

# Building Effective Farrier - Veterinarian Teams



"The trusted voice in farrier education"

**Butler Professional Farrier School**

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## **Building Effective Farrier – Veterinarian Teams**

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Farriers and veterinarians can be of more service to clients and their horses by creating a liaison, or relationship, with one or more of those practitioners who serve their area. Cooperation builds successful outcomes.

An effective, lasting liaison comes from mutual understanding as well as respect. Recognize also that it is impossible to work with some individuals where conflict seems to be unavoidable. Search for and recommend those you can work with. Cooperation is most likely to occur when we understand each other.

### **Strive to understand the other's point of view.**

#### **a. Historical origin.**

The first key to building effective farrier/veterinarian relationships is to recognize that there is a tradition of conflict. Traditionally, the veterinarian/farrier relationship has been adversarial; that is, farriers and veterinarians haven't liked each other. The feeling persists even though most veterinarians don't want the physical stress that farriery requires, and most farriers don't want the cerebral stress that veterinary medicine demands.

The modern veterinary profession evolved from the ancient farrier profession. Before 1800, they were one and the same. At that time they began to separate on the continent of Europe. Farriers or blacksmith/horseshoers took the path of least resistance. Veterinarians, on the other hand, chose the path of education and growth.

Veterinarians established schools and developed training programs. Most of them were short-term, what we would today call a trade school. Early veterinary schools required no more than a few weeks or months of classes, much like our American farrier schools today. But they continually improved and progressed until professional schools, requiring several years of study, were established by 1900.

Edward Coleman, one of the first British veterinary educators, said in his book, *Observations on the Foot of the Horse* in 1798, "A proper mode of shoeing is certainly of more importance than the treatment of any disease, or perhaps all the diseases incident to horses." Foot study was central to good veterinary care. Today, emphasis on the foot is lacking in veterinary school curriculums.

Foot study requires more emphasis than is traditionally given in existing formal veterinary and farrier training programs if competence is to be achieved. Opportunities for reliable continuing education are available for both professions. However, they must be pursued and acted upon to be of benefit to the horse and its owner.

## **b. Economic competition.**

The second key to understanding why there may be veterinary/farrier conflict is economic. Veterinarians and farriers see themselves in competition for the horse owner's dollar. Although rarely true, if each stays in his or her own realm, it is a widespread perception just the same.

State veterinary practice acts were originally written as protectionist legislation against someone doing the veterinarian's work, but were passed as animal protection or welfare acts.

The foolish indiscretion of working in each other's realms destroys one's positioning and potential for success. Veterinarians who shoe horses and farriers who float teeth don't help this situation.

Regardless of the reason, many vets and farriers see each other as competitors rather than cooperators. They believe the horse owner will call either one or the other.

## **c. Half-brain thinking.**

The third reason, and perhaps the main one, for understanding why animosity may exist between veterinarians and farriers, stems from the major differences that exist between people. We need to understand our differences and work together, using our strengths to solve problems.

Veterinarians spend many years studying and being "emotionally beat-up the entire time they are in veterinary school," according to Dr. Loretta Guage in her book, *If Wishes Were Horses*. Veterinarians develop their left-brain capabilities to a very high degree. The left side of the brain houses logical, numerical and verbal skills.

Farriers, on the other hand, are usually not as schooled and disciplined as vets. They tend to be more right-brained, developing spatial, intuitive and visual skills. And they get physically beat-up by unruly horses!

People using different thinking modes usually don't communicate very well. They are speaking different languages. Steven Covey calls it "the language of the deaf," in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Instead of working toward synergy, that gives a solution better than each could have arrived at separately, we frequently go ahead on our own and get a half-brained solution! The corollary is that we don't see the world **as it is**, but **as we are**.

#### **d. Practical versus scientific approach.**

Farriers look at the solution to foot problems as primarily mechanical. They develop their skill by repetition and feel. What they do has to be practical and make sense to them. Farriers want to immediately try what they think will work (because it worked on the last horse they tried it on). They have a tendency to be very sure of things they've learned by experience. They tend to rely on themselves.

Veterinarians, on the other hand, are trained to use the scientific method to evaluate and prescribe a medical solution. They must go through a process of differential diagnosis to eliminate all the possibilities. This often takes time. They are taught to be cautious, use only tested and proven procedures, and be non-committal in phrasing answers. They rely on the word of "experts" to help them make up their minds. This different way of looking at a problem may cause conflict.

#### **e. Self-taught versus system-taught.**

American farriers are largely self-taught, mainly because we have no formal training system. This often produces narrowness and even blindness. As a rule, farriers are academically deficient in scientific training. Farriers may have great ability and be highly skilled, but most have little understanding of medical physiology.

