

COMMUNICATING CAPTIVE WILD ANIMAL NUTRITION

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Abstract

Zoo or captive wild animal nutrition is globally evolving into a respected science. It is still in its infancy and there are many unknowns particularly with today's economic environment. However, there is one certainty about this emerging arena, and that is, only the people caring for these animals and their dedication, will improve the field of zoo nutrition. Often "people skills," rather than nutritional expertise determine success within a zoological institution. For example on a local scale, if an optimum diet is formulated for an animal, but the keeper does not believe in it and does not feed the diet – what good does the diet do? If a Curator or Area Supervisor is alienated because the nutritionist did not follow the "chain of command" – then they cease to be effective. Learning to communicate with those you work with on a frequent basis is a key to success – there is no place for ego. On a national and international scale, if a nutritionist does not participate in the exchange of ideals within scientific forums (AZA, CNS, NAG, AAVN, ACVN, EZNRG, ESCVN, ECVCN), or via scientific literature or the Internet (list serves, web sites); what value does nutritional work completed at one zoo, or in one country, aid in the preservation of endangered species? We all need to work together and we all need to communicate. Communicating effectively – whether verbally or written – is essential for the procurement of nutritional knowledge and the maintaining of the captive wild animal populations in zoological institutions.

COMMUNICATION – THE SIX RULES

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant!" ANONYMOUS

Communication. How often have you read or heard about communication and its effectiveness? But have you really heard? Lets talk about people skills and using them. People skills - that gut feeling when to say the right thing, nod your head, look someone in the eye, step forward, step backward, say something or keep your mouth shut - people skills is the key to effective communication. I have found that if you can just listen, really listen to what someone has to say, you make more progress in achieving your goals. Remember you have two ears and one mouth, that can defined by saying that you have to listen twice as much as you talk! Sounds simple doesn't it, but it is not always easy. For some individual personalities this is extremely difficult, but I have found, even if it is challenging, it is worth the effort. In my work, I have six rules that I try to use when working with people. They are as follows:

- 1) Be positive and cheerful.
- 2) Learn names.
- 3) Listen - really listen.

- 4) Be open-minded – keep in mind that your way is not the only way.
- 5) Be sincere and keep your word.
- 6) Follow up on what you implement.

- 1) **Be positive and cheerful.** We really do create our own environment. There have been scores of books written on the subject, but it is actually very simple. If you are pleasant and cheerful, people won't cringe when you walk in, or see you as a necessary evil. You don't have to go in bouncing off the walls, just be positive. Watch for the results, it's catching.
- 2) **Learn names.** An individual's name is part of who they are. A name is important. If you take time to learn it and call people by their name, it makes them feel good. Learning someone's name tells "them" that you think they are important. Everyone needs to feel important. If you make them feel better, they are more likely to work with you instead of against you. There is a saying that, "People who feel good about themselves, produce good products¹." It works in this industry too!
- 3) **Listen - really listen.** Have you ever been talking to someone and their eyes keep wandering away or they get this distant look. Or they wave at someone else walking by while talking to you? How does that make you feel? Compare that to someone meets your eye as you are speaking, giving you their full attention, and taking in every word. How does that make you feel? Who would you rather work with? Who do you think "others" would rather work with? Do you really listen?
- 4) **Be open-minded - your way is not the only way.** When discussing on how "something" should be approached, whether that is feeding an animal, or implementing a new diet, take some time to listen to what others think. By discussing and considering what someone else is thinking, you give "them" a chance to participate, to be part of the project, and let them take some ownership in what is evolving for the animal. Did you ever stop to think that you might have missed something, a fact that is obvious to others? Who knows, their idea may be better than yours. If you can include others in your work, it becomes more important to them, and the ultimate winner is the animal. Besides, if you are not open-minded, others will not be either.
- 5) **Be sincere and keep your word.** How many times has someone told you that they would do something and it doesn't happen? When you work with that person again, do you believe what they say? Do you trust that they will do as they say or do you follow up, "just in case"? When you tell someone that you are going to do something, do it. Simple as that, do it. If you cannot, let them know what is going on. People have long memories and it easier to lose someone's trust than to keep it.
- 6) **Follow up on what you implement.** If you start a project or change a diet, follow up on it. By you coming back to "check" on the progress, you give it importance. If you change a diet and never follow up on it, how can you really determine if it was a success? What kind of message are you giving? If you take a vested interest in your work and its progress, others will see it and will be waiting for you with questions and observations.

