

# COMMUNICATING WITH THE CANINE

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Our companion dogs live in the world of humans, not the world of wolves. Their brain functions like their ancestors' in many respects; it is a highly instinctive brain with its own rulebook. It is based on water, dirt, vegetation, weather, and wildlife—survival. Canines do not naturally understand, or at least easily accept, being tied up, TVs, four walls, vehicles, traffic cones, or Spiderman action figures. There is nothing instinctive about these things to a canine, and since their reasoning is based on their instincts, they can have a difficult time adjusting to human norms, depending upon the personality type of the dog.

Canines are most often linear thinkers. They can think quickly; however, it's one thing at a time. This is also a reason for the success in trial-and-error learning. Dogs usually have an amazing memory; after all, learning is in part based on memory.

If the dog is worked for fifteen minutes, and the handler keeps things positive and flowing nicely, the canine remains in a good frame of mind, thus ending on a positive note. The longer the session, the more difficult it is to keep everything upbeat and positive, especially *The Fundamentals: Sit, Stay, Heel and Come*.

A person can work with a dog for five hours, but if the last five minutes have a negative tone, the dog more than likely views the activity as negative. The dog still retains parts of the session as intended, but it will not be viewed as positive as we would like due to ending on a bad note. I recommend short but frequent sessions, anywhere from five to twenty minutes, two to four times a day, until the dog is doing satisfactory work for the handler. This is for *The Fundamentals: Sit, Stay, Heel and Come*.

Like everything else in life, the more one does something, the better one gets at what one is doing. Handlers have to feel out their dogs to know where their boiling points are, so the handlers know when to call it quits. The handler should always end the session when they want to; however, they should make sure the dog is aware that the handler is the one terminating the session and not the dog, keeping keep things upbeat and positive.

The canine has blueprints in its head that it bases its own functions on, as well as the functions of others in its life. To understand the transfer issue from teacher to owner, we must break down the love, respect, and trust relationship. The owner's relationship is based on love, and their past with their dog is usually an unruly one, or at least not an authoritatively sound relationship. The owner has established security, comfort, and a lack of control, simply due to never showing the dog otherwise. Even the mildest, easy-going dog needs to know the extent it must listen to its owner.

Dogs are given the role of alpha at times whether they want it or not due to a lack of communication or effort on the owner's behalf. The owner hopes to gain respect through a proper presentation with practice.

I, the teacher, on the other hand, come into the relationship with a clean slate. The dog has never gotten away with anything with me. I establish control from the start with quality guidance in a positive, strong, sports-coach manner that the dog understands and can appreciate. The dog usually realizes due to my quality presentation that I am an individual of consistency that can be weighed and measured in my favor.

My role as alpha is completely understood, and most of the time, accepted, by the dog. But a dog may have a difficult time seeing its owner as an alpha, particularly if the owner has always been below the dog on the social ladder. The owner's previous role was understood and appreciated, but now the dog says, "Whoa-whoa-whoa, wait a minute here! The alpha, the teacher, is now taking my owner, who is below me on the social ladder, and trying to place my owner above me?!"

There is nothing in the laws of nature that says canines must listen to more than one alpha per environment, especially an adult human who has demonstrated non-alpha characteristics. A multi-alpha environment is a relatively foreign concept. Unfortunately, living in a human world, we must oust this belief, so we can all function as handlers while teaching the canine.

Having lived with between eight to fifteen dogs in my home nearly all my adult life, I can tell you that the pack structure is not rigidly a single alpha and all eyes are on him or her all the time. Dogs form cliques and partnerships and they engage with certain pack members for certain activities at certain times and engage with the rest in their own ways. It has been fascinating to observe over the years.

At best, I would say that there is normally only a forty to fifty percent transfer from myself to the owner. The more training that is done by both trainer and handler in a condensed period of time, the faster you will see positive results. It takes several months of consistent hard work to learn the proper handling strategies for the owner to become a quality leader that will enable them to bring their relationship with their dog to that happy, healthy, and safe place we all want to achieve. Handlers must concentrate on what they are doing more so than what the dog is doing! The dog can never handle better than the handler. In the first few weeks of training, there can be a lot of friction between the owner and their dog until the owner's handling improves to the point to where the canine responds promptly due to good guidance by the owner.

