



Watering Your Practice's Bamboo

Author Greg Bell shares ways animal hospitals can prosper

by Jen Reeder

MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER AND AUTHOR Greg Bell has built a successful career inspiring business leaders to greatness. He started with himself. Raised in a poor but loving home in a small town in Texas, Bell became the first person in his family to graduate from college. While studying at the University of Oregon and competing on the basketball team, he was named “Inspirational Player of the Year” twice. After becoming a “reformed attorney,” he helped launch the Coaches vs. Cancer campaign for the National Association of Basketball Coaches, which has raised more than \$50 million for cancer research.

Now the author of *Water the Bamboo: Unleashing the Potential of Teams and Individuals* (Three Star Publishing, 2009) and founder of the Water The Bamboo Center For Leadership in Portland, Ore., Bell counsels corporate clients like Nike, AAA Insurance, and Kaiser Permanente and gives around 40 keynote addresses each year at such conferences as AAHA Tampa 2015.

“I just had such a good experience with that group,” Bell said of his AAHA audience. “I thought, ‘Wow—these people are amazing!’ And then I remembered, ‘Oh, right—they love animals. Of course!’”



Just as bamboo farmers have to patiently water their giant timber bamboo for years to then have such a remarkable growth spurt, veterinarians and practice managers must also nurture their animal hospitals over time.

Bell said he thinks the “water the bamboo” philosophy described in his book and keynote speech resonated with AAHA attendees because they are actively working to grow their practices.

“Your ‘bamboo’ is your dream. The water is really about the effort to achieve your dream,” he said. “In China, giant timber bamboo grows 90 feet in 60 days. That is a remarkable growth—everyone wants to grow 90 feet in 60 days. The question is: What are you doing today to have that growth 5 years out from now?”

He said that just as bamboo farmers have to patiently water their giant timber bamboo for years to then have such a remarkable growth spurt, veterinarians and practice managers must also nurture their animal hospitals over time.

“Growing your practice now has got to be super challenging for so many reasons. It’s going to require so much patience, so much persistence,” he said.

To prepare to speak at AAHA Tampa 2015, Bell spent 4 hours observing a local animal hospital undergoing the AAHA-accreditation process. He realized that becoming an AAHA-accredited practice is a major step in watering the bamboo to create a successful veterinary hospital.

“If you go through that process, it’s not like money in the bank—it’s not immediate. But being organized around [accreditation standards], there will be a payoff,” Bell said. “It was just so clear.... It takes patience; it takes some persistence; it takes self-discipline to be organized in that fashion; it takes courage.”

While achieving and maintaining AAHA accreditation is an important part of watering the bamboo, as well as attending conferences and reading industry publications, Bell said there are many other ways to continue to build a thriving business.

Listen to clients

Bell says veterinarians and reception staff need to listen to pet owners when they arrive, because they are often stressed about their animal’s well-being. Clients also will undoubtedly have consulted “Dr. Google” before arriving at the hospital—even Bell admits to researching potential ailments online when his cat, Whisper, has an issue.

“So much information has created a lot of FUD—that’s fear, uncertainty, and doubt,” he said. “If you want to serve someone, you have to listen to them. Listening doesn’t mean you agree with all of that [you hear], but sometimes with pet owners, it’s a pretty stressful situation. So part of the listening is to de-escalate the stress. You can find out what’s really important for the client, and then you can deliver it.... If a veterinary clinic had the goal of ‘We’re going to be the best listeners in the world,’ I would suggest that their bottom line would increase three- or fourfold.”

Listen to employees

“Staff has this close relationship with pet patients but also their owners. If we’re not listening to the owners, then how can we serve them better? If we can figure out what’s going on for pet owners, it’s much easier to serve them better.”

Listening to employees is also important, as it boosts their morale. Bell said studies show people think the key to

Bell's Bamboo Rules

You have two ears and one mouth.
Use them accordingly.

Take your work seriously, but don't
take yourself seriously.

Your ability to have effective
relationships will do far more for you
than any other skill you learn.

Reaching goals while sacrificing your
values is not achievement at all.



According to Bell, becoming an AAHA-accredited practice is a major step in watering the bamboo to create a successful veterinary hospital.

employee retention is pay, but it's actually “to be heard.” As such, he suggests asking employees questions about their opinions, noting, “A well-timed question can really help a person.”

Keep a bamboo farmer's nurturing mindset

“You planted this seed and now you're watering it,” Bell said. “Persistence is so important—it's not about drowning the bamboo, but it's showing up every day and trying to do it [your job] just a bit better and sticking with the principles. The bamboo farmer has a tremendous amount of self-discipline. That's probably the key to life, right? What the impatient veterinary clinic does is dig up every seed to see if it's growing. They dig it up. You have to actually let it germinate and stay with it longer.”

Don't farm alone

Bell also promotes teamwork, saying that working solo “doesn't make sense. And there isn't a lot of joy in farming alone anyway.”

Bell compared a single stalk of giant timber bamboo to a whole grove of giant timber bamboo, which has roots that grow over 100 yards and become interconnected.

“They're deeply rooted. So in an area where giant timber bamboo is, if an earthquake happened, the grove could handle it. It could handle a mudslide,” he said. “It could handle a recession. If the team is strong, you can handle

setbacks. You don't farm alone so you can rely on each other in challenging times.”

