Kristen Hassen
Principal
outcomesforpets.com

Communicating on Your Own Terms:
A Simple Guide for Animal Shelter and Rescue Leaders

Introduction

Today, more than ever, animal shelters find themselves struggling to communicate effectively with advocates, volunteers, public officials, and even their own colleagues. To complicate matters further, animal shelter and rescue leaders often find themselves on the defensive, communicating from a reactive position.

How to use this guide

This guide is written for everyone working in an animal shelter or rescue, and is equally useful for communicating internally and externally. Consider using this guide to form the agenda for a staff meeting that can include everyone on your team or just the supervisory and leadership staff members.

Logical Fallacies (also known as fallacies of thought or cognitive biases)

Logical fallacies impair our ability to engage in fair, rational, and constructive discussions. They rely on flawed premises which makes it difficult or impossible to arrive at accurate conclusions or to arrive at a solution to a problem. They can also impede constructive dialogue by shifting the focus away from the actual argument to irrelevant or misleading points. Finally, they discourage critical thinking and create a culture where sound evidence and rationality are not valued or are undervalued.

- ❖ **Ad Hominem Fallacy**: Attacking the person making an argument rather than the argument itself.
- ❖ **Straw Man Fallacy**: Misrepresenting someone's argument to make it easier to attack.
- ❖ **Appeal to Authority**: Assuming something is true because an authority figure says it's true, regardless of the evidence.
- ❖ **Appeal to Emotion**: Manipulating emotions to win an argument, especially in the absence of factual evidence.
- ❖ **Bandwagon Fallacy:** Assuming something is true or correct because it's a popular opinion.
- ❖ **False Dilemma/False Dichotomy**: Presenting two opposing options as the only possibilities when more exist.

❖ **Circular Reasoning**: When the argument repeats what it just assumed instead of providing evidence.
❖ **Hasty Generalization**: Making a broad generalization based on a small or unrepresentative sample.
❖ **Slippery Slope**: Assuming one small step will lead to a chain of related (and often negative) events.
❖ **Confirmation Bias**: Favoring information that confirms your existing beliefs and ignoring evidence that contradicts them.
❖ **Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc**: Assuming that because one event followed another, the first event caused the second.
❖ **False Equivalence:** Assuming that two things are essentially the same, when in fact they are not.

🐭*Exercise: Use Chat GPT to learn examples of each logical fallacy. For example, use the prompt, "Provide an example of the slippery slope fallacy that might happen at an animal shelter." You can then ask the group, what is another example of this fallacy that might happen at our animal shelter?*

10 common communication mistakes

1. Falling into one of the logical fallacy traps
2. Defensive or reactive communication
3. Being unwilling to reconsider your point of view
4. Communicating in anger, especially in writing
5. Punishing or 'canceling' vocal critics
6. Under-communicating or failing to communicate entirely
7. Neglecting to seek help or thank the helpers
8. Oversimplifying a complex situation
9. Failing to keep key stakeholders in the loop
10. Speaking to media before writing down and practicing your key points

🐱*Discussion prompt: Write down or share with the group a time you've made one of these mistakes. Consider the following: Did you know at the time you were making a communications mistake? What do you wish you would have done differently? Is there anything you could do today to correct the mistake?*

'Communicate-ifying' terminology

1. **Transparency** is telling people what we do. This is how we do it. Here are the things we could do better.
2. **Collaboration** is what we need help with and how we work with others.

3. **Complexity** is acknowledging that we are here to help animals who are truly in need. But the shelter is not the best place for pets who can be otherwise served in the community.
4. **Data** is what you know, how you know it, and why it matters.
5. **Challenge** is a description of a problem, an explanation of why it exists or why it happened, how you're addressing it, and how others can help.
6. **Gratitude** is highlighting the helpers and saying thank you every day.
7. **Trust building** is taking the public 'behind the scenes' so they can better understand the

🐶**Exercise:** *Using the definitions above, provide an example next to each term of how the concept applies to your role at your organization.*

🦴*Example A. "As a volunteer coordinator, I train volunteers on how to safely interact with and handle animals, including telling them about the potential risks of not practicing safe handling practices."*

🦴*Example B.: "As the executive director, I provide monthly, comprehensive data reports to elected officials and the public and I host an 'ask me anything' monthly meeting for volunteers and staff to answer any questions."*

Transparency	
Collaboration	
Complexity	
Data	
Challenge	
Gratitude	
Trust-building	

Ten golden rules of animal welfare communications

1. **Avoid generalizations and stereotypes.** Treat all animals, people, and circumstances as unique and individual.
2. **Use evidence-based arguments**. Use evidence, facts, and data.
3. **Offer context.** Explain the who, what, where, when, and why in simple, plain language.
4. **Be real.** Speak truthfully and authentically.

