How to Approach Difficult Situations: It's Not Always About the Medicine
Elisa A. Rogers CVT, VTS(ECC)
Matthew J Ryan Veterinary Hospital, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa

Managing difficult situations is a forgotten art in Emergency and Critical Care Medicine. We work in an incredibly stressful environment on a day-to-day basis, treating the most critical of cases and managing owners that have been completely blind-sided with bad news. It would only be natural that the staff becomes stressed as well with the cases, with the owners, with each other. How do we manage these feelings? What can we do to make each day a new one and not allow our emotions to interfere with our cases or each other? How can we approach members of our team when an interpersonal issue arises and solve that issue in a constructive positive manner? How do we manage that client that is (literally) yelling at you telling you that “you do not care about animals”-(which the author believes to be the most hurtful comment you can make to a veterinary professional)?

While no one person can ever be an expert in these areas, there is much literature available to offer substantial advice. In addition, wherever we may be employed, there is almost always a staff member that has been in the profession long enough to offer some friendly and helpful advice. As anyone knows that has been in our profession for an extended period of time, it is paramount that we learn how to manage stressful situations in a positive and focused way to survive. The alternative is burn out and/or becoming bitter, neither of which are qualities that are welcome in an emergency and critical care environment.

Everyone in our profession has had first hand experience with difficult clients. Horror stories of dealing with these client types are often a topic of conversation at post-work functions. Your company has to function effectively when confronted with clients who operate from a place of fear — which is often at the root of most difficult clients we encounter. You can’t do your job well or be recognized for a job well done by the client when your client is inadvertently, or deliberately, standing in your way.

The author has found five difficult client types that commonly create challenges to our role as medical caregivers and can truly make our already difficult day a little more difficult. Financial concerns, people that stand in your way, micro-manager, the people that feel they can do it better and the panicker. There are other difficult types that can also be found, but these tend to be the most common.

**FINANCIAL CONCERNS**

It is fair to say the “money conversation” is the root of aggression in a vast majority of negative client interactions. These clients have come to the emergency room with their beloved pet, the veterinary staff delivers horrible news, and then these owners are told if they want to fix their beloved pet they will need to leave a substantial amount of money. For some clients this is not possible which can create fear, anger, frustration and a loss of patience. It is important to take a step back as the veterinary professional and put you in the role of the pet owner. Understanding their fear, anger and frustration will allow you to communicate better. Be patient and kind with these individuals. Most of their anger is coming from place of fear and pure frustration- they want to save their pet but the realization that they cannot is horrifying to them. It is very important to not be judgmental of this client type, as none of us know their story. Remember, this client may have to report to someone else (spouse, parent, children) and explain the choices that need to be made with consideration of financial constraints. There may be other priorities that the owner needs to take into account (birthday presents, Christmas presents, food, mortgage or rent payment, etc). Give them the time they need to make the decision, do not be outwardly rude or dismissive of them, listen to them, and give them the options they need. Most importantly, if the owner cannot afford the care the patient needs, understand that an end of life decision may be the only outcome. This is undoubtedly hard for us, but imagine what it is like for the owner.

**PEOPLE THAT STAND IN YOUR WAY**


In certain situations, a client may bring a friend to the hospital with them. And sometimes, this friend may act as the decision maker when it is clear to the veterinary staff that they are not the owner or financial provider. This type of client has been labeled the “Silo-er” in some literature. They stand in the way of an effective conversation with the person that we need to speak to. The best way to manage this situation is to be polite but direct with whom you would like to speak with. Make eye contact with the person you want to speak with and ask direct questions to that person and that person only. While this may frustrate the person that wants to speak, more often than not the client will begin to speak and the other person will back down. However, it is not uncommon to have to make it clear that the veterinary professional staff can only speak with the person under which the animal is registered to avoid confusion.

**MICRO-MANAGER**

Another common difficult type of owner is the micro-manager. This is the person that wants details, details and details. This person wants to control every aspect of patient work up and treatment plan. It may feel like they don’t trust what the veterinary team is doing or that they can never do the job to their satisfaction, but their obsessive compulsiveness is often driven by fear. Understand that the micro-manager is operating from a place of fear. Instead of riding their fear wave, have a heart-to-heart and find out what you can do to help them feel more comfortable with the plan presented to them by the veterinary team.

**THEY CAN DO IT BETTER**

A type that is often associated with the micro-manager is the client that feels they can do it better or they know more than the veterinarian. These clients will tell you they have researched the disease, spoke to a family friend, or their breeder and they will feel that the veterinary team is always wrong. In the author’s opinion, this is one of the most frustrating client types in veterinary medicine as they are the clients that feel they can manage the disease process better. Again, this comes from a place of fear and the feeling of being powerless. Sometimes in these situations, the veterinary team has to allow these clients to go elsewhere and in certain cases to report them to officials for neglect simply because they will not listen to the veterinary team. Of course, the client should be reasoned with as the first level of action. Patience and direct communications is key. The veterinary professional must use polite but assertive tactics with the most difficult of situations.

