

Critical skills for the next age of veterinary medicine and animal health

Melanie Barham DVM, PMP, MBA

“Listen, all we have to do is....,” I remember saying about a particular issue I was trying to solve with a large group. Then I stopped myself, because I remembered a fundamental truth I’ve learned the hard way: there are very few problems where you can “just do this one thing” and everything is solved. I Maybe many of the “easy” changes or optimizations to animal health, veterinary medicine, or even daily work efficiencies have been achieved. Maybe problems are more complex now with a global, socially connected society. Either way, problems like climate change, veterinary and farm labour shortages, animal welfare are not simple. Pulling a small strand of any one of them unravels about 100 or more other issues to be sorted out. It’s enough to make you give up, except that any of these big, wicked problems are not going away. So, what’s an animal health professional to do, if they want to solve complex problems at hand, or train the next generation of amazing people who can take up the torch to solve tomorrow’s problems?

I offer up the skillsets below as critical skillsets for all current animal health professionals, looking to unite groups with opposite views, and for the next generation of animal health professionals, who will surely have to tackle even bigger challenges in the years to come. After having the opportunity to work alongside and observe leaders in animal health here in Canada and internationally and watching what has been successful in moving big problems forward, it’s my observation that the leaders and teams who work to continually embrace the following skillsets have achieved more innovative results and unification of polarized groups. I’ve tried in my own leadership practice to incorporate the same principles. Although I’ve heartily failed on many occasions, when I’ve got it “right”, something fantastic happens where issues move forward faster, groups work with high levels of trust, and we collectively create a space that leaves ego, competition, and bluster at the door. It’s not all roses and rainbows: there’s conflict and disagreement, but at the end of the day, everyone involved leaves with their needs satisfied, and meaningful solutions and transformative change and trust.

Before I jump into the skillsets that seem to be critical ingredients for success, I want to talk a bit more about what success looks like when solving challenging problems. I mentioned a mythical place where everyone walks away with their needs met. For the cynics, this either sounds like an impossibility, or a terrible solution designed by a committee! Maybe I can convince you otherwise.

Shared value creation

Collaboration is a term that’s often used to describe anything from a committee-based approach to a group of stakeholders working as a cohesive team on a problem. Another term can be considered instead: shared value creation. Shared value creation was popularized in the early 2010s environmental sustainability movement ([Porter and Kramer, 2011](#)). Porter and Kramer posit that in most problem solving, “Each side has assumed that the other is an obstacle to pursuing its goals and has acted accordingly.” Shared value differs in that it considers the

views of those people at the opposite side of the table. “The concept of shared value, in contrast, recognizes that societal needs, not just economical drivers, define markets.”

Shared value creation can be applied lots of complex problems, and two parts are particularly relevant to animal health:

1. Shared value creation allows for all stakeholders to come to the table as equals with their own unique perspectives, needs, and desired outcomes.
2. Instead of pitting the opposing viewpoints against each other, shared value creation allows for another way, where the groups work to innovate for a new solution that satisfies all parties major drivers.

If this sounds impossible in animal health, especially in the case of highly polarized or political views, we do it every day in veterinary medicine, and in almost every part of our lives! Here’s one I lived every day for many years. As a veterinarian in horse practice, I used to work on sport horses. Every time I pulled up to a farm to work on a lame horse, I had multiple stakeholders to work with. Every single one of them had a different agenda, needs, and beliefs. The rider hoping to get to the end goal of the competition, the trainer with an economic driver and a desire to take their client to the competition, the farrier with a need to ensure the feet are cared for, the horse owner with a desire to keep the bills to a minimum. I always felt like there were a million ways to achieve the goal of a pain-free horse whose welfare is upheld, but the right solution came through when we all understood the needs of each person and we co-designed a solution everyone was happy with, especially the horse! That ability for a group to unite around a shared vision is where the most beautiful, innovative ideas always come out.

Shared value creation is a way to advance collaboration beyond incremental change and allows groups with opposing views to co-design new solutions to big or old problems. Continuing to try to solve problems from only our own viewpoints will almost certainly not deliver the magnitude of results we need to bring imminent change on topics like the veterinary shortage, mental health issues on farms or within veterinary medicine, or how animals should be used/raised. We know that companies who embrace shared value creation from an environmental perspective experience an increase in profitability and attract and retain more talent, as two simple markers of success ([Goddhart & Koller, 2020](#)). When I’ve seen groups in animal health achieve shared value creation, trust is amplified, progress is faster, and solutions are far better than anything designed in isolation. I offer shared value as an alternative to consider instead of competition between groups, where the loudest or richest wins, solitary problem solving, and to multiple compromises creating a watered down solution.

So what skills allow shared value creation to happen?

