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Developing people skills in the human–wildlife conflict community

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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



failed in that charge. For example, during a presentation at the 2006 Annual Meeting of The Wildlife Society in Anchorage, Steve Williams, president of Wildlife Management Institute and former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, noted that many wildlife professionals still lack basic people skills. We obviously have historically understood the need for greater human relation skills, but we haven't been widely successful in developing those skills within our profession. Why?

Part of the reason wildlife professionals lack good human relation skills is the type of people our profession attracts; we simply don't attract many people, relative to other fields, with strong interests in human relations. The people skills of the wildlife community probably will never rival that of people-centered professions, such as, for example, sales and marketing. However, this doesn't mean we can't build and improve the human relations skills of the individuals within our profession.

Unfortunately, many of us lack an understanding of how to develop better people skills. The term "skills" has specific meaning. 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 relation 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. ❖

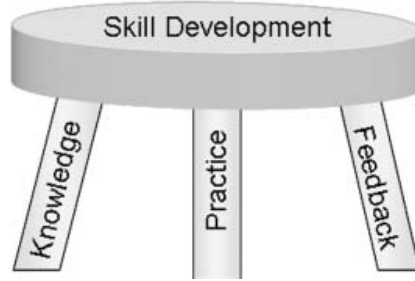


FIGURE 1. Facets of skill development.