

COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

Inclusive Communication Strategies in the Veterinary Setting

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Many of us joke about choosing veterinary medicine because we prefer interaction with animals over interaction with humans. In actuality, most of our work is centered on communication with coworkers, teams, clients, the industry, and the public. Inclusive communication in the veterinary profession can increase client compliance and improve team retention and wellbeing.^{1,2} Inclusive communication is paramount to the advancement of our profession, both for our teams and for the communities that we serve.

Using communication strategies that are inclusive enables us to communicate with people who differ in terms of culture, gender, socioeconomic background, age, lived experiences, and ways of thinking. Diverse

organizations are more likely to outperform homogeneous ones.³⁻⁶ Diversity alone, however, is not enough. The key is an inclusive culture, a culture in which everyone feels comfortable respectfully expressing their opinions and ideas.⁷ Inclusive teams are twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets, 3 times as likely to be high performing, 6 times as likely to be innovative, and 8 times as likely to achieve better business outcomes than teams that are not inclusive.^{8,9} Homogeneous teams can sometimes feel like an echo chamber, as individuals have similar views, leading to similar outcomes. In diverse teams, individuals may have different opinions and ideas—but if the team is not inclusive, individuals may not feel comfortable sharing their opinions and expressing their

Abstract

Although the veterinary clientele is diverse, the veterinary profession is one of the least diverse professions in the United States. Diversity is the presence of differences. In the context of inclusion, diversity refers to differences such as culture, gender, socioeconomic background, age, lived experiences, and ways of thinking. Inclusive communication increases a team's chances of performance and financial success. The key to successful inclusive communication starts with fostering a growth mindset. Having a growth mindset enables us to identify and combat our biases, expand our ability to give and receive feedback effectively, and adapt our conflict management styles. Adapting our communication strategies based on contextual clues improves outcomes, leading to open and honest discussions. Inclusive communication creates just enough friction to promote innovative problem-solving and outcomes that more closely align with the needs of the communities we serve.

