Developing people skills in the human–wildlife conflict community

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management profession years ago to one today where this field is not only recognized as a critical component, but also is valued by the professional wildlife management community. Today, wildlife damage working groups are one of the most heavily attended committee meetings at professional wildlife meetings such as those of The Wildlife Society, the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The evolution of the wildlife damage management field was highlighted during the early 1990s with the establishment of the Jack H. Berryman Institute for Wildlife Damage Management at Utah State University and later at Mississippi State University.

Wildlife management programs have been extremely successful over the years, resulting in increasing populations, and in some cases, overpopulations of species, such as white-tailed deer, elk, coyotes, wolves, and other predators, as well as beavers; fish-eating birds, blackbirds, feral swine, and others. Add in the threat from vertebrate-invasive species, such as brown tree snakes in Guam; introduced tree frogs in Hawaii, Florida, and other States; nutria in much of the southern and eastern United States; giant Gambian pouched rats in the Florida Keys; and an increased threat from diseases transmitted by wildlife, such as chronic wasting disease, West Nile virus, avian influenza, bovine tuberculosis, rabies, plague, and a number of other diseases, and it becomes clear why there is such a demand for wildlife damage management professionals to address these threats and conflicts.

Those of us involved in the wildlife damage management profession realize that wildlife management decisions are not always made on the basis of effectiveness or sound biological rationale. Organizations and groups with different goals often exert public and political pressures that can affect or influence the decision-making process. As a result, knowledge in just wildlife biology is no longer enough. Today’s wildlife damage management professionals must also be well-versed in economics, sociology, public relations, and political science.

We have all witnessed the changing face of wildlife damage management over the years: more innovative control methods, increased emphasis on research, more public scrutiny, increased professionalism, better science, and expanding wildlife populations for numerous species throughout the country. These changes have been the catalyst for rapid growth and new opportunities. Based on the way the wildlife damage management field has evolved over the years, I believe that our profession is well-poised to meet the wildlife damage challenges that will face us in the future.

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As I travel across the country talking with wildlife professionals about leadership and communication, I often ask groups this question: “How many of you decided to become a wildlife biologist because you just love working with people?” Believe it or not, I’ve never witnessed the raising of a single hand. Fact is, most biologists get into the wildlife profession because they relish the idea of spending time outside, with nature and mostly alone. As a qualified instructor in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the most prevalent personality assessment in the world, I have talked with hundreds of wildlife biologists about their personalities. Without question, our profession attracts individuals with personalities that tend not to be highly communicative or socially engaging. In essence, our profession attracts people who, by their very nature, are unlikely to be excited about and well-equipped to work with a myriad of other people to solve human–wildlife conflicts.

Once aspiring wildlife biologists actually get into the profession, however, they typically find their most significant problems to be people-related. We as a profession usually can solve the technical problems with wildlife management, but often we have problems with the human relation issues inherent in our day-to-day business. A quick perusal of the wildlife literature reveals that we have, for decades, called for greater communication and human relations skills in our profession, but we’ve largely
According to Dictionary.com, a skill is “the ability, coming from one’s knowledge, practice, aptitude, etc., to do something well.” Skills, by their very definition, can be learned and acquired, and they are multifaceted: they incorporate both knowledge and practice. Think of golf. To be a competent golfer, one must have some basic knowledge. For example, one must understand the rules of the game, how to hold and swing a golf club, how to select different clubs for specific situations, and how to score the game, along with lots of other information. But, that knowledge base isn’t enough to produce a competent golfer. I could, for example, study golf in-depth and have a perfect intellectual understanding of the game, but, if I never apply my knowledge through practice, I’ll never be a competent golfer.

Clearly, application or practice is an absolute requirement in skill development, but it alone will not allow one to develop a particular skill. Imagine a golfer again who practices every day, for hours. Unfortunately, this golfer’s only instruction in the game of golf came by watching the movie Caddyshack, and instead of normally gripping and swinging the golf club, he crouches down for each shot and uses the golf club as one would a pool cue. Obviously, this person will never become a competent golfer because, although he has practiced, he doesn’t possess the knowledge necessary to be successful.

Finally, imagine a golfer who studies the theory of the game, devotes much time to practice, but never keeps score. Would he experience an increase in his skill level? Perhaps, but perhaps not. Without feedback, we can’t be certain whether our level of skill is increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. Feedback is absolutely critical to our development of skills.

So, knowledge, practice, and feedback constitute the 3 legs that support skill development (Figure 1). This principle holds for nearly all skills, including human relations skills. The problem, however, is that most wildlife professionals don’t understand or fully engage each of these 3 components of skill development when attempting to enhance their people skills. Let’s take public speaking as an example. I have worked with dozens of groups of wildlife professionals to help them become better public speakers. During my presentation, I will ask, “How many of you believe that public speaking is a skill you simply learn by doing…that the more you speak, the better you will become?” Typically, everyone in the room raises their hand. Then, I will ask, “But, how many of you know someone who has been speaking in public for decades, but is terrible at it?” Again, after a good bit of laughter and cajoling, most raise their hands. Simply engaging in the practice of public speaking, without incorporating the underlying theory of public speaking or without obtaining meaningful feedback, will not cause one to become a great public speaker.

If we truly want to develop better human relations skills among the professionals in the wildlife community, we must begin engaging in each of the 3 components of skill development. We must explore and acquire knowledge pertinent to the skill of interest, we must apply that knowledge through practice and application, and we must get meaningful feedback about our performance. In future issues of HWC, I’ll explore ways to use each of these 3 elements—knowledge, application, and feedback—to build and enhance essential people skills in the human–wildlife conflict arena.

![Figure 1. Facets of skill development.](image-url)