Dogs are gray creatures, with the same emotional spectrum as humans, but we must deliver our messages in black and white for our presentation and demands to be clear. To reach the level of success that is functional for the real world, we must only tell a canine a command once, and then fix it the second time. The handler should always be following this rule: First time told, second time fixed. This simply means that if the dog does not do it the first time, then make them do it the second time. If the handler tells the dog to sit, and the dog does not sit, then they should wait one second and make the dog sit.

The canine must be aware that there are no options with the handler; if there are, then it's a good possibility that the canine will choose everything but the handler's desired response when the dog is stimulated. As handlers, there should be as little negative interaction as possible, both verbally and physically.

The leash is the handler's main tool until respect is gained. I call the leash a freedom stick. When in hand, the dog knows the handler has control, and when not in hand and when out of the hand, the dog "flips the handler the paw," as I say. The dog should remain on leash until it is happily cooperating with its handler consistently so when the leash is removed it's not as much about the leash as it is the developed relationship that both human and dog have accepted at that time.

During the corrective process of any command always give the verbal command with the physical follow-through. We only give a command initially when we want the canine to do something and we repeat it only if the dog makes a mistake. We do not want to constantly reinforce the command if the dog is doing the task properly, because the canine might think that if we repeatedly say the command that it made a mistake or we are doing its work for it. We do not want to condition the dog to only perform the command for as long as we are verbally reinforcing the command. Please, only give a command if it will be followed through; if not, it only emphasizes a lack of control to the canine.

Teaching a canine properly takes time. "Rome was not built in a day but they worked on it every day to build it" is a saying that could be said about working with dogs. The nice thing about dogs is that whatever the handler puts into them, the handler will usually get out of them. The bad thing about dogs is that seldom will they do more than what one makes them do with respect to commands when you need them to do it the most.

It's very important to use positive reinforcement when teaching the fundamental commands. Over the last couple decades I've used and seen many modalities with dogs of many different personalities. Positive reinforcement of emotional exchange reward, also referred to as earned praise, has been the most successful type of reward system for real world functional command response with the majority of my four-legged students in building the relationship we want. I firmly believe that being that charismatic sports coach that everyone admires and respects is how we want to present ourselves when being a handler. Having a strong, positive, excited delivery of *earned praise* is valued so much by the dog.

If I can keep the learning atmosphere positive and successful with earned praise as the positive reinforcement, I prefer not to use food or toy reward for the Sit, Stay, and Heel commands. Food and toys are great motivators to get companion dogs to do tasks, but on a fundamental command level, with Sit, Stay and Heel the dog can gain a greater education about its environment by not being as fixated on the handler for its food or toy reward.

With working dogs there's a greater range of problem-solving that occurs that extends beyond the focus of the handler, so food and toy reward is always the way to go! Working dogs thoroughly enjoy utilizing their abilities and this job becomes a partnership to enhance the bond between human and dog.

My experience has shown that you will yield a higher return on your bond and relationship if you can do these few commands well with the positive reinforcement of emotional exchange rather than food. If proper execution of all the instruction in this educational PDF has you falling short with the proper training devices being used with your dog, there's nothing saying you can't go the food reward route, but give earned praise a try first.

When food or toy reward is the primary motivator, depending upon the distraction there could always be something more important than a food or toy reward in the real world. Developing a relationship with the dog that has had positive reinforcement through earned praise for having performed tasks correctly yields the best results. My experience has been in when you are in crunch time with very challenging real world distractions, earned praise relationship development edges out food reward training strategies.

In my experience, food and toy reward-based training work more consistently for indoor classroom training, tricks, teaching mechanical concepts well, and lower-level environment challenge situations. Most of my students desire off-leash control when hiking in the mountains and being able to have great command response regardless of what the environment throws at them, may it be wildlife, terrain challenges, or other hikers with dogs. Sometimes the bond created with the reward of food is not going to supersede the distraction at hand. It depends upon the dog in hand.