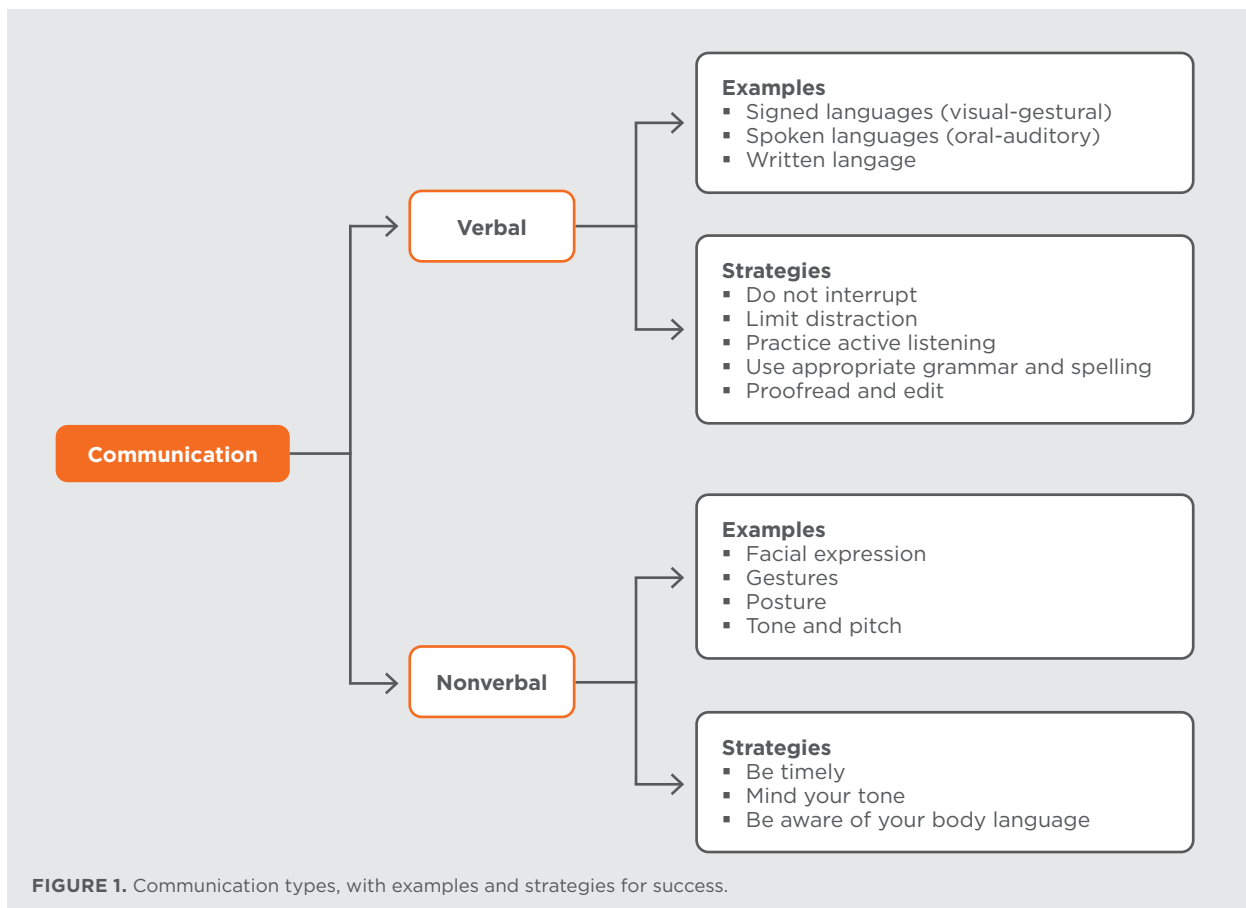
Take-Home Points

- Inclusive communication strategies enable us to communicate across cultures, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, lived experiences, and ways of thinking.
- Inclusive communication combines communication strategies and contextual cues in ways that overcome communication barriers.
- Mastering inclusive communication involves diminishing our biases, fostering a growth mindset, giving and receiving feedback effectively, and leveraging differences in conflict resolution.
- Fostering a growth mindset and disrupting biases require being open to change, stepping out of our comfort zone, and learning from surprises and failures.
- Effective feedback is delivered regularly and in a timely and specific manner.
- Understanding differences in conflict management styles can help us navigate conflict more effectively.

ideas. On the other hand, diverse and inclusive teams engage in radically candid, open, and honest discussion that acknowledges a variety of experiences. Differences in opinion promote conversation, creating just enough tension to promote innovative problem solving,

ultimately generating outcomes that more closely align with the needs of the communities they serve.

Inclusive communication requires an understanding of verbal or nonverbal communication strategies,



communication barriers, and contextual clues (**FIGURE 1**). Some communication strategies are straightforward, such as using proper grammar and spelling when sending emails as well as limiting distractions and interruptions during a conversation. Other communication strategies, such as giving and receiving feedback and resolving conflict, are more complex and require contextual cues (**TABLE 1**). As veterinary professionals, we often use contextual clues based on our audience and are aware of the potential repercussions of miscommunications. I always prided myself on using plain language when talking to clients, but I will never forget the time I asked a client, “What questions do you have?” while on the phone, and she said, “I think I got it. I just have to go Google what neoplasia means.”

Barriers to communication are traditionally divided into physical, emotional, and language (**FIGURE 2**). One of the most important barriers to communication, which is often missed, is accurate perception. Accurate perception is the ability to differentiate fact from feeling and is affected by cultural differences, assumptions, biases, stereotyping, and generalizing. For instance, making eye contact during conversations is

often listed as an effective communication strategy because, in some cultures, making eye contact is a sign of care and respect. Yet in other cultures, eye contact is considered rude. In addition, direct eye contact can be extremely uncomfortable for some neurodivergent individuals, resulting in increased anxiety that actually hinders communication. Another example of accurate perception involves correctly interpreting body language.¹⁰ Body language interpretation helps decipher demeanor because gestures and posture can reflect someone’s emotional state. Crossed arms and legs are seen as a sign of closedness, anger, and frustration. However, crossed arms can be secondary to ambient temperature; and persons with hypermobility disorders often unconsciously cross their arms, legs, and ankles in an effort to stabilize their joints.¹¹

