A Strategy for Effective Communication in Equine Practice

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1. Introduction
In today’s equine practice, four generations (Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X-ers, and Millenials), each with its own unique way of looking at the world, are trying to work together and collaborate to be productive and innovative in order to provide exceptional veterinary service to clients. Common strategies for managing in this multigenerational workplace include villainizing the “other” generations or merely tolerating their presence. It is not unusual for conflict, disagreements, and misunderstanding to get in the way of practicing quality medicine. Thus, it is important for equine practitioners to develop a strategy and skill sets that will allow for effective communication, not only within the practice, but also with clients, vendors, and other valuable stakeholders, a strategy that builds bridges among the generations and engages all members of the team, regardless of their generation.

2. Generational Overview
The Traditionalists were born prior to 1946 and were faced with a myriad of adversity during their formative years, including first-hand experience with the great depression and its aftermath as well as World War II. They grew up in an environment where “right” and “wrong” were clearly defined by their parents and a strong work ethic was what led to prosperity. A woman’s place was in the home, raising the children, while it was the man’s responsibility to provide for the family financially and children were best seen and not heard. From a technology standpoint, Traditionalists came of age with the typewriter.

The Baby Boomers were born from 1946 to 1964 and came of age during the thriving new economy that followed World War II, which led this generation to be very secure and optimistic. They experienced the shift from the Golden Age of Radio to television as well as a move from the country into “suburbia.” As a result, they learned about values not only from their families, but also from television and their neighbors. With security came an outward focus that caused them to question the status quo, leading to the civil rights and women’s movements as well as anti-war sentiment specifically targeted at the Vietnam War. Due to their numbers, the workplace was very competitive for Baby Boomers. From a technology standpoint, Baby Boomers came of age with the mainframe computer.

Generation X was born from 1965 to 1980, and, unlike their Baby Boomer parents, were born into a world of uncertainty and turmoil as civil rights and...
women’s liberation, political scandal, inflation, and massive corporate layoffs led to a environment of distrust and fear. Because both Dad and Mom were at work, the resulting “latch key kids” came home to an empty house after school and learned to be very independent and resourceful. After watching their parents get laid off and then divorced, they are skeptical of the way things have always been done and are more interested in working to live, rather than living to work, the first generation to emphasize work-life balance.1–3 From a technology standpoint, Generation X came of age with the personal computers.4

The Millenials were born from 1981 to 1999 and came into the world at a time of unprecedented growth and prosperity and are struggling to understand how to function in a world that is now facing economic crisis. Raised by “helicopter parents” who hovered over their every move, this generation is very confident and has been told by their parents and teachers they can be whatever they want to be.5 They do not know life without the Internet and have experienced adversity through the lens of the media, thanks to 24-hour news coverage by CNN. They are an incredibly diverse generation, and they do not understand the need for “diversity training.”1–3 From a technology standpoint, Millenials came of age with smart phones and PDA’s.4

3. Strategy Foundation

In his 1998 article, “What Makes a Leader?” Daniel Goleman outlined the five components of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill, and it is on several components of this framework that the strategy that follows is built. Self-awareness, or the ability to understand one’s own weaknesses and strengths as well as the lenses through which one looks when interacting with others, is an essential starting place for effective communication and interaction. Self-regulation is one’s ability to suspend judgment and control responses to situations to have a fair and healthy outcome. Empathy, better called “social awareness” in this context, deals with one’s ability to relate to others such that one considers the other person’s situation, background, and feelings before an interaction occurs. Finally, social skill involves putting it all together in such a way that the desired outcomes are achieved, or, as Goleman puts it, “friendliness with a purpose.” Applying these concepts to the generation gap provides an effective strategy for multigenerational communication and interaction.

Step 1: Recognize Your Own Generational Bias
(Self-Awareness)

Though conflicting research exists concerning the significance of the generation gap among the generations, understanding what, in general, has shaped one’s own generation as well as what has shaped the other generations is a helpful starting point for making sure interactions among members of each generation are positive and not wrought with assumptions and tension. This step is often the most difficult one because it forces self-reflection, something most high-performing individuals do not make time for in demanding careers (i.e., equine veterinary medicine). It also requires an open-minded approach to other people’s generational lens. Often, each generation makes the assumption that the way they did things was not only the right way, but also the best way. Recognizing that one has a generational bias leads to awareness that the way one generation looks at the world isn’t necessarily right or wrong, it’s just different.

To better understand one’s own generational bias, consider the following questions. Why do I have a problem with the older/younger generations? What is it that bothers me about my associate’s desire to have work-life balance? Can I explain the benefit of “paying your dues?” What threats do Traditionalist/Baby Boomer/Generation X/Millenial values represent? What role do I play in causing the tension between us? How will I need to change to take advantage of the generation opportunity instead of increasing the generation gap? Why do I get so frustrated when my boss doesn’t acknowledge my new ideas?

Step 2: Suspend Your Generational Bias
(Self-Regulation)

Much of the conflict that occurs among generations is not founded in fact but is based on assumption. The difficulty with assumption as it pertains to generational issues goes back to right versus wrong, instead of different. Each generation assumes its approach to life is the correct approach and then, if not able to suspend that bias, further assumes that anything the other generations do/say/etc., must be wrong.

In equine veterinary medicine, a theme that comes up often is one of respect, or better, lack of respect. Though it is often the older generation complainting of lack of respect from the younger generations, it is increasingly also heard from the younger generation with regard to the older. Work done by Jennifer Deal and her colleagues at the Center for Creative Leadership on the issue of respect among generations found that all generations want and value respect.3 Seemingly, then, this value should not be a point of contention. However, Deal’s research discovered that though all generations value respect, the definition of respect differs among generations. Older generations “want younger people to hold them in higher esteem (than they do others) and to defer to their perspectives,” whereas younger generations “want to be held in esteem and to have their opinions considered.” Herein lies the problem, and the solution, in part, comes from suspending bias. For the Traditionalist or Baby Boomer, fielding Millenial questions or considering an X-er’s opinion is a way to show re-
spect and thereby earn the younger generations’ respect. For the X-er or Millennial, deferring to wisdom and experience may be an important part of the learning curve that shows respect and allows respect to be earned.

Step 3: Learn How to Speak Other Generational Languages (Empathy or Social Awareness)

In veterinary medicine, budgets usually do not allow for extensive market research about recruiting strategies for new associates and staff. However, equine veterinarians can take advantage of other industries’ marketing strategies to learn the “language” of the other generations. The language each generation speaks has some foundation in the qualities and values that each generation holds valuable. Just as different automobile commercials speak to specific audiences, our professional conversations and interactions can benefit from considering what will grab the attention of those with whom we are having a conversation.

Step 4: Build Relationships Across Generations (Social Skill)

Building relationships across generations is dependent on successfully recognizing and suspending bias and learning how to speak the languages of the other generations. This step is especially crucial in veterinary medicine because students entering veterinary school are less likely to have a farm or ranch background or extensive equine experience. Thus, the experienced horseman and horsewoman will need to build relationships with younger equine veterinarians to foster the transfer of the tacit knowledge associated with a lifetime of equine veterinary experience. Tacit knowledge, the knowledge captured within the experience of people who have spent a career acquiring it, can only be transferred through relationship.

4. Conclusion

Creating a successful, generationally diverse team requires mindful attention to which strategies build bridges between people and which strategies widen the generation gap. Incorporating emotional intelligence theory into a generational communication strategy can foster engagement among all team members and allow generational strengths and abilities to shine.

References