

Interaction of animal management authorities

Mick Cartwright

INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to discuss best practice and the interaction between organisations involved in animal management. Drawing organisations together to achieve best practice is not new. It is becoming common place to resource share and we should all learn from this trend. Rather than providing theories on how this interaction might work I have decided to use some practical experiences from South Australia that highlight the benefits of interaction.

As individuals involved in animal management we strive for best practice. Dogs and cats deserve full meaningful lives, free from diseases and danger. We gain a great deal of pleasure from reuniting or relocating dogs and cats. Generally speaking we are very conscientious. After all, people don't become involved in this business unless they have a genuine desire to ensure owners properly care for animals. We want to see that animals are looked after properly. We want to encourage owners to have their animals identified, registered, checked by a veterinarian, desexed and vaccinated. These aims are fairly consistent across the nation.

So why is it so hard to bring organisations together to work towards their common goal? Is it competition for the mighty dollar? Is it a belief that our organisation is the best and we couldn't possibly gain anything from others in our field? Is it the fact that we are too busy doing our own thing to meet and discuss common issues? Most likely it is a combination of all these facts.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

In South Australia all organisations involved in animal management work together to achieve our aim of 'best practice'. Best practice is an ongoing process — what works well today won't necessarily work well next week. You must continually adapt to the changing needs of the community.

In South Australia each organisation works and operates independently. Through mutual respect and desires to achieve best practice the Dog and Cat Management Board can call on any or all organisations involved in animal management throughout the state to gain their input, expertise and advice. South Australia does not have all the answers, just as we don't have a monopoly on best practices in place for animal management. But you can be guaranteed that we will continue to strive for best practice and, while we continue to work together, our success will continue.

Cooperation amongst animal welfare bodies such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Animal Welfare League, state and local government, pounds and shelters offers the best opportunity to achieve best practice. Benchmarking, information technology and advertising are just a few areas in which your organisation can benefit from adopting a cooperative approach with similar interest groups. Any authority that believes they can, as individuals, handle dog and cat management issues throughout their state is, in most cases, doomed to mediocrity. We rely on each other more than we realise.

I am not suggesting that as an individual organisation you can't function effectively. I am suggesting that as an individual you are not as efficient as you would be working collectively with all relevant authorities towards responsible animal management. Animal management dollars are hard to come by. If your organisation wants to maximise your output while minimising your costs then adopt a unified approach, talk about common issues with all relevant organisations and benefit from the experience.

Collectively, state by state, our organisations are amongst the strongest interest groups in the country. Yet time and time again initiatives are lost because we can not provide a unified approach to the issue. We are too busy playing one-up-man-ship to realise the damage being caused and the opportunities being lost. So effectively this is a wakeup call. Unify the organisations involved in animal management throughout your state or risk being left behind.

In South Australia we are committed to communication without confrontation. I have seen the benefits, as have my counterparts and the process works. In South Australia there are in excess of 70 authorities that have a direct interest in dogs and cats. They include state government, local government, the Dog and Cat Management Board, Animal Welfare League, RSPCA, the Canine Association and the South Australian branch of the AVA. We must not forget our biggest stakeholders in this process, the owners of pets, without them this exercise would be a little pointless.

Frequently there appears to be a generic dislike between animal management organisations. Each organisation appears to believe that they are the most important in their field. Often the opportunity to achieve best practice is lost simply because organisations will not admit that others may have a better way of doing things. Drawing these authorities together and keeping them focused is not an easy task, but most certainly it can be achieved. In South Australia all the authorities work together to achieve a common goal.

Recently the Dog and Cat Management Board, the South Australian branches of the Animal Welfare League and the RSPCA were given the opportunity to advertise services through the Yellow Pages 'Pet Care Talking Guide'. For those of you who have not heard the messages on the guide, they offer a small advertisement followed by a message, such as responsible dog and cat ownership, and conclude with a small advertisement. The guide gave the perfect platform to educate the public regarding effective animal management — an opportunity too good to pass up. As individual organisations the cost was too high, but collectively we purchased the rights to the entire page. This effectively reduced the cost by 66 % for each organisation.

Several meetings were held in order to sort through the messages that would be heard on the page. As you can imagine this was the recipe for disaster with each organisation having a preference for a particular topic. A simple process of elimination was introduced, each organisation picking one topic at a time eliminating all arguments. This sounds simplistic and it is, but it works. Each organisation was willing to compromise, to give and take to achieve our goal.

In the first year of operation it is estimated that the service has saved the organisations many thousands of dollars collectively. This is just one example of the level of cooperation we have developed — there are many others.

Recently the South Australian Dog and Cat Management Board addressed the age-old problem of dogs wandering at large. As a result of early consultation amongst the relevant organisations a working party was formed. Representatives included members of the RSPCA, local government, the Animal Welfare League, the Authorised Officers Association and the Dog and Cat Management Board.

The Dog and Cat Management Board could have addressed this issue independently and come up with a series of recommendations. However two critical points would have been missed. The collective input of the organisations that would be asked to initiate the recommendations and the benefit gained from all organisations taking ownership of the new initiatives.

The working party established terms of reference. These terms proved to be critical to the success of the group. By establishing boundaries the chairman of the working party was able to keep the group on course.

Due to the diversity of the group there were several differences of opinion. This was not seen as a problem as each individual had the right to voice their opinion. **Problems only arise when a person is not able to put forward their point of view, or more importantly when people refuse to listen.** Once each person had been given the opportunity to speak and their input considered a recommendation was placed before the group where majority ruled.

The conciliatory approach adopted by the organisations resulted in practicable working solutions that will undoubtedly improve animal management. Time will tell if our recommendations equate to best practice.

The recommendations put forward by the group are inconsequential to most of you attending the conference. For anyone that would like to see the working party document and/or the recommendations, copies can be made available. What is important is the conciliatory approach adopted by the group. Collectively we came together with individual ideas regarding a common problem. At the conclusion of the process we had a sensible, workable set of recommendations resolved by communication not confrontation.

CONCLUSION

In closing I would ask that each representative here consider, if they are not currently practicing it, taking the opportunity to unify the organisations they work with throughout their community. Apart from the obvious monetary gains you could achieve pet owners and pets will benefit. After all, isn't that what we all hope to achieve?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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