How, then, can we use contextual cues and accurate perception to expand our ability to effectively communicate with individuals from a variety of backgrounds? We can do so by building a growth mindset, identifying and diminishing our biases, understanding the art of giving and receiving feedback, and leveraging differences in conflict resolution. Inclusion does not mean that we are perfect at all times,

TABLE 1 Examples of Communication Strategies That Can Be Adapted Based on the Situation and Conflict Type (Contextual Communication)

CONTEXTUAL STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
Audience	Understanding the demographics of the audience and adapting the language and tone to deliver the right message (e.g., using medical terminology when communicating with colleagues and colloquial terms when talking to clients or family members).
Conflict management	Knowing the 5 conflict management styles (avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating) and when to leverage each one; in addition, becoming familiar with the conflict management style that you may gravitate toward, and consciously using other styles appropriately.
Delivery method	Determining the most appropriate delivery method for the type of communication. For example, email is most effective for tone-neutral communication as well as nonurgent messages. On the other hand, phone calls and in-person communication are more effective for conversations in which tone is of utmost importance and for urgent messages that require immediate attention. Using multiple modes of communication, if appropriate (e.g., in-person meetings in which numerous tasks were discussed can benefit from a follow-up email that summarizes the discussion).
Emotional intelligence	Recognizing and regulating our own emotions while considering the emotions, perspectives, and needs of others. The 5 components of emotional intelligence are empathy, effective communication, self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation. Emotional intelligence can help us recognize why someone may have a different reaction to a situation than our own.
Listening	Actively and reflectively listening to show that you are engaged in the conversation, open to other perspectives, and willing to find a solution. Effective listening involves avoiding interruptions and listening to others without judging and without the urge to respond, but rather comprehending another.
Feedback	Adapting to individual preferences in feedback, for the person giving the feedback and the one receiving it. Adapting can include the mode of delivery, the timing, and the level of formality.

but it does mean that we actively try to act in a way that is respectful of others.

BUILDING A GROWTH MINDSET

Dr. Carol Dweck identified a continuum of mindsets that differ in individuals and affect their response to challenges, obstacles, feedback, mistakes, and the success of others.¹² She coined the terms “growth mindset” and “fixed mindset.” Individuals with a growth mindset believe that qualities are things that you can cultivate with effort, whereas individuals with a fixed mindset believe that qualities are innate and you either have them or lack them. While developing a new skill and in the face of unexpected results and even failure, individuals with a growth mindset rebound more easily while those with a fixed mindset experience greater setbacks.

