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What's in Your Communication Toolbox?

Throughout this communication series, we have built a toolbox of communication skills. The **toolbox** itself symbolizes the overarching framework of relationship-centered care, building a mutual partnership, involving the client, and working in collaboration to enhance clinical outcomes for the veterinary team, client, and patient. The **tools**—evidence-based communication skills drawn from the Calgary-Cambridge Guide—have proven successful in navigating diverse clinical scenarios to bolster clinical outcomes:[1]

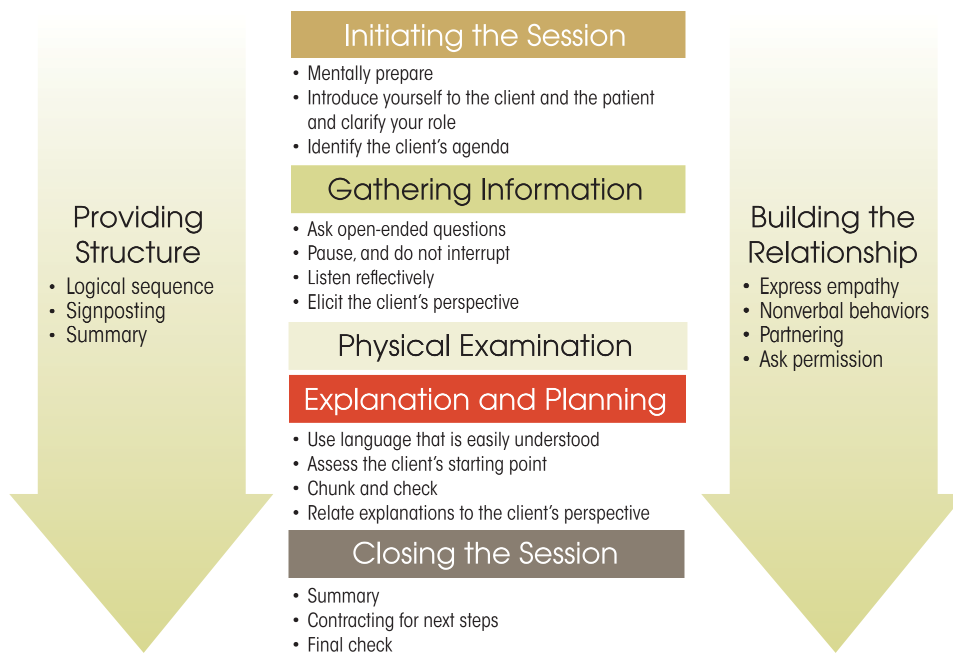
- Shared decision making
- Improved recall and understanding
- Better adherence
- Improved patient health
- Enhanced client and veterinary team satisfaction
- Time savings
- Reduced complaints

Unlike scripts, which require specific phrasing for every situation, these tools can be carried with you at all times for a myriad of circumstances. Your skills toolbox can be relied upon to guide you through your most routine to your most challenging interactions, including end-of-life conversations, delivery of bad news, medical errors, and financial discussions.

Final Inventory

Now that the series is drawing to a close, let's take a final inventory of our tools. In taking stock, we recall what we have on hand to guide our client interactions from initiation to closing, intentionally using each communication tool to promote accuracy, efficiency, and supportiveness, as well as to provide excellent medical care to the patient and compassionate care to the client each step of the way (see **Figure 1**).

20 Key Communication Skills
Within the Calgary-Cambridge Guide Framework



Adapted from Kurtz S, Silverman J, Benson J, Draper J. Marrying content and process in clinical method teaching: Enhancing the Calgary-Cambridge Guides. *Acad Med* 78(8):802-809, 2003.

Figure 1

You Had Me at Hello: Navigating the Art of Initiation

(May/June 2011, pg 6)

In initiating the clinical interview, take time to **mentally prepare** for the appointment by putting aside other matters and focusing on the task at hand. Next, **introduce yourself** to the client and the patient and clarify your role. A warm greeting, handshake, and introduction build rapport and help the client understand what role everyone plays in the pet's care. The final step involves fully **identifying the client's agenda**. An open-ended solicitation draws out a full response.[2] Pay attention to your nonverbal behaviors and resist the urge to interrupt, so that the client fully discloses his or her list of concerns.[2] Minimal prompts, such as "I see" and "Go on," demonstrate that you are actively listening and want to hear more.

