

Unity

Cultivating diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential to ensuring the health and welfare of the veterinary profession and those working within it.

Diversity in the workplace takes into account the unique characteristics of staff members, including gender, race, disability, religion, sexual orientation—and the list goes on. In the third article of our Unity Series, we are looking at the characteristic of age and how it can affect perceptions, opportunities, and interactions in the workplace.

Bridging the Generational Divide

By Elizabeth “Betsy” Charles, DVM, MA

“When I was in vet school, I didn’t question my teachers like that. You get your butt up there and do those physical exams.” I had barely finished my sentence as I pointed behind my student toward the barn where six horses stood munching hay. My student grunted something under her breath, glared at me, and turned in frustration, kicking at the dirt and continuing to talk to herself. As I stood watching her huff her way up to the barn, almost ready to give myself a huge pat on the back for saving yet another entitled veterinary student, a terribly uncomfortable wave of self-awareness washed over me.

I just became “them.”

I had given my student instructions about how her externship would run, including doing physical exams and recording her results in the medical record. She replied in a disrespectful tone, “I don’t know why I have to do physical exams on healthy horses.” It was this statement that caused me to respond the way I did. If you have any gray in your hair, think Facebook is still the happening social media platform, know how to use a rotary phone, or lived (and died) by when the streetlights came on when you were a kid, you might also be one of “them” and probably don’t take issue with my response.

As tempting as it is to become like Clint Eastwood’s character in *Gran Torino* and

tell all the young people to metaphorically get the F\$@! off your lawn, if we, as a profession, are going to thrive, we must learn how to effectively work together across not only generational differences, but also multiple dimensions of diversity. When we, as a profession, can value the wisdom and insight of those who have gone before us, while also encouraging, embracing, and valuing new ideas and enthusiasm, we will create a profession where everyone belongs.

The generation gap is not a new thing. It has existed as long as young people and old people have tried to navigate life together, which means it has been around about as long as people. What has brought it to the forefront in the 21st century is the rapid change and the subsequent wide divide between seasoned practitioners and newer graduates—most specifically a divide in how we work, find meaning, communicate, and build relationships with one another. Thankfully, we can effectively narrow that divide by becoming emotionally intelligent veterinary professionals. And the awesome thing about increasing your EQ with regard to generational diversity is that those skills transfer to other areas of diversity. Bridging gaps will require us to understand that much of what divides people and generations isn’t about right and wrong, but rather about “different.” Research

tells us that “different” is hard and sometimes scary, but it is also good and important.

Emotional intelligence can be broken down into the following sectors: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Let’s go back and apply those four quadrants of emotional intelligence to the story that opened this article.

Recognize Your Biases: Self-Awareness

I am a poster child for Generation X. I am fiercely independent due to the fact that both my parents worked and I, as the oldest of four kids, was responsible for making sure my sisters and brother were taken care of while Mom and Dad were at work. I know how to problem solve and take initiative because I had to. I learned not to ask too many questions of my elders because the answer was often “because I said so, that’s why.” Respect was something given to those elders simply because of their elder status, not necessarily because it was earned. As a result, I can sometimes struggle with being a team player.

My student was a classic Millennial. She wanted to know the “why” behind what I was asking her to do—physical exams on horses that were at our clinic for lameness evaluation, not illness. She felt comfortable questioning an authority figure. She didn’t immediately make the connection between doing physical exams on healthy horses that were being evaluated for a lameness issue as a way to solidify her understanding of normal findings so she could readily identify abnormal in the future. She was frustrated by my inappropriate response.

If each of us knows who we are by reflecting on the generational lens through which we look, we can enter into conversations more intentionally

so we can better manage ourselves, something I did not do in my interaction with my student.

Suspend Judgment: Self-Management

As soon as my student questioned me, I lost my mind. She hit one of my triggers, the lack-of-respect trigger. I worked very hard to get to my position as director of the imaging center and I did not appreciate her questioning me, so I blurted out a pretty aggressive “them” response—the “I walked up hill in the snow both ways” thing. Had I paused for a moment, taken a deep breath, and then responded, I think the outcome would have been very different. We did talk about the situation the next day, both her disrespectful tone and my inappropriate reaction. She was able to express her genuine confusion about me asking her to do physical exams on healthy horses and I was able to explain why I felt that it was important in her development as an equine practitioner. Self-management is a critical skill when confronted with anything that pushes us out of our comfort zones.

Learn to Speak Their Language by Building Relationship: Social Awareness and Relationship Management

Not only do I need to know myself; having awareness about the world around me is also critical. The best way to do that is to build relationships with people who are different than you. Old people: hang out with young people! Young people: hang out with old people! You don’t have to do it all the time, but find ways to make sure your world includes different voices. Once I was willing to embrace the “it’s not right or wrong, it’s just different” approach, I stopped making assumptions about a so-called lazy and entitled generation who doesn’t

want to work. Instead of telling my “uphill in the snow” stories, I learned how to work with a group of young people who are engaged, brave, and willing to blow up broken practice models that no longer work. When we can work together to rebuild those models, the resulting veterinary practices will be places where everyone fits, not just a select few.

Instead of continuing to propagate an “us vs. them” mentality, let’s become a more emotionally intelligent profession by bridging the gap. If you are interested in learning more about how to put these specific skills into practice—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—a more in-depth review of these ideas is available in *Vet Clinics of North America* (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0195561621000735>). ■

