

## DO CHICKENS SPEAK?

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### Introduction

In my over twenty years of teaching agriculture to different levels of students, I have always asked this question in class; Do Chickens Speak? The answers have varied, according to the intellectual level of the class, from undergraduates to post graduate levels. Most times the answers vary from funny to absurd. At other times the class just stares at me like what is this man saying. Those outspoken students in class make attempt to answer by making descriptive signs, funny sounds mimicking the chickens and sometimes just say no, chickens don't speak. The question is, do chickens really speak indeed? Do they speak but farmers don't comprehend or understand the language of the chicken? Again we tend to narrow communication to direct distinct syllables of sounds that make sense or the application of vocal expression with cognitive sound. The deaf and the dumb speak, albeit with sign languages and many understand them but we tend not to understand the sign language of the chicken which they express in clear unmistakable terms. Communication is the bedrock of knowledge and understanding to achieve a common goal. It is the means of fostering cooperation between the farmer and the flock to work towards the desired goal. Without it a gap or break in communication that may lead to a colossal loss to the farmer and the flock is created. Believe me, no living thing wants to die or do not want to do well. Inadequate response or misunderstanding between the flock and the farmer leaves the flock with no option but to give up on production and in extreme cases on life. Some ways chickens communicate (speak) included the followings.

#### 1. Refusal to eat

When feed presented to birds for some hours is not consumed or sparingly consumed, the birds have spoken. The language is clear and unmistakable. Several factors are responsible for chickens' refusal to eat presented feed. This could range from ill health, poor diet presentation, lack of drinkable water, composition of the feed, poor particle size, high environmental temperature, contamination of the feed leading to poor aroma or poor palatability, threat arising from rats or snakes and stale or unhealthy feeds. These various pointers are areas the farmers need to investigate for answers to the question of refusal to eat. How good the farmer is in identifying or diagnosing the real problem becomes critical. The message once passed, solution is expected. Many wrong diagnosis of the problem have led to fatality within the flock. The knowledge and experience of the farmer are very vital for adequate and proper understanding of the problem and a key to providing appropriate solution. Most times withdrawal from feed may precede actual visible signs of symptoms in case of ill health. Many incubating gastro intestinal problems may precede actual symptoms of diseases. For example, before blood is seen in the faeces, as a symptom of coccidiosis, certain internal damages have occurred. Therefore refusal to eat may be an initial sign of ill health that requires immediate attention. Similarly, fatty liver disease, typhoid, respiratory tract infection just to mention a few may be preceded by feed withdrawal. Therefore when birds refuse to eat, it may be a clear message that underlying sickness/sicknesses may be responsible. The farmer should as a matter of urgency seek veterinary attention. Issues related to composition of feed, particle size of feed or contamination of feed can easily be recognized by the pattern of consumption and laboratory testing. Young birds will naturally avoid feed with particles sizes beyond what they can ingest. Also feed with smooth particles may be rejected by adult birds because of clogging of their respiratory track. High environmental temperature may also limit feed consumption by birds. Under normal temperature, chickens drink twice as much water as feed consumption. Therefore absence of clean and cool water may limit or stop feed consumption. Farmers must therefore be very conversant with these signs in order to diagnose the messages being passed by the birds.

#### 2. Ill Health

When birds are sick and even before they become sick, they inform the farmer. They communicate in unmistakable term that it is difficult not to notice. Even before the actual manifestation of the disease, messages such as withdrawal from feed, huddling together, dullness, listlessness, poor gait, dullness

of eyes, ruffled feathers, loss of agility, slow movement, wet or slimy faeces or certain discharges may be noticed as signs. Birds do not just die. Before mortality, there are progressive messages being passed to the farmer. They spoke to the farmer but the farmer doesn't hear. Early detection of these signs may elicit prompt action and reverse the disease condition. A careful look at the eyes of apparently healthy birds will tell a lot about how healthy the birds are. The quality of the faeces in terms of dryness or wetness, watery or semi-solid, mucus or free from mucus, blooded or free from blood are some signs that all is not well with the birds. Farmers who fail to notice these messages become victims of losses not realizing that the birds have spoken.