**PANICKER**

People outside the realm of medicine are often not equipped with the skill set for emergent situations. This is the client type that presents to the hospital in pure panic mode. Sometimes, completely warranted and other times, maybe not as much but remember this is a panic moment for them. We have seen more as veterinary professionals and we have to be patient with these individuals. It is paramount that the entire team be patient and kind. The Panicker will suck you into their panic mode if you’re not careful, setting a work tone that can be extremely disconcerting. Again, often times this is coming from a place of fear. They often present in panic mode and we can trigger more panic after we triage their pet and take their pet away from them into the treatment area. This behind the scenes aspect of our job that they are not privy to may have set them into further panic mode. Your job is to help alleviate their fears. When owners are in complete panic mode, ask them flat out what can you do to help them, what do they need. And do the very best to provide this for them. Continuing/constant communication with them will help alleviate their fears as well.

With any of the above-mentioned scenarios, it is essential for the staff members to remember it is absolutely acceptable to “tag out” of the situation to avoid further confrontation with the client. There are times when we simply cannot get through to the client and the situation will continue to escalate further. It may be in the best interest of the client and the veterinary professional to bring someone new into the conversation. The client will often have displaced aggression towards the veterinary professional they have been speaking with and by having a new person enter the
conversation will instantly calm the client (as they are frustrated with the previous person with whom they were speaking).

Every client relationship can be peppered with moments of misunderstandings and disappointments — like any relationship. But without a strategy in place that can help you bring harmony to your client relations, one or more of these bad client types could negatively impact the reputation of your veterinary team. Learn to listen, and think before you react. It sounds so simple yet is truly a difficult trait to master. Talk with your team to have strategies in place and have a person on your staff that will be the ultimate decision maker when managing difficult clients.

We cannot leave out interpersonal relationships within our profession. As mentioned in the beginning, we work under an incredible amount of stress. It is easy to become frustrated with one another, which is often displaced aggression. A member of the team may be frustrated with a case, a co-worker or simply have a personal life issue they are managing. We must be as equally patient with each other as we are with our clients. The author has read numerous articles and book chapters on managing difficult situation, having difficult conversations etc., but the key underlying strategy is to always listen and to have calm, effective, direct communication with the individuals around you. Very few problems will get solved if they are ignored. It is acceptable practice to manage an interpersonal conflict directly without the supervisor present. If you are not certain how to have this conversation, one should ask their supervisor first before proceeding as to avoid aggravating the situation. It may be necessary to bring in the supervisor if the individuals cannot solve the issue. The important thing is to not allow the issue to breed further anger or resentment towards one another.

When faced with stress, recognizing the stressor is key. Once the stressor is recognized, choose how to respond to it. Even if you’re powerless to change the source of your stress, you have the power to choose how you’ll respond to it. Sometimes there are things we simply cannot change - the outcome of a case, the way a client is acting, the way a co-worker is acting. If we cannot change it, we must move on. Focus on what can be changed and/or how you can be a positive influence in the situation. If you can change the outcome of a situation that matters to you, then do so as quickly as possible. Make a plan for this resolution and act on it- whether it is in the moment of dealing with a difficult client, a difficult case or a long-term plan such as how to forge better relationships with your co-workers. If a situation is beyond your control, or if it just isn’t that important, stop worrying about it. If you continue to experience stress no matter how hard you try then you probably haven’t set realistic goals. In a culture that values a can-do attitude, it can be hard to admit that sometimes you can’t solve the problem.

It is essential to have open lines of communication with your team and your clients. Talk with your co-workers and let them know how you are feeling and in return validate their concerns. Be compassionate with your clients and with your coworkers. It is important to remember that if you are seeing a consistent negative result with your interactions, with clients or coworkers, the source of the issue may be you. You will have to take the necessary steps to improve your behavior.

Simply listening and not reacting without thinking first can successfully manage most difficult situations. Before speaking in the face of a difficult situation ask yourself if what you are about to say is true, necessary and kind. If the answer is no for any of them, do not say it. If you are having a stressful day, you may need a moment to yourself, it is acceptable to ask for this. It should not be underestimated how important it is to understand and tackle stressful situations in the emergency and critical care field.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING:

Pattersom K et al. Crucial Confrontations. 2002 McGraw Hill

Hardware excellence. 2003 Studder Group