"Hello Ms. Sherman, I am Dr. Davis [introduction]*, and it's my pleasure to take care of you and your boy Flash today* [confirms gender]*. It seems like you guys had a busy morning* [empathy]*. If it is all right with you, I would like to sit next to you and make friends with Flash, if he can sit still long enough while we talk* [asking permission]*."*

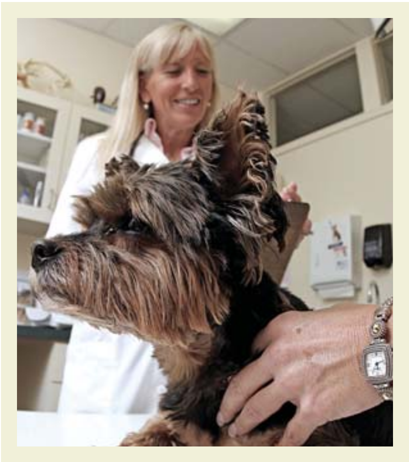
"What brings you and Flash in today [open-ended question]*?"*

"What other concerns would you like to discuss about Flash [open-ended question]*?"*

"Anything else [open-ended question]*?"*

"It sounds like Flash is in excellent health, full of energy, and enjoys his walks. However, you've noticed a decrease in his appetite over the past 3 days that really concerns you [summary]*.*

Am I missing anything [check for understanding]*?"*



Pausing after each question and fighting the urge to interrupt ensures you get the full story, demonstrates interest in the client and animal, and gives you time to think and process before moving on.

Solving the Case by Creating a History Together (July/August 2011, pg 12)

Gathering information explores the presenting problem(s) from the client's viewpoint, while obtaining the information needed to develop a diagnostic and treatment plan. Further use of **open-ended questions** encourages clients to tell their stories in their own words, providing you with a detailed account and full context. Using the funnel technique allows you to hone in on details and seek clarification by beginning with broad, open-ended questions and filling in the gaps with closed, direct questions. **Pausing** after each question and fighting the urge to interrupt ensures you get the full story, demonstrates interest in the client and animal, and gives you time to think and process before moving on. **Reflectively listening**, by echoing or paraphrasing the client's message back in your own words, checks the accuracy of the information gathered. The last tool, **eliciting the client's perspective**, allows you to explore the full range of the client's concerns—including the client's and pet's broader lifestyle and their relationship—and invites the client's ideas, beliefs, expectations, and feelings.

"Tell me about a day in the life of you and Flash [open-ended questioning and eliciting client perspective]*."*

"Would you tell me about Flash's normal eating habits [funneling: more specific, still open]?"

"Describe Flash's eating habits over the past 3 days [funneling: more specific, still open]."

"What else have you noticed [open-ended question]?"

"Does he seem painful in his mouth [funneling: closed questioning]?"

"Does he seem interested in his food [funneling: closed questioning]?"

"What else is worrying you about Flash [eliciting client perspective]?"

Building a Home to Care for Your Clients (January/February 2012, pg 14)

All of the communication tools contribute to building the relationship, acting as the glue that holds the various parts of the visit together. Taking time to build the relationship enhances the accuracy and efficiency with which information is gathered, while promoting partnership and collaboration and creating long-term client relationships. Start by creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere through your **nonverbal behaviors**, by leaning in, making strong eye contact, matching the client's tone and pace, mirroring his or her facial expressions, and sitting down together for the conversation. **Expressing empathy** allows you to appreciate and see the situation from the client's point of view, taking yourself out of the equation and putting yourself in the client's shoes. **Partnering** with your clients and using inclusive language (eg, let's, we, together, our, us) emphasizes you are working together toward a mutual goal to care for the pet. **Asking permission** not only serves to build the relationship but also structures the conversation and gently assesses the client's readiness to take the next step in the conversation or interview.

"I understand that you are worried about Flash, as a decreased appetite was the first sign that Jackson displayed when he was diagnosed with cancer [empathy]. *Thank you for sharing Jackson's story with me* [partnership]*; that was hard to talk about* [empathy]*."*

"It is helpful to know all of your concerns so we can work through them together [partnership]. *Are you okay if we move on to Flash's physical examination now* [asking permission] *so we can get to the bottom of this?"*

Are We There Yet? A Road Map to the Clinical Interview
(November/December 2011, pg 4)

In the clinical interview, providing structure acts as a road map. It's a tool that helps organize the interview in a logical sequence from one task in the clinical interview to the next so that you and the client stay on track and arrive at your destination in a safe and timely manner. **Signposting** provides a smooth transition between topics, ensuring your client is following along. **Summary** acts as a pit stop to check for understanding and accuracy of information with the client and lets the client know that you have heard his or her concerns.