5. **Be accountable.** Own your decisions without making excuses.
6. **Use clear and precise language.** This will help you avoid misunderstandings.
7. **Admit mistakes.** Tell people the steps you're taking to fix the problem.
8. **Set and manage expectations.** Create a mechanism to make sure you follow through.
9. **Listen and embrace feedback.** Be open, thoughtful, and find the 'grain of truth.'
10. **Prioritize face-to-face communication.** Engage in in-person conversations.

🐰*Discussion prompt A: Share a time (in your personal or professional life) when you embodied one or more of these 'golden rules.' Describe the scenario, what you did, and the outcome.*

🦎*Discussion prompt B: How could the organization as a whole or your own department, do better when it comes to embracing these guidelines? How could you do better when it comes to embracing these guidelines?*

🦜*Draw it. On a piece of paper or poster paper, draw two pictures of yourself: One when you are being your best communicator self and one when you're failing to communicate effectively or making communications mistakes. Draw what is happening around you in each of these moments. If working in a group, give students the opportunity to keep their drawings private but encourage each group member to share their drawing and explain what is happening in the pictures.*

Let's Practice!

Use these scenarios to practice what you've learned. You can work through these one-by-one, or assign one question to a smaller group and present back to the larger group. The prompt is simple: What would you do in response to the following scenarios?

1. **Disease outbreak.** You have just discovered that you have a widespread outbreak of distemper among the dogs in your shelter. You know that over the past several days, it's likely that unsuspecting adopters took home dogs that may fall ill and even infect other dogs in their new homes.

2. **Adopted dog harms another dog.** You receive a call that a recently-adopted dog escaped its property and attacked a small dog that was being walked by its owner. The recently-adopted dog is currently safe and confined in the adopter's home. But you've learned the small dog's owners are planning to pursue legal action against the shelter and the adopter.

3. **Pilot a new program, policy, or practice.** You have decided to start asking people who find orphaned kittens to foster them until they're old enough to be spayed or neutered

4. and adopted. In the past, you simply took these kittens in and now you're going to be changing your approach. What do you need to do to communicate the launch of this new approach?

5. **'Hoarding' case.** Every cat kennel at your shelter is full and you have no room for incoming cats and kittens. You respond to a request from your local sheriff's department to impound more than 80 cats after the owner was arrested on serious charges.

6. **Capacity crisis.** You are above capacity for dogs and are euthanizing 10 or more dogs daily due to a lack of space. The intakes are exceeding outcomes every day and you're worried that without help, you'll have to euthanize even more dogs.

7. **TRN criticism.** You receive a call from the assistant city manager letting you know that community members spoke at the board of supervisors meeting earlier that day. They complained that the shelter is not taking in every cat and kitten and is instead offering to provide TNR and SNR (shelter-neuter-return). They claimed the shelter is not meeting its obligations to taxpayers. The assistant city manager tells you she is getting questions from the board members and says to you, "We need to respond."

8. **Volunteer protest.** You receive a screenshot from a private volunteer group in which a volunteer says the following, "I think the animal shelter director is incompetent. Why would they euthanize that dog for no reason? I really think they are unqualified for the position and we should start a petition to get them fired. Who wants to join me?"

9. **Staff resistance.** You are encouraging your staff members to start a program to allow the public to take dogs on field trips. Several members of the team are arguing with you, saying they don't have time, that they are concerned about liability, and that they don't understand the purpose of such a program. They are insistent that you continue to do what you're already doing and not make any changes or start any new programs.

10. **Cat escaped.** One of your long stay cats was adopted yesterday and you learned he escaped today. There is a lot of social media chatter from folks claiming that you never should have adopted the cat to this home because the adopters had young kids. They speculate the children probably let the cat out and they're tagging reporters in their posts, encouraging the reporters to 'hold the shelter accountable.'

Resources

ChatGPT

Logical Fallacies definitions and examples

OUTCOMES CONSULTING

Kristen Hassen
Principal
outcomesforpets.com

[Core competencies for new directors](#)

[Communications protocol for at risk dogs](#)

[Brand audit exercise template](#)

[Why shelters are in crisis](#)

[Outcomes for Pets resources](#)

[The transparency checklist](#)

[How to write a great monthly report](#)

[Monthly data report template for shelters](#)

[Telling pet owner's stories](#)

[Communications plan example from Riverside](#)