THE PEOPLE

If you stop to think about it, most people work at a zoo to work with the animals, however, if they cannot work with other "higher primates", they will not last long. "Higher primates" at a captive wild animal facility include, but are not limited to: 1) the zookeepers; 2) administrators; 3) the veterinarian; 4) volunteers and

interns; 5) the public; and 6) the scientific community. Now even though these are all people, and in essence people are the same, you have to keep in mind the “position” individuals have. Position should not be important, but face it - in the “real” world - it is. Therefore, each individual will have to be approached differently. Keep in mind, that if you take the time to get to know an individual, your success rate of achieving your goals will be much higher.

“The best minute I spend is the one that I invest in people¹.”

A few words of caution may be of benefit as you begin to implement these steps of communication. It is not in your best interest to always be everyone’s best friend. You still have to be professional, and you still have to get your job done in a timely fashion. You can get to know someone, and still maintain that fine professional line. If you cross that fine line, you will find that when you make unpopular decisions, feelings may be hurt. When feelings get hurt, then you are dealing with raw emotion. I said it was simple, but I did not say it was easy. Now, let’s take a look at the people a nutritionist deals with on a daily basis.

Zoo Keepers

The zookeeper is probably one of the most important people to have on your “side.” These individuals spend every day with “their” animals. They feed them, they clean them and after that they give them treats. They call for help when the animals are sick and they think up things to entertain them. This almost has the ring of “motherhood” in its lines, does it not? Now enter the zoo nutritionist. Opening their notebook, the zoo nutritionist says to feed only biscuits (how boring!) and stop feeding those grapes, not so many oranges, forget the peanuts entirely and heaven sakes no honey!!! Let me tell you that if you walk in and start making changes without major attention to just what is going on in this “household”, there will never be a change in the diet! Oh yes, it may be up on “the” white board, or a chalkboard, on the computer, posted on the refrigerator, even on the master in the commissary, but NOTHING will change unless you convince the keeper of its importance to the animal.

Now step back and replay this scenario, a nutritionist walks into the “zookeeper’s house” and asks “how is it going?” “How are George and Martha (all animals have names in a zoo)?” What’s going on, and do **YOU** think that there is anything that I can do? What you have done is to take the individual off of the defensive and you have asked their opinion. What higher respect can you give them, than your ear and your time to listen? But then you **HAVE** to listen. Now this obviously can be overdone, and you could come off as “fake” and never be effective. However, there is a balance where there can be mutual respect and accomplishment of goals.

Administrators

Every zoological institution has its hierarchy that dictates who answers to whom, and who gives the orders. Usually there is a director at the “top.” The director sends decrees to the curators (mammal, bird, reptiles or fishes) and the veterinarians. The curators then “lay the law” to area supervisors, who then “control” the zookeepers. The veterinarian works in between all of them. Where the nutritionist is classified depends on the zoo. It is important to stress that even though an individual may scoff at the importance of hierarchy, a hierarchy is essential. The director is the “top” of the hierarchy and going along with that “position” is the

responsibility of the whole zoological institution. If something happens and the director knows nothing about it, the first thing he/she will do is call the curators and on down. In working within a zoological institution, it is essential to follow this “chain of command” or rather this “chain of communication”. That way, all in roles of responsibility know what is going on.

“Higher primates” are closer to the animal world than we realize and frankly many are quite territorial. Be aware of territories. If you pay close attention, you will find that egos are closely associated with territories, and if you “trespass” into a territory you find just how large an ego is. The key is to remember the “position” (or territory), and then get to know the person. If you respect that person and their “position,” working becomes much easier. Now - are nutritionists any different? Have you looked at what “your” territory is? Do you get a little “burn” deep inside when the vet or curator applies a nutritional principle without your advise? We need to work as a team – whether that team is within a zoological institution or a professional organization? These are hard questions for some to answer, but how powerful the answers can be!