"In summary, Flash's appetite has been declining for the past 3 days; he is curious when you put the food down, takes a few bites, and then walks away from the food bowl, and he has no interest in his treats or chew toys [summary]*."*

"Now that I have finished his examination, let's talk about what might be causing his decreased appetite [signposting]*."*

4 Courses at a 5-Star Restaurant & Dine-in or Drive-through (May/June 2012, pg 44; July/August 2012, pg 32)

Continuing to work collaboratively and partnering with the client during the explanation and planning phase of the clinical interview can be a challenge. Avoiding jargon and **using language that is easily understood** is the first step in maintaining this relationship. **Assessing the client's starting point** identifies early on what the client already knows so you can tailor the information to his or her level of understanding. Using the **chunk and check method** by giving information in manageable chunks, continually checking that the client understands, or eliciting client feedback helps guide the discussion. Finally, **relating explanations to the client's perspective** allows you to create a customized plan. Take into account the client's ideas, expectations, concerns, and feelings, and identify the client's strengths and challenges in administering the care plan.

"I would like to share with you what I found in examining Flash's mouth [signposting]*."*

"I noticed an infected tooth, which is painful, and I suspect that is why Flash does not want to eat [using easily understood language]*."*

"I know that you've had dogs in the past. Have you ever dealt with a dental problem before [assessing the client's starting point]*?"*

"Flash will need to be placed under anesthesia to remove the tooth. We will examine and clean the rest of his teeth at the same time [chunk]*. How does that sound* [check]*?"*

"What concerns you most about this procedure [relating to client perspective]*?"*

"I am confident that Flash will feel better once we take care of this sore tooth and return to eating his dinner with gusto."

On-time Departure (September/October 2012, pg 30)

When closing the clinical interview, a well laid out and executed plan will set you up for a successful and satisfactory ending. The use of **summary** at the end of the appointment double-checks your accuracy, elicits additional details, and corrects misunderstandings. **Contracting for next steps** identifies the roles and responsibilities of both parties in moving forward with the plan. It's an explicit statement of what you will do and what you expect the client to do to follow through. Finally, **conducting a final check** at the close of the consultation makes sure that all questions and concerns have been fully addressed and understood.

"Just to recap, Flash's decreased appetite is due to an infected tooth in the back of his mouth. We scheduled him for surgery tomorrow to remove the tooth [summary] *and will be calling you before, during, and after the procedure to keep you informed as you requested* [contract for next steps]*."*

"Would it work for you to bring Flash in at 7 AM tomorrow fasted and pick him up at 4 PM [asking permission]*?"*

"We can discuss his after-care, special feeding, and medications when you pick him up [contracting for next steps]*."*

"How are you feeling about our plan [final check]*?"*

Having the Right Tool for the Job

Knowing *what* to say in specific situations is not always enough. Effective communication combines using specific communication tools with the knowledge of *how* to properly implement them during any given situation. Like a mechanic, it is important to know which tools to reach for no matter what the problem. In communicating with clients, keep in mind the goal that you are trying to achieve and consider which tools will help you reach that outcome. Raising your awareness in the moment will help you use your skills with the utmost purpose.

Putting It into Practice

Tools that aren't used or cared for on a regular basis can become dull or rusty, and rendered useless. The same can be said for communication skills. To keep the tools in your communication toolbox in working order, take the following steps to practice and hone your skills, keeping them sharp! The gold standard for teaching and learning communication is delineation of the skills (Calgary-Cambridge Guide), observation, constructive feedback, video recording and review, opportunities for practice, and individual coaching.

1. **Identify your SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) goals** (see page 54 for an example). What skills do you want to work on, what are you trying to achieve, and how will you observe the difference?
2. **Designate a coaching partner. Choose a trusted, engaged, and supportive colleague and ask him or her to serve as your coach.** The coach's role is to partner with you in achieving your goals listed above. This is accomplished through observing your client communication, recording notes and specific examples of the skills you are working on, and providing descriptive and constructive feedback on "what worked well" and suggesting an "even better yet." (See **Characteristics of Effective Feedback** on page 19).
3. **Videotape your client interactions.** First and foremost, obtain consent from the client and inform him or her that the videotape will only be used for your learning and will be destroyed afterward. Set up a home video camera on a tripod in your exam room and record your interaction.
4. **Review your videotape.** On your own or with your coaching partner, review your videotape based on the goals that you set. Self-assess and identify "what worked well" and "even better yet." We tend to be our own worst critic so your partner may be helpful in keeping it all in perspective.
5. **Follow through.** Based on the lessons learned, return to step 1 and reset your SMART goals, take time to practice, and then set up another time for videotaping, observation, and feedback with your coaching partner.
6. **Repeat the cycle.** Schedule regular intervals for skills review and enhancement. There is no ceiling to enhancing communication; it is a process of mastery with mentorship. || **EVT**

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This article is the last in the Communication Toolbox series. Visit myEVT.com/communicationtoolbox for additional articles and training materials.

See Aids & Resources, page 51, for references and suggested reading.