On the other hand, today's veterinary education is only as good as the system. Graduates have little mechanical or practical experience. If they do have any, they got it before or after attending veterinary school.

A former undergraduate student of mine wrote me on her first day at vet school, "One of my professors said by way of introduction: 'Today's veterinary medicine involves two distinct operations: acquisition of knowledge and acquisition of skills. You will leave school full of the former and all but devoid of the latter.'"

This is not the fault of the graduate veterinarian. Rather, it is the fault of the system we have allowed university faculty to build into our American veterinary schools.

Those who have tried to change the system have faced many hurdles, as noted in an excellent book, *Shedding the Blinkers in Veterinary Education*, by Dr. Henry Collins, an Australian veterinary professor, published by the University of Sydney Post Graduate Foundation in 1997. He emphasized the need to teach veterinary students to think, not just memorize facts.

Even though some systemic changes have been tried in America, they haven't helped much. For example, vet schools have experimented with "tracking" to provide a more focused curriculum on a few species, resulting in students doing poorly on unchanged Board Examinations that were designed for a more general curriculum.

The media quoted the Dean of a prominent American veterinary school, "Today's veterinary education is a mile wide and an inch deep." Clearly, the current education systems need a major overhaul.

Vet students are up against ferocious competition in higher education. The emotional and physical abuse that students survive makes them qualified to "swim with the sharks," as author and businessman Harvey McKay says. Some *don't* survive; they even lose their families and their identities in this hostile environment. Those who do survive learn how to get along in an adversarial and critical environment.

Most farriers, on the other hand, have not been conditioned to deal with these emotionally toughening experiences. They have no idea how tough it is in veterinary school. That may explain why farriers often have a hard time dealing with critical evaluation and differences of opinion that contribute to conflict.

#### **f. Return on investment.**

Little investment is required to become a farrier. Since there are no required exams, anyone can start in farrier work. A person simply needs to be willing to work hard and take the time to learn the basics over a period of a few months. One can get into business for an investment of a few thousand dollars for schooling and tools. The most variable expense is the truck setup.

Few professions have such a low cost of entry compared with the kind of income possible. Some farriers earn as much as veterinary school graduates. The biggest unknown is how long it takes to build a sustainable business. For many, it's between two to five years.

Many farrier students are so anxious to get out of school and start making money that they don't make the best use of their learning time. After school, they don't continue to learn because they don't have to. The public simply doesn't expect or demand it. The biggest difference among farriers is their desire for and application of continuing education.

Veterinarians, on the other hand, enter a job that offers a very low return on their investment of time and money. First, they must take a rigorous undergraduate science curriculum and achieve a high-grade point average. Because application to vet school is highly competitive, odds are they don't get in the first time they apply. They must be committed and persistent. And they must have financial resources.

Most farriers do not understand how tough it is to become a vet and how little respect "an animal doctor" gets for the effort and sacrifice he or she made to graduate. Few careers give such a low return on the investment required.

Unfortunately, some veterinary students are more motivated by the expectations of their parents than they are from internal sources. They felt they wanted to do something with animals, and their parents wanted them to get paid well. I observed as an academic advisor that these students were often pushed into a profession that they were not totally enthused about. The job didn't really fit their ability and internal motivation. In reality, the parents wanted to tell their friends their child was a "doctor" and had a "real job."

Bruce Daniels, an expert harness racehorse farrier from New Jersey, said his in-laws would often ask his wife, "When is Bruce going to quit shoeing horses and get a real job?" Apparently, a lot of people feel like farriers don't have a real job. After the first question, "Does it hurt the horsy?," the next is, "Why do farriers get paid so much for doing something so simple?" Most people have never tried it, and therefore cannot understand how difficult it is. Yet few jobs give such a high return on the investment required to enter the field. Not surprisingly, this difference is a source of conflict.

#### **g. Regulation and licensing.**

Veterinarians are highly regulated by governments, while farriers have little or no regulation. This can't help but cause jealousy and feelings of unfairness. Veterinarians have education and licensing requirements. They have a long list of things they can and cannot do. Because they are recognized as a profession, they can be held to specified standards of behavior and can obtain professional liability insurance through their associations.

Since farriers don't have an educational or licensing system, they cannot be held to as high a standard of responsibility as veterinarians. It is hard to make negligence stick if there is no required formal training and/or mandatory qualification exam.

Veterinary practice laws are different in each state. These really serve as protectionist legislation that prevent unqualified (unexamined) persons from practicing any therapeutic work that could be construed as veterinary medicine. For example, some states allow non-veterinary equine dentists to work on horses while others make it illegal to put a float in a horse's mouth without a veterinary license.