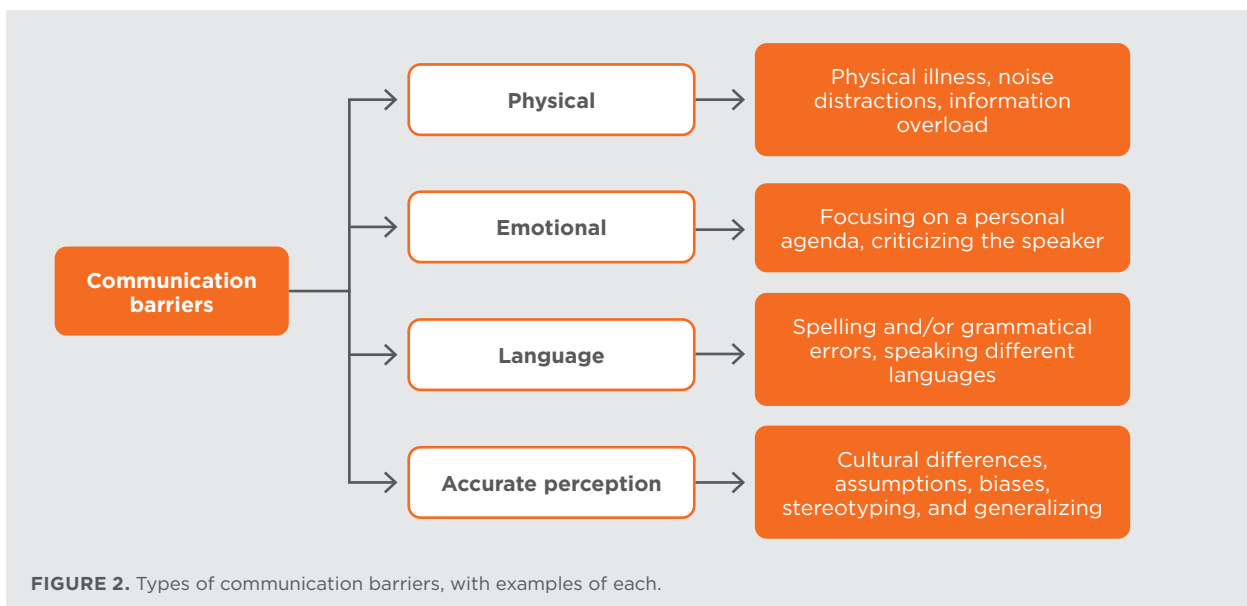
Having a growth mindset means believing that to grow, we must challenge ourselves. Those with a growth mindset are more open to a variety of perspectives and views. To foster a growth mindset, first identify your current mindset and then start identifying the challenges around you. As you do, work on seeing them as positive actions and opportunities for growth, rather than failures.

Accurate perception is the ability to differentiate fact from feeling and is affected by cultural differences, assumptions, biases, stereotyping, and generalizing.

OVERCOMING BIASES

Although the veterinary clientele is very diverse, veterinary medicine continues to be described as one of the least diverse professions in the United States. The literature shows that women and people from historically marginalized communities frequently experience microaggressions and other forms of discrimination in the workplace that are detrimental to their wellbeing.¹³⁻¹⁷ Microaggressions often stem from unconscious biases.

We all have biases, which are inclinations for or against an idea, object, group, or individual. Our biases are affected by the religious, racial, socioeconomic, and political makeup of the community in which we were raised. Biases do not necessarily align with someone’s personal identity, but they can still creep into interactions and decision making, affecting how we



BOX 1 Tips for Overcoming Bias

- **Accept that you have biases.** We all have biases, and accepting that is the first step in addressing them.
- **Figure out what your biases are.** One tool is the Implicit Association Test (implicit.harvard.edu), which can be used to measure your own levels of implicit bias on a variety of topics.
- **Avoid autopilot.** In physically, emotionally, and cognitively stressful situations, our brains go on autopilot, making us more likely to engage in cognitive biases. By decreasing stressors or stepping away from situations while asking “why,” we return to active, analytical thinking.
- **When surprised, ask yourself why.** If something you assumed does not align with reality, take a moment to consider why it was surprising to you. For instance, is it surprising to you that a person from another race is well spoken? Ask yourself “Why is this surprising to me?” 25 times to decrease the odds that cognitive biases are influencing your perception when analytical reasoning should be leading your thinking.
- **Consciously choose inclusive language.** Actively replace biased language with inclusive language. Examples of biased language include using “he” or “she” when speaking in the third person as opposed to the more inclusive “they,” or using husband or wife when referring to spouses and partners ([TABLE 2](#)).
- **Challenge your biases continuously.** Expand your networks and information sources. Biases lose power when you are exposed to life experiences, political perspectives, and analytical styles that don’t support those biases.

treat others from a particular demographic or social group. In clinical practice, for example, biases can creep into the medical plans we propose to clients for the care of the patient. We may be presenting the same plan to every patient in the same situation, but our tone, word choices, and body language can still show our biases, affecting client receptivity.

