A veterinary team member is overheard saying to a client, “When my Pickles was diagnosed with cancer, I was shell-shocked. I am sorry that you are in a similar place with Melvin.” The simple use of self-disclosure is intended to build rapport.

If only it ended there—but the team member continues on, and on, and on about Pickles’ battle with cancer. The client is holding back tears and edging toward the front desk, but the onslaught of personal information continues. It’s a case of the dreaded overshare.

Beware the Dreaded Overshare
From Blurred Lines to Clear Boundaries

Some tend to share their business with anyone who will listen. It may be how they were raised, a result of no one listening in their personal life, or the blurred lines created by the culture of sharing on social media. Whatever the reason, oversharing can damage professional relationships with clients and team members alike. Setting up and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries prevent oversharing from becoming a workplace hazard.

Eliciting Perspective

The most likely explanation for the preceding scenario is that the team member did not realize he or she was oversharing with the client. The intentions were good and the motives may simply have been to put the client at ease, relate to her experience, and let her know she was not alone.

The first step in approaching difficult situations involves uncovering the oversharing team member’s perspective. Entering into a partnership helps the team member feel valued and heard rather than chastised and singled out. Achieve this by using inclusive language and “I” statements and asking permission.

The use of inclusive language (eg, “us,” “we,” “together,” “our”) provides a foundation of mutuality for the discussion. Framing feedback as “I” statements makes it less likely the receiver will go on the defensive, enhancing receptivity to the message. Asking permission structures the conversation, builds the relationship, and allows the team member to be ready for the conversation. For example:

I heard you talk about Pickles today. How are you doing with her loss [eliciting colleague’s perspective]?

I noticed that you shared a lot of your own experiences with Mrs. Gable.
Striking a Balance

Empathetic snippets of personal information do build rapport, but strike a balance when sharing with clients. When the conversation becomes more about the veterinary professional and less about the client and patient, the scale has tipped and the veterinarian–client relationship may be put in jeopardy. The key to establishing trust lies in the appropriate use of empathy.

A client-centered empathetic response creates common ground and leads to a shared understanding of the client’s experience. Consider the following approaches:

- It is overwhelming to receive a diagnosis such as cancer.
- How can I best support you at this time?
- I felt helpless when my dog was diagnosed with cancer.

Empathy involves seeing and appreciating the situation from the client’s perspective. Team members take themselves out of the equation, set aside their own experiences and viewpoints, and place themselves in the client’s shoes, remaining open to the client’s thoughts and feelings.

References