Most veterinary practice laws include working on the foot. Only in a few states is horseshoeing officially exempt. Tradition is all that keeps farriers out of trouble. Farriers must not cross the line by doing anything to treat sensitive tissue without vet supervision.

*(For a listing of exemptions, see "State Legislative Resources – Issues" on the American Veterinary Medical Association web site.)*

Richardson in his book *Practical Farriery* published for British apprentices said, "Occasionally the farrier forgets himself and fails to recognize that when he is in consultation on a foot case the professional's word is *always* taken. He may be right, he may not... Always recognize that he (the vet), not the farrier is in charge of the case... Most veterinary surgeons recognize that successful treatment frequently depends more upon the farrier than upon himself."

Of course, the client can make the choice initially not to include the veterinarian. This also creates bad feelings.

#### **h. Public perception.**

There has been a tremendous shift in how the majority of people view animals. Historically and legally, animals have been regarded as property. People have made decisions regarding an animal's care based on its economic value. Not today. Animals are thought to have "rights" by the majority of people. Most animal care decisions are based on emotion, not science or common-sense logic.

The *Journal of Animal Science* did a survey in 1995 of incoming college freshmen in the Animal Science major across the United States. Researchers found that 82% of these young people believed in animal rights. A major horse magazine recently determined by survey that 95% of their readers believed in animal rights. Clearly, public perception has changed. Farriers and veterinarians need to be aware of this and position themselves as a source for sensible solutions involving animal welfare.

Believing in animal rights is different than believing in animal welfare. Farriers and veterinarians should be champions of, believe in, and promote animal welfare. Animal welfare means taking good care of animals and looking after their needs from the animal's point of view as determined by scientific study. Humane health, nutrition, environment and foot maintenance practices come under this category.

Animal rights means animals are equal to, or more valuable than, humans and deserve the same rights as humans do. The most radical of these groups believe that animals should not be "exploited" by being ridden, shod, worked against their will, kept in enclosures, used for food, or slaughtered for any reason. It is a position no responsible farrier or veterinarian can take. But some have. This difference in perception creates conflict.

### **Respect, Trust and Courtesy**

Most farriers and veterinarians feel they don't get enough respect. Respect and trust must be earned. When we try to obtain these values through intimidation or titles, it isn't genuine.

We would all be better served if we showed more respect for each other. Now that we understand a little more about what we each have experienced and endured, perhaps we should call each other by respectful names such as *Doctor, Miss, Mrs.* or *Mister*.

It pays to be courteous. Dr. Robert Miller, a veterinarian from Thousand Oaks, California writing in *The Western Horseman*, said that the most important characteristic of the ideal client is courtesy. They won't call on you at inconvenient times and expect service without compensation. Also, they won't expect you to put your life in danger.

You can gain great internal satisfaction from helping animals in need and working with the people who care for them. Yet the satisfaction quickly evaporates when people don't respect you as a professional.

A lot of farriers and veterinarians feel slighted in this way. Farriers are looked down upon because of the dirty and physical nature of their work. (See how much respect you get when you go into a closed-in public area after you've been working on "thrushy" horses all day!)

Similarly, veterinarians are looked down upon by the medical community. They say vets aren't "real doctors." That hurts, especially when, for many years, it was more difficult to get into vet school than med school!

## **Understanding Encourages Communication**

Farriers and veterinarians are motivated by similar things. They both want to help the animal and provide the best solution for its welfare. They both want to make a living doing what they like to do. They both want respect for doing what they do and for what they have been through to get where they are. They want respect from the client, from the public, and from each other.

We could all do better than we have at working together to serve our clients and their horses. One important way for farriers and veterinarians to expand their service base is to seek out others with whom each can effectively work.

## **Get Training in Communications**

Dr. Lydia Miller, writing in *Equine Practice*, has said that veterinary school graduates "have a strong knowledge base, moderate professional skills and probably no interpersonal communication abilities." The same could be said of many practicing farriers. Communication skills need to be developed.



Recognize that it is more important *how* something is said, than *what* is said. Concentrate on the person and give them your full attention. Figure out exactly what they want and try to provide it for them. Adapt your conversation style and professional role to each client. Their client's lifestyle will affect the effectiveness of the prescribed treatment and client follow-up. We all need to work at improving our communication skills.

## **The Therapeutic Shoeing Triad**

By comparing the strengths, limitations and concerns of others, you can be better prepared to be empathetic (feel what the other is feeling) and make the necessary communication adjustments. I call the relationship among the farrier, veterinarian, and horse owner the "Therapeutic Shoeing Triad."

We are at our best when we are courteous, humble and teachable. As we apply the synergistic or team approach – **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore.

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