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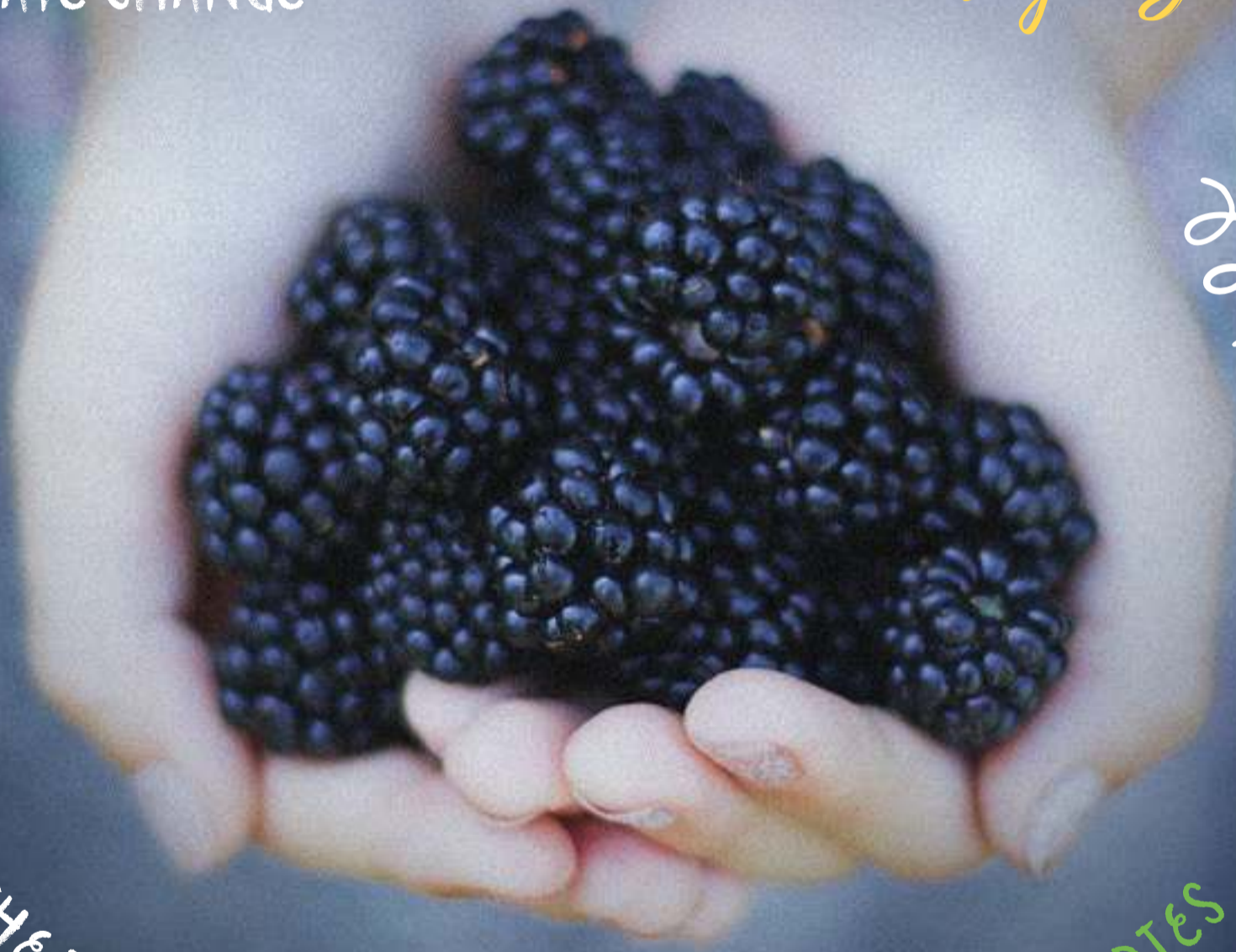
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WOULD I FOLLOW ME?

LESSONS FROM PSYCHOLOGY THAT ASSIST VEGAN ADVOCACY

By Clare Mann

With a background in organisational psychology, I have seen people in organisations working in silos on different projects and only engaging with other groups when absolutely necessary. Members of each different group identify primarily with their own group and often resist collaborating and learning from others. My role has been to break down those barriers, increase communication between and within groups and create mutual understanding in order to achieve better collective outcomes.

One of the biggest limitations I have observed is to do with unquestioned assumptions. Without high levels of self-awareness, we often fail to question our assumptions about other people and how things should be done. These preconceived



ideas result in prejudice and stereotypes that truly inhibit us connecting with others and collaborating for mutual benefit. An important intervention is to develop the means to continually question our assumptions and our part in creating the outcomes of every interpersonal interaction we have. This, together with learning to communicate effectively and skilfully navigate differences, has the potential to create relationships, groups and organisations that achieve superior collective outcomes whilst becoming satisfying communities in which we can work.