Having a growth mindset and disrupting biases go hand in hand because they both require being open to change, stepping outside one’s comfort zone, and learning from surprises and failures.¹⁸ Interrupting biases and decreasing their influence require

acknowledging that they exist, recognizing that we all have them, and using a growth mindset to address them ([BOX 1](#)). Are you ever surprised at how well someone speaks English? Or when a particular client moves forward with the estimate? When something surprises you, continuously ask yourself why.

Individuals with a growth mindset are more open to a variety of perspectives and views.¹⁹ Overcoming biases through a growth mindset requires patience, persistence, and work. Do not expect changes to happen overnight, and give yourself grace as you navigate this journey.

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Feedback is part of any healthy relationship, enabling the professional and personal growth of individuals and teams.^{20,21} Giving and receiving feedback can be uncomfortable because doing so challenges our existing mental maps and connections. Feedback can be either positive or corrective. The goal of positive feedback is reinforcement, and the goal of constructive or corrective feedback is modification or improvement. Often we focus on constructive feedback, which can make individuals defensive and can be misinterpreted as criticism if not delivered correctly. Both positive and constructive feedback, however, should be given regularly, as part of a 2-way conversation with a neutral power dynamic.

Supporting an inclusive relationship and team starts with trust. After trust has been established, feedback becomes part of a mutual partnership. To maintain that trust, avoid making assumptions, psychoanalyzing individuals, and forgetting to focus on behavior while providing feedback. Be open to receiving feedback and communicate your preferences for receiving it. Ask others about their preference for receiving feedback. For instance, some individuals prefer written feedback and others prefer verbal feedback; some prefer formal meetings for discussing feedback and others do not mind being pulled aside.

Each person giving and receiving feedback has their own preferences; in inclusive teams, those differences can be adapted to create a stronger team. For example, if part of the team prefers feedback in written form, and part of the team prefers verbal feedback, the team can have a 2-step strategy in which feedback is given and received in person and is then followed up in written form.

TABLE 2 Using Inclusive Communication Strategies

DO	DO NOT
■ Introduce yourself using your pronouns ■ Use language that puts people first, such as ■ “person with a disability” rather than “a disabled person” ■ Use gender-neutral language, such as ■ “they” instead of “he” or “she” ■ “spouse” or “partner” instead of “husband” and/or “wife”	■ Use phrases with racist connotations, such as ■ low man on the totem pole ■ peanut gallery ■ master bedroom ■ Use derogatory mental health and disability language, such as ■ crazy ■ retarded ■ schizo ■ psycho ■ Use “preference” when speaking about sexual orientation and pronouns.

Giving Feedback

Effective feedback is delivered regularly and in a timely, constructive, specific, and nonjudgmental manner (**BOX 2**). When giving feedback, carefully consider the giver, recipient, and environment in which the feedback is given. To be sure the recipient is in the right mind space to receive feedback, first ask for permission.

Receiving Feedback

Being open to receiving feedback is as important as giving feedback to others. Ensure that you communicate your preferences for receiving feedback. When receiving feedback, maintain an open growth mindset. As previously stated, individuals with a growth mindset see constructive feedback as an opportunity for learning and growth. Consider that not everyone knows how to give and receive feedback or what to do with feedback when they receive it. Listen to the feedback, express gratitude for it, and clarify any questions you may have.²¹ Reflect on the feedback received and consider how to best integrate it, if necessary.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Conflict refers to a struggle between 2 or more parties in which the parties perceive that their goals are incompatible. Conflict is a normal part of every relationship that at times can result in innovation and motivation but at other times can result in loss of productivity.²² The goal of conflict management is to address and resolve conflict. Conflict management skills are crucial for building resilience, working in teams, and thriving in challenging situations. Conflict should be approached with genuine curiosity, ensuring that all parties know that their opinions are heard and valued.