Act like a puppy

“If you were in a room with a thousand people and there was a puppy in there, the puppy would go up to all of them, and it would have no doubt in its mind that you didn't love it. You could be allergic, you could hate dogs, but it's coming [up to you].”

He said that a similarly friendly approach, such as warmly greeting clients and pets by name, builds trust and rapport, cautioning, though, that it needs to be genuine.

“I'm not talking about being friendly so I can get something from you: It's not a transaction when I think about relationships. It's more—especially in this team way—about transformation. If we help each other become better people, what a great ripple [effect].”

Create a positive work environment

Bell suggests practices enact “Optimistic Mondays” since people often dread Mondays. In addition to being cheerful with clients, staff meetings on Optimistic Mondays can include talking about what Bell calls a thorn, a rose, and a bud.

A thorn is something that's frustrating you or didn't go so well. A rose is something that's going well for you.

Bell's Humor Etiquette

Avoid hateful humor or making fun of people based on their social status—race, gender, religion, age, size—and limit sarcasm.

Positive humor:

- Bonds people
- Releases stress
- Includes laughing at self

Negative humor:

- Divides people
- Causes tension
- Focuses on laughing at others

Bell's Advice on Decision-Making

Although most decisions have time constraints, you should never make a serious or important decision when you're:

- Hungry (whether physically or just wanting something too much to think clearly)
- Angry
- Lonely
- Tired

You should **halt** and take care of your needs; then regroup to make the decision—you'll be glad you did.



For More Information

Greg Bell's website: gregbellspeaks.com

Greg Bell's TEDx Portland Talk:

youtube.com/watch?v=V4DUcHJ8qXs&feature=youtu.be

And a bud is something you are looking forward to, Bell explained.

"You get insight just listening to what people value and what they care about. If you ask better questions in meetings, you'll get better participation."

Hire and keep the right staff

"When I coach folks on hiring, I always say, 'Hire the smile—you can always teach the skill. You can't teach a smile.'"

Bell said that, typically, we spend 80 percent of our time and energy on people who are causing the most problems with their negativity, whether employees or clients. But he thinks this is the wrong use of resources.

"Take that 80 percent of your time, money, and energy, and give it to the people who are doing the right things," Bell said. "I'm not saying to ignore all of your problems—you have a little bit of energy reserve to deal with them—but don't give it all to them. You can think about that personally but also organizationally."

For instance, he said he has a client who said the company spends staff meetings "fighting fires," which was ultimately robbing the bottom line. "I asked, 'What about that is satisfying? How are we going to get you to shift that energy around the things you want and the things you're for?'"

Management can deal with employees who are "negaholics" by asking them questions about what's going wrong and what's going right, but ultimately if that person persists in being a bad apple that threatens to spoil the bunch, it might be time to ask if they'd be happier elsewhere.

"It's hard. No one gets into management, into leadership, so they can fire people, but I think somebody needs to give people permission to do that."

And when responding to people who tell you your dreams aren't going to work, "We've got to tell them to mind their own bamboo."

Strive to maintain a work/life balance

Bell said work/life balance is challenging in today's 24/7 connectivity, but that it's critical for all employees

at a practice. He equated it with the instruction on airplanes to put on your own oxygen mask first so that then you can help others.

“We have 168 hours a week, and you should sleep about 60 of them,” he said. “Being tethered to our devices can be problematic. That’s the real question: How do we keep boundaries?”

His solution is to have “Do Not Do Lists” instead of “To Do Lists.” He suggests animal hospitals pursue only “high-value activities” and say no to low-value activities.

“Ask, ‘Is this a high-value activity that I’m doing? Is it going to serve our clients or employees, our community?’”

If not, add it to the Do Not Do List and say no politely but firmly—even with a smile on your face, he said.

Embrace your original vision as well as change

Bell has worked with extremely successful business leaders and said all of their visions for their companies evolved over time.

“What I find with visionary entrepreneurs is once they take flight, once they get the thing going, they’ll see things and say, ‘Oh—I never knew that was an opportunity,’ or ‘I’m surprised—I thought that would work easier,’ or what have you. So the adaptability is super important.”



“Having a vision but being flexible about what that vision is—that’s critical.”

—GREG BELL

He suggests writing vision boards to help set goals for the clinic, such as where you want to be in 5 years, 3 years, and 1 year, and describe how time, money, and energy is being invested to make that vision happen.

“Having a vision but being flexible about what that vision is—that’s critical,” Bell said.

“There’s no way you can build a clinic or a business or your career where there aren’t going to be setbacks. But she who recovers first, wins.... In times of change, it’s the students who will inherit the earth, while the person who already ‘has it all figured out’ is going to be obsolete.”

Help others with their bamboo

Bell said mentorship is “imperative” to young practitioners, so experienced veterinarians should share advice to help the next generation. And veterinarians at any stage of their career can support others through giving health lectures, offering free exams to service dogs, or volunteering in the community.

“You should always be giving. Whether you have it or not, give it away,” Bell said. “There are so many ways to contribute to the profession.” ✨



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder was inspired to continue watering the bamboo of a children’s book she’s been writing about dogs after reading Greg Bell’s *Water The Bamboo*.