Three skillsets are critical and interdependent in the pursuit of shared value creation. I imagine the three-legged stool of skills: emotional intelligence, curiosity, and trust building.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is described as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions, and to recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others. Coined in 1990

by researchers Salavoy and John Mayer (Salavoy & Mayer, 1990), author Daniel Goleman popularized the term in 1995 with his book “Emotional Intelligence” (Goleman, 1995). Although the term implies that you are either born emotionally intelligent or not, emotional intelligence is a learned practice, and involves continual improvement. Emotional intelligence becomes critical when we work with others and explore opposing viewpoints. Particularly when we work on issues that matter to us personally, emotions can come up for us, or for others. One thing is certain is that challenging our beliefs and ideas to create a new solution always creates emotional responses. Leaders and organizations who have been able to reflect and understand their own feelings and why they arise have been the most successful in persevering (Why am I feeling so angry about this? What’s this emotion telling me about the importance of this topic?) An even more advanced skillset is in exploring and understanding the feelings of others, and how those feelings map onto behaviours. (Why is this person doing what they’re doing? What’s the feeling or driving need behind the behaviour?) Being comfortable with the discomfort of examining why you may feel a certain way or why you may be the recipient of someone else’s strong emotional response is a critical part of sticking around long enough to find a solution to a problem.

One action to consider

Consider using an [emotions wheel](#) with your team or on your own in the next week to expand your ability to name the emotions that come up for you in your daily work (Cooks-Campbell, 2022). Emotions researchers disagree on the exact count of number of emotions humans (anywhere from 27 up to 3400 is the current count), but the average person can name only a few off the top of their head and even fewer when feeling “emotional!”

Curiosity

A colleague of mine regularly challenges her team to staying curious with her and rewards them when they remain interested to learn more and explore solutions before making up their minds. Our brain prefers to take shortcuts based on previous experiences; it’s a way of preserving brain power, creating habits, and it’s one way we learn! Teams working on shared value creation successfully fight taking brain shortcuts, and work to remain in a non-judgemental state of curiosity. Curiosity allows us to check assumptions, imagine other possibilities, and ultimately allows change to become possible.

When I think of getting into a state of curiosity, I have found open ended questions helpful as a tool (“Can you tell me more about what you said about X? I wonder if this work?”). I also actively have to pay attention to my emotions as flags for when I am slipping out of a state of thinking about what’s possible and into an entrenched viewpoint (making curiosity greatly linked to emotional intelligence). An old improvisation trick is to eliminate your team from saying “but” or pulling apart an idea before it’s riffed upon, explored or built upon. The exercise asks the team to only say, “Yes, AND” to any given idea, adding to the idea or creating a new one. Given the vastly different backgrounds we all come from, it’s unlikely I know the full story on someone’s viewpoint or that I’d fully understand all the aspects of their ideas without

exploring them. When I can stay curious, it allows me to gather information to make better decisions, and as a team we can actually innovate for new ideas.

One action to consider

The book “Immunity to Change” is an excellent reference book to start to bring in the practice of curiosity to when motivations and reluctance to make change is present despite shared desire to make change.

Trust building

Building trust is likely the most intangible of skills, as trust is slow to create, easy to dissipate, and highly variable in how it’s established. No one can give you an exact set of things to say to that works for every group. Brené Brown, qualitative researcher and TED talk phenom has researched this topic extensively. Her data shows that you simply cannot have trust without vulnerability. It also showed that trust is often built in small, every day actions that add currency in the bank account of trust ([Brown, 2018](#)). The teams I’ve observed who absolutely have trust among themselves regularly engage in several key behaviours. These included:

- Noticed that the other person’s behaviour was out of character, and checked in with them
- Regularly ask/check how their words and actions landed with the other person/people
- Took ownership of mistakes quickly and with ease
- Shared parts of their lives and how their life may impact their work, and showing mutual caring by asking about parts of their team member’s lives
- Small acts of care and consideration took place regularly

Trust was built in those small everyday “little difficult conversations.” Little things didn’t become big things. These high trust teams and groups showed they cared about one another, which created the psychological safety to lean in to tough conversations even when it was uncomfortable. These teams also didn’t shy away from difficult conversations or pretend everything was ok only to create a complex workaround behind the scenes.

One possible action

Listen to this [summary of trust](#) from Brené Brown and consider one thing you are doing well on, and one thing you could action to increase trust on your team.

As the only ones in the One Health equation to have a voice, we are the conductors and convenors tasked with tackling the big problems of animal health. When I look around among the leaders working to find solutions, it looks like we can choose to do business as we have in the past with incremental improvements and some wins along the way. Some leaders are working on a new way that creates more value for everyone, innovative solutions, and brings opposing groups together instead of driving them apart. I hope more people (rising leaders/students included) join in the practice of developing new skillsets to try a new way, to co-create solutions that allow us to leap frog ahead, together.