### **3. Slow growth and Poor production**

These twin performance indexes are clear out spoken signs of the displeasure of the poultry birds to the farmer. Most times the messages are passed on early in the form of inadequate feed expressed by immediate consumption and clear annoying sound of pecking on the feeders to alert the farmer. At other times it is the rush to peck at the farmer's feet, hands and body whenever he enters the house. When water is completely consumed within an hour of supply, the message was passed. When the feeders and drinkers became points of confrontation for the battle of the fittest, the message was clear. When birds stretch and jump to reach the feeders, the message was clearly passed. When the cold came, they spoke by huddling together. When the temperature became unbearable they spoke by opening their mouths and feathers to expel heat. When they were sick, they spoke. At the end their grievances of being neglected were expressed in poor growth and production. Their unmistakable reply is what you give is what you get. Therefore slow growth rate and poor production is a cumulative effect of ignored messages that should have received answers much earlier.

### **4. Mortality**

What many farmers refer to as sudden mortality, is actually not sudden. This is because the messages were passed but ignored. When the birds were saying, look at our eyes and see how dull they are, they were ignored. When they said we will not eat because we are sick, they were ignored. When they said we will not drink because the water is unfit for us, they were ignored. Also when they spoke against the weather, the crowdedness of the house, the lack of ventilation, the poor sanitary condition, the wet litter, the negligence of the attendants, the insufficiency of feed and water etc., they were ignored. The result is often high mortality. Successes and failures in poultry farming are mostly attributed to management. This is because management is the sum total of activities from the first day to the end of production of that flock. Farmers that listen to their flock often succeed irrespective of whether they are professional animal scientist or not. What the birds need is a listening ear not a professional certificate. That is why many medical doctors and engineers are succeeding in the poultry business and professionals are failing. Listen to your birds, they are speaking and must be heard and attended to.

### **5. Poor feed efficiency**

The cumulative effect of various signs and symptoms leading to poor feed efficiency has been highlighted above. Ability to use feed properly and efficiently depends on several factors. These factors include the quantity and quality of the feed, the health status of the birds, the environmental condition and some other aspect of management. Each of these factors has a way the bird expressed them, either for adequacy or inadequacy. For instance birds will reject poor quality feed and if the quantity is not also sufficient, birds tend to maintain their bodies with it. Such maintenance may be physiological that has nothing to do with productive output. For example, when birds use insufficient feed to maintain their feathers, for breathing, for good health or for exercise, little will be left for growth and production which are evidence of good feed efficiency. Therefore when poor feed efficiency is observed, the birds have spoken.

### **6. Response to temperature and humidity**

Birds often speak clearly in response to temperature and humidity. Such expression for high temperature come in the form of panting by opening the beak and feathers, increase water consumption, gathering toward open window and doors for ventilation, reduced feed intake, poor production, and general discomfort. Farmers' response to combating the effect of high temperature by putting in place strategies to reduce temperature and increase the comfort of the birds will go a long way in improving production. The combined effect of high relative humidity and temperature is counterproductive for birds and should be controlled.

### **7. Cannibalism and egg drinking**

When chickens begin to cannibalize and drink their eggs, then the message is clear. They have spoken very clearly that something is wrong with them. The message being passed could be that there is not enough salt in the diet, feed given is insufficient, the birds are overcrowded, there is stress within the flock, there is insufficient water supply, the light in the pen is too bright, certain injuries have occurred that need such birds to be removed, poor ventilation, poor egg shell quality occasioned probably by low Calcium and Phosphorus in the diets or absence of vitamin D, poor nest quality, insufficient nests leading to overcrowding, irregular and infrequent egg collection, high temperature etc. The expression of these various signs varies and the farmer needs to pay careful attention to investigate the cause or causes of the problem and proffer solution.

### **8. Lack of flock uniformity**

When there is poor uniformity within a flock, the birds have passed a message to the farmer. In every animal society or kingdom, there is hierarchy and authority. Nature selects against the weak. The tendency is for the stronger and bigger birds to bully and outsmart the smaller and weaker ones. Such hierarchy and superiority tends to be eliminated when there is sufficient space for feeding and drinking. Therefore in flock suffering from poor uniformity the message include insufficient feeding and watering spaces, overcrowding or high stocking density, irregular feeding and insufficient feeding of the birds, poor feed quality and quantity etc. A clear understanding of these will lead to appropriate solution to poor flock uniformity.

### **Conclusion**

Chickens have unmistakable ways of communicating with the farmer. However, farmers do not listen or understand these sign languages. This is the main reason poultry farmers fail. A clear comprehension of what the chickens are passing across as messages and prompt responses in providing solutions are the secrets of success in poultry business. Do chickens speak? Or put in another way, do chickens communicate?

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