Vegan and Animal Advocacy groups are no different from other groups or larger organisations. They comprise diverse types of people with different backgrounds, viewpoints and skills and ideas of how to get the job done. The high levels of emotion often associated with animal welfare and veganism offers one of the biggest opportunities and yet one of the biggest challenges. High emotions can compound misunderstandings and differences of opinion and result in conflict. At the same time, strong emotion when channelled effectively can be a uniting motivator for action. In this article I will use the term Animal Advocacy or Animal Social Justice to refer to all forms of vegan advocacy in which people come together to create a more compassionate world for animals, people and the planet. When I refer to “organisation” this refers to groups, large and small with a common overall goal to which all the people involved are committed to.

How can high levels of emotion and commitment to veganism be channelled constructively to achieve animal social justice rather than conflict, despair and frustration? For example, I often see



high emotion and criticism expressed in social media, which is damaging if we have no ability to effectively work through the resultant conflict. Technology is giving us amazing tools to connect and collaborate but we must still learn the skills of managing ourselves effectively and creating good relationships with exquisite communication in environments of high stress.

By applying the wisdom of lessons learnt from psychology to animal advocacy groups and focusing on four main human areas, we can take full advantage of the benefits offered by technology.

Individual self-awareness

In order to contribute our best as an employee or volunteer in animal social justice, one of the best things we can do is to develop high levels of self-awareness. We must become aware of when our buttons are pressed, of the patterns we repeat in relationships and how we come across to other people. By identifying our unquestioned assumptions, we can avoid making too-quick judgements, challenge our conclusions and remain open-minded. This increases our ability to form good relationships with other people and be available to collaborate effectively.

Group dynamics

A group comprises individuals who identify with the group and share a common purpose. The extent to which group norms are adhered to determines how cohesive the group is. Groups often

avoid talking about difficult subjects, fearing it will cause conflict. Whilst counter-intuitive, it is essential for groups to “air their differences” and create a platform of trust and mutual respect in which opinions can be discussed. Without this, groups never become truly effective, because unresolved differences inhibit effective collaboration.

Communication skills

An individual must be able to communicate with other people effectively. This involves creating rapport and having meaningful conversations with people, many of who will resist or criticise the message of animal social justice or veganism. Learning to



have challenging conversations with other people or communicating difficult information effectively without aggression or “backing down”, is important. It often takes help and practice to challenge other people whilst maintaining rapport, especially when the material discussed is distressing.

Organisational culture

In order for individual and group endeavours to be maximised, an effective culture must be developed. This occurs when there is effective leadership, a shared vision and people feel they belong and know the rules within which the organisation operates. Without a culture that fosters commitment, contribution and mutual respect, politics, in-fighting and sabotage often occur. A vegan or animal advocacy organisation is no less subject to the rules of group dynamics in a culture than any organisation or group.

We are living in a time in history when we have the means to communicate instantly with people all over the globe. People can be called together, physically or virtually, within hours rather than the months it previously took to galvanise people into action. In order to truly benefit from these wonderful new communication platforms, we have to ensure we invest in our individual, group and cultural development. Only then can truly collaborate and come together with other groups and be an even greater collective voice for animals.

By getting our own houses in order, understanding group dynamics and applying exquisite skills of communication, we have an opportunity to partake in dramatically changing the fate of billions of animal that currently are subject to exploitation by humans. The sheer number of animals whose lives stand to change for the better makes this the largest social justice movement on the planet.

Whatever animal or vegan group we belong to, we are effectively doing the same work. Each of us is attracted to different aspects of animal social justice. Some of us work on the frontline, involved in direct or uncover work like factory farming or vivisection. Others work

on lobbying governments and industry to make changes in legislation and policy. Some of us enjoy working locally with hands-on wildlife care, whilst others of us simply make more ethical consumer choices about products we purchase. All these actions contribute to a kinder world for animals and ultimately people and the planet.

But it starts with us as individuals. How we choose to conduct ourselves is an act of leadership and example to others of how we want the world to be. We must each get our own house in order and become a self-reflective individual who can proudly answer “Yes!” to the question, “Would I Follow Me?”



Clare Mann —

Clare Mann is an Australian-based psychologist, best-selling author and animal advocate. She provides skills training to help vegans and animal advocates communicate more effectively and animal welfare organisations collaborate for increased effectiveness. For more information visit her [website](#) or connect via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#)