was in large animal practice in Idaho.

In my first practice job there were 2 practices in a town of 3500. The competing practice also had a new vet who graduated the same year as I had. He took a lot of business from our books. He had no more experience than I had, but he employed a very effective tool that transferred clients from our database to his. Simply, he followed up on his cases. This was the pre-cell phone era so he was often taking the time to do this work from home in the evenings. What a powerful tool! He was demonstrating that he cared (soft... er, *essential* skill), and he was monitoring his cases. He had the attitude that the client was a resource, he listened, and was able to learn about the progress of the case, he accelerated his acquisition of experience and if anything appeared untoward, he was able to fix the case before it turned into a train wreck. His yearning for learning expanded into a powerful relationship, and practice-building technique. Today’s technology allows us to make these sorts of contacts very efficiently. Follow-up is a remarkable tool (would you fall off your chair if your doctor called to see how you’re doing? See?!)

The other thing I wished I had done was to discipline myself to document my experiences in practice. In a leadership program that I facilitate we call these After-Action Reviews (AAR). Our daily interactions with colorful characters, challenging cases, emotional highs and lows can serve many purposes as we progress into our careers. Yes, to keep some form of journal is another time pirate but there are riches and rewards in the process of active reflection. Much like the SOAP (Subjective Objective Assessment Plan) notes you kept on cases in vet school, an AAR forces us to review, reflect, re-set and repeat. It’s a laborious process but the learning yield is extraordinary. As an aside, I wish I had a catalog of the crazy experiences that practice gifted me with – as a public speaker that would be like *treasure!!*

Odds and ends about the importance of learning:

- “Everyone we meet has something to teach us. Even if it’s ‘don’t do that!’”
- Mentors can be an accelerant to our progress and keep us between the guardrails as we go forward. Some mentors have a shelf life.
- The outer boundary of the comfort zone is the beginning of the learning zone.
- I worked with a vet who was a better public speaker than I was. We were very competitive and I sought a way to improve my skills. I joined Toastmasters, an organization devoted to improving speaking

and leadership skills. Single most important thing I have done in my professional life. Seek out training in communications and leadership. Remember, humans, not cattle, will determine your destiny in the veterinary profession.

- The AABP Listserv is a great place to learn about cool stuff related to large animal practice (and lots of interesting info that’s not).

Good listening leads to good learning. Good learning is growth. Growth is good.

Lead

You can hold your diploma up to a strong light and you won’t see the word ‘Leader’ anywhere near the DVM, VMD or BVSc. It’s there, though. It comes along with that big brain of yours, those critical thinking skills, the ability to make decisions with insufficient information, and now with the enhanced set of *essential skills* that are Listening and Learning. You’re a leader. Did you say nay or Hooray!

In 2014 I watched a good friend of mine go through a company-sponsored yearlong leadership course. He changed. His attitude, the things he paid attention to, his conversations... all were altered by the experience. Positively. I wanted some of that... but not for that price tag. I signed up for a county leadership program instead. At the end of the 9 months I, too, was seeing myself and my world through a different lens. One big takeaway for me was the concept that you don’t need a title to be a leader. That took my main excuse away. I could lead and it didn’t have to say it on my diploma or on a business card. I could encourage and listen and share visions and volunteer and speak up and... I could now see myself as a leader. And a contributor.

That can be you, too. Actually, that *should* be you, too.

I highly recommend that you find some leadership training and take it. Early in this paper I referenced Dr. Betsy Charles. From what I hear, the Veterinary Leadership Institute is an amazing experience. You can learn more here: <https://veterinaryleadershipinstitute.org/programs/vle/> The benefit of any leadership program is that it invites introspection. The more self-aware we are, the better leaders we are. I discovered some blind spots during my program and I also identified some unknown sparkly bits. I cross-pollinated with like-minded, positive people and learned about the power of authenticity and vulnerability.

Now I co-facilitate the program with a very talented lady who teaches me a lot about effective facilitation and growth. Together we’re a dynamic team and it’s a real joy to watch our participants moult their old limiting shell and expand into a new awareness with new possibilities.

Some of my most powerful learnings about leadership are:

- Leadership isn’t about knowing all of the answers, it’s about having the courage to have a go. Put your hand in the air. The people you meet and the lessons

you learn are very different than they are when you sit back.

- Failure is an 'F' word, but it's a great teacher.
- A sincere Thank You is a powerful tool (review: humans *crave* appreciation). In a study conducted by leadership experts Kouzes and Posner³, people identified the most powerful non-financial reward that they received at work as... a simple thank you.
- One of my veterinary leadership mentors, Dr. Andy Clark, DVM, MBA, once said that leadership comes down to a simple question: "What kind of wake do you leave with people?" Sometimes we don't know. Sometimes we do. If it's not good, leadership may require that we turn our attitude into a renovation project.

One last story and I'll wrap this up.

I worked in veterinary pharmaceutical research and development in New Zealand for 10 years. It was a great experience, but it was a long way from my home state of Wisconsin. In 1998 my father was diagnosed with lung cancer. There were multiple metastases. His prognosis was grim. The poor fellow went from diagnosis to deceased in 15 weeks. I had a generous boss who let me make that long trip twice during my father's descent. One day the call came from Wisconsin. "You'd better come – it's not long before he's gone." Sigh. I sat down with my boss and explained the situation. He said, "You know you've got to go. Do you need money for an airfare?" I didn't need the money. He'd given me the gift of empathy, which is one of the most critical pieces of emotional equipment for a leader. He got it that this was hard and that I was a long way from home. He offered to help wherever he could. He was a great boss. He was a great leader. On that day he taught me what leadership was all about.

To summarize, I wanted to share some of my insights on connecting with people in ways that stimulate their neurotransmitters, that benefit them, benefit us and build a healthy, respectful professional relationship. Listening – truly listening – to another can be enlightening to us and a gift to them. It's also a tool for us to learn about that person, their business and how we can best serve them with our skills and our network of support. Combine those 2 with our intellectual and decision-making skills and we have the template in place for leadership and making a difference in our practices, in the livestock business and our communities.

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