Conflict and discomfort are not inherently negative. Members of inclusive teams, for example, are comfortable challenging each other's ideas and assumptions respectfully and directly. The team feels comfortable giving and receiving open and honest feedback, but disagreements still cause some tensions. Paired with a growth mindset, such friction in a team with a multitude of experiences actually leads to innovation.

BOX 2 Tips for Giving Feedback

- **Make sure feedback is labeled as such** to avoid confusion and miscommunication.
- **Deliver feedback in a private environment** and avoid outnumbering the recipient.
- **Include specific examples**; be sure to identify the specific contextual and physical location as well as the specific situation that the feedback is tied to.
- **Include successes as well as areas of concern**; however, do not sandwich corrective feedback between statements of praise as doing so can make the successes seem disingenuous.
- **Ask how the feedback recipient feels** about the particular situation because, many times, they are already aware of potential areas of concern.
- **Point out the specific outward behavior that you observed**; be specific when explaining why the other person's behavior did or did not work from your perspective and how it may have affected you.
- **Ask the recipient if they need time** to digest the feedback.

TABLE 3 Conflict Management Styles

STYLE	DEFINITION	BEST FOR	DISADVANTAGES
Avoiding	Staying away from the threatening situation	Emotionally charged or trivial conflict	Unresolved issues lead to resentment
Competing	Being more concerned with the outcome than with the relationship	Emergencies (promotes quick action)	Can damage relationships and foster resentment
Accommodating	Self-sacrificing to adapt to the other person	Maintaining harmony	Overlooked needs may lead to burnout over time
Compromising	Searching for a mutually acceptable solution	Finding a middle ground quickly and for temporary solutions	May not fully resolve issues
Collaborating	Being assertive and cooperative; working with others to find a solution	Mutual understanding and consensus	Very involved and time-consuming; requires cooperation from all parties

BOX 3 Tips for Managing Conflict

- Identify the source of the conflict.**
 Solvable problems are those in which the barrier can be identified and solved. Perpetual problems, on the other hand, may not have immediate solutions and require ongoing adaptation and communication. With effective communication and inclusive strategies, most conflict can be managed productively over time.
- Consider which conflict management style is best suited for a particular conflict.** Emotionally charged conflicts can often benefit from both parties taking time off. On the other hand, in emergency situations action should be taken quickly, and there may not be time to process the conflict until after the incident is resolved.
- Look beyond the current incident and consider differences in perspective.**
 The parties involved should listen to one another with the intention of understanding.
- When it is time to discuss the conflict, be sure that all parties are present.**
 All parties should work on identifying a suitable solution, whether that is a physical change or a change in perspective. There is not always an ideal solution, but the parties should focus on the bigger picture and be willing to work together to find a suitable solution.
- All parties should agree to the solution.**
 If one party is not agreeable, a solution may not be achieved.
- Consider finding a mediator or facilitator.** Doing so can be effective if parties are unable to arrive at an agreement.

Not everyone approaches conflict similarly. Five conflict resolution styles are avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating (**TABLE 3**).²³ Although some individuals can adapt to different styles, others often unconsciously gravitate toward a specific conflict management style.²² The type of conflict management style we use during conflict management can significantly affect the outcome. For example, during emotionally charged situations, using an avoiding conflict management style can be effective because it gives individuals time to evaluate their emotions, whereas using a competing conflict management style can lead to resentment and damage relationships in the long term.

Tools for managing conflict include exploring conflict management styles, cultivating our emotional intelligence, and developing active and reflective listening skills (**BOX 3, TABLE 1**).

SUMMARY

The veterinary profession is one of the least diverse U.S. professions, yet we work with diverse clientele. Inclusive communication strategies require understanding and respecting the individual needs of all parties. Communicating in a way that respects the individual needs and preferences of all people with whom we interact every day can lead to personal and professional success. Inclusive communication is not a one-size-fits-all strategy and requires time, work, and persistence. Having a growth mindset enables us to challenge ourselves every day, see opportunities for growth, and create spaces in which everyone around us feels included. **TVP**

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