



Notes from the Consultant's Corner

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Do You Want to Play Dolls or Football?

We've all heard about the differences between men and women. But how do these differences affect us at work? Did you ever have a serious miscommunication with someone at your work and not really know why? Just as with any other profession, gender differences can affect a veterinary hospital.

One reason why men and women communicate so differently is that they are socialized differently*. Here are a few examples. Traditionally, young boys play sports and young girls play "dolls." Boys are socialized to compete, follow the coach's orders, and win the game (product oriented). Girls are socialized to work cooperatively, play together, and talk (process oriented). When girls and boys grow up and work together how do these things get played out at work?

- **Hierarchical vs. Flat power structure.** Boys are taught through sports that there is a definite leader (the coach), and you follow the coach's orders without question (a hierarchical power structure). Girls are taught to play without a definite leader (there is no head "doll" player) and everyone should have equal say (a flat power structure). How this gets played out in the veterinary world... perceived insubordination by female employees. Veterinary medicine has a definite hierarchical structure- the owner and office manager are the boss. Since women are socialized with a flatter power structure, a female employee might be more likely to "question" the boss simply as a means of discussion but be perceived as insubordinate.
- **Ways of dealing with conflict.** Boys are taught that conflict is acceptable and normal (conflict is inherent to competitive sports) Girls are taught that conflict should be avoided (a good game of "dolls" relies on cooperation, not arguing). Boys are also taught that when the game is over- it's over. All the players can go back to being friends and there are no hard feelings. When girls fight during play, it creates a big disruption, has much deeper implications, and is not as easily forgotten. How this gets played out in the veterinary world... difficulty resolving conflict. Once a conflict is over, a woman might be more likely to hold a "grudge" against a perceived hurt for a longer time because she has less experience in letting conflict go.
- **Product vs. process orientation.** Boys are taught with sports that the goal is a product (playing to win the game). Girls are taught with "dolls" that the goal is a process (playing for the sake of playing).

As boys and girls become older, they often approach life in these "product" vs. "process" orientations. How this gets played out in the veterinary world... miscommunication and frustration. For example, employee male asks employee female to give him an update about how Fluffy is recovering from anesthesia. Employee male expects a quick, one-word answer (product) with something like, "good, fair, or poorly". However, employee female answers the question through a process (e.g...."Fluffy was initially disoriented, is slightly groggy, but maintaining a good body temperature. He is still receiving his fluid bolus and he started barking a few minutes ago. I think that he will be fully awake in about fifteen minutes"). Employee male gets frustrated at such a long-winded answer when all he really wanted was one word. Employee female-on the other hand- assumed that he wanted to have an "anesthesia discussion." This type of difference can be played out many times each day in all sorts of situations. In fact, using this model may help explain why some men think women "talk too much."

It's obvious that for illustration I have been over-generalizing here. We all know that some boys and girls are socialized in similar fashions and not all men and women communicate these ways. However, it is valuable to think about these differences that next time a conflict arises at your pet hospital. If the conflict occurs between a man and a woman, ask yourself if any of these issues may apply. It might help shed light on some behaviors that drive both genders crazy and disrupt work for everyone.



(photo from Dreamstime.com)