Food reward for a quality response to a Come command can have its benefits because we want the dog fixated on the handler during this command. The food reward dispensed upon completion can aid in having the pup view this as a more positional exercise. You can always wean the pup off of food reward at a later time. I also use food for labeling people as positives when dogs have aggression issues with non-pack members, and for dogs that are fearful of things in life, if they are secure enough to receive food as a preliminary coping tool.

Food reward is fine for shaping behaviors in puppies that are highly motivated by it. This creates a positive association and a fast response time to mechanical concepts early on. My largest student base is a one- to three-year-old dog that has seen two to four trainers, nearly all who have used food reward. Often the dog will not focus on the task given because the distraction in the environment is of greater priority than the food reward and therefore the handler. There are dogs that have a mega-high food drive and an incredible pleasing gene that makes for food reward training to be a breeze. However, given the number of breeds out there and different personalities, we often need to look beyond a food reward system to solve our day-to-day issues.

Certainly, heavy-handed techniques of striking the dog are outdated, frowned upon, and are of inferior methods. The more violent the handler gets with the canine, the dog will either go into total fearful submission or become defensive or offensive with that person, both of which often will bring about aggressive behavior. I attribute these methods to a poor handler profile, including a lack of communication abilities. Ill-tempered people have no business handling dogs nor training people how to handle dogs.

With a love, respect, and trust method there is nothing more valuable to a dog once these feelings are earned. Along with being understood by their peers, dogs thoroughly enjoy verbal and physical praise.

Canines are extremely intelligent, but if you truly understand them, you will learn how simple they really are. A handler's natural ability certainly affects the results they will get. My methods are simple, straightforward, flexible to adjust to individualism, assertive yet compassionate, and equally as important, they are understood by the dog. There is a tremendous amount of information to learn about the canine, but it all comes easily. The hardest things for a handler to learn are when to appropriately trust their dog and how to respect their dog.

Lastly, people always find it funny to hear me say this, but working your dog is not the most important thing that you do with your dog. A lot of work is necessary to achieve excellence in many cases, but by no means is it the most important thing. Great handling is one of the keys to success but when the dog is on a Take-a-break for 98% of its life and is feeling in control of itself, then you better believe that is when the dog is doing some of its evaluating of the owner.

From your dog's perspective, your behavior around the clock establishes a baseline presentation to the dog that your dog will view as your profile and basis for your ability. This profile becomes the dog's belief system of what you are capable of in dog handling. As you evolve your skill set as a handler, the dog may take some time to believe this is the new you.

The attitude of the handler can greatly affect a dog's progress. I can teach an owner technique and understanding of their canine; however, having the right attitude can often just depend on the individual person. When people see me handle they say, "Wow! I do not have that much energy." My passion for teaching the canine certainly is projected, in a quality presentation with confidence.

It is important to want to work with the canine. One has to have the discipline to work every day with their unruly student. A novice handler has to have the confidence that they can accomplish the work with their dog. I define confidence as being positive, upbeat, fluent, and knowing what you want from the dog and how to get it. The handler has to have the attitude that the dog must impress him or her.

When I handle a canine I always say to myself, "What are all the possible outcomes when I tell the dog to do a particular task?" I identify all possible mistakes and then assume that

the dog is going to make them. By thinking in this way I am fully prepared to correct any mistake that the dog might make. Handlers must always present themselves the same way regardless of the dog's presentation; this illustrates leadership potential. It is very natural for the handler's performance to deteriorate as the canine's performance worsens. This cannot happen if one is to achieve alpha status.

The handler must always remain cool, calm, collected, and always focus on their handling. The presentation of the handler to the dog is the key factor. I like to say, "The dog will never handle better than the handler." It is imperative that the novice handler concentrates on improving his or her handling. The sooner the handler improves, the sooner the dog improves. We must clearly define our rules so that the guidance that we are giving is totally understood. Think of teaching a dog like dancing; the handler is the lead dancer, and the dog must follow the handler's lead.

Have the attitude that you are on a mission, you are going to succeed, and you are going to have fun! As you heard me state earlier, as the dog's presentation deteriorates so does the handler's. If I ever work with you personally you will hear me say that all the time. I have found that the more precise structure I am able to give the owner, the better the owner does as a handler and the better the dog does for its owner.