Veterinarians

To the nutritionist, the vet is the “other” partner in science that is needed to make captive animal nutrition come together. In order to get the whole nutritional picture, a blood panel and sadly sometimes necropsy results are essential clues in deciphering captive wild animal nutrition. The animal nutritionist is not as effective without the participation of the zoo veterinarian. Now what is the “position” that the vets are coming from? Keep in mind, that vets have been the resident scientist for years. They have always been on the hot seat answering all science-related questions. For some, the entrance of a nutritionist is a blessing and an asset. There are others, however, the addition of a nutritionist is an inconvenience, only adding more to a workload that is already too heavy. All veterinarians that I have worked with recognize the importance of nutrition, but have limitations on what they want to do with it.

Volunteers and Interns

Volunteers or docents (as they are called) do the “grunt” work of the zoo. The work that is tedious and boring or jobs that no one wants to do - like talking with the public answering those “inane” questions, this is what the volunteers and interns do. Often, volunteers and interns are there to “get their foot in the door”, get zoo experience and often for no or little pay. It is amazing that if you take just a few minutes to find out their name, ask how they are and how they are doing, the “importance” you give to the individual and what a difference that it makes in how they approach their tasks. Everyone deserves and needs to be recognized. Because volunteers and interns have an unclear “position” they are often forgotten in the hierarchy.

Public

The public has more control over a zoological institution than most realize. Why is it that we have a papa bear, a mama bear and baby bear all in one cage - even though this is the most “unnatural” thing for a species? This is done because the public wants to see, a “family!” Now as a nutritionist, how do you feed mama, papa and baby when they are all in one exhibit? Why is it that we do not feed live lambs or bunnies to the lions, tigers and bears? We don’t do this because of public perception. The old saying, “the customer is always right” has its price. In general, the captive wild animal nutritionist does not have as much to do with the public, however, there is always a public impact. What is the “position” of the

public and how do you think they affect your role as a nutritionist?

Scientific Communities

As a zoo nutritionist, the scientific community is essential not only to keep current in our field, but also to provide input for others in the exchange of ideals. If we all hide the “secrets” of keeping animals so that a single institution can seem superior, the ones who ultimately suffer are the animals. Communication among individuals, among zoological institutions – both at national and international levels – and with the academic community is critical if we are to maintain many of the endangered and threatened species. The world is becoming smaller and thinking at the global level is necessary to continue the evolution of captive wild animal nutrition into a respected science. Already scientific agencies such as AZA, CNS, NAG, AAVN, ACVN, EZNRG, ESCVN, ECVCN and others are providing the forum to present the accumulated knowledge - via scientific meetings or in the literature or the Internet (list serves, web sites). Within these arenas and with continued communication, the community of captive wild animal nutritionists will continue to procure nutritional knowledge needed to maintain the wild animals of today.

SUMMARY

I am sure that you can list other people that a captive animal nutritionist works with daily. This is only a start. The thing to remember about people is that all want to be heard and all want to succeed. It is human nature to want to be liked and to succeed. It would be easy to throw your “power” around, or your education, or your knowledge, but to “really” work with people, you have to get to know them. Perhaps more important than getting to know people is to respect them. It is also human nature that we will never like everyone, but we can respect them for what they are and what they are doing. Keep in mind the six “keys”: 1) create your own environment; 2) learn names; 3) listen (two ears and one mouth); 4) open-mindedness; 5) sincerity; and 6) follow-up. Communication **IS SIMPLE**, but it is not always easy.

“Influencing people is the art of letting them have your way”. ANONYMOUS

Implications

If a captive animal nutritionist takes the time to get to know the people and their “position” at the zoological institution, their progress will be much greater.

LITERATURE CITED

1. Blanchard, K. and S. Johnson. 1983. *The One Minute Manager*. Berkley Books. New York.