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Dog training also requires people training

By Dianna Young
Special to the NEWS



Dogs read very subtle signs that we often broadcast without realizing. Being hard-wired for hierarchal relationships, when a dog detects vulnerability he has no choice but to try to take advantage of it.

It often surprises people who bring their dogs to us for training, that we spend at least as much time training the owners as we do training the dogs.

Why? Because people don't know how to think like dogs. And if we are to succeed in communicating with dogs, we have to meet them on their own intellectual level.

They cannot meet us on ours.

For instance, as humans, we tend to depend on verbal communication with each other and also with our animals. But words are not a type of communication that dogs use. Dogs pay attention instead to body language, tone of voice and energy level.

If my body language or energy level is not assertive, I transmit that information to the dog.

An example of this occurred recently with a beginning student in one of my group classes. We were teaching her young dog to sit/stay, and this was as new to the owner as it was to the dog. She was unsure of her teaching ability, and when she attempted to give a command, she did it as though it were followed by a question mark. So it wasn't really a command at all. It was only a suggestion, and that is the way her dog interpreted it.

Dogs read very subtle signs that we often broadcast without realizing. The fact that the woman raised the pitch of her voice at the end of each command was evidence that she herself believed it was only a suggestion, and the dog detected that.

Our tone of voice or the way we stand or move speaks volumes to our canine friends. If we stand with shoulders slumped, head down, unwilling to make eye contact, we project the opposite of assertiveness. Some people are naturally – probably genetically – shy or submissive. Such a person may not necessarily lack confidence. He or she may be a very competent professor or mathematician or mechanic. But if he or she doesn't project assertiveness, a dog interprets this as vulnerability. And, being hard-wired for hierarchal relationships, when a dog detects vulnerability he has no choice but to try to take advantage of it. Where a dog sees vulnerability it sees opportunity.

I talked with a woman recently who has a German shepherd puppy that needs training, and as we chatted on the phone she mentioned that the dog will listen to her husband and her son, but not to her. She believed this had something to do with their deeper

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male voices.

I knew from experience that this was not the issue.

Her husband and son could have their vocal chords removed and they still would have more control over the dog than she. Then, in the course of our conversation, the woman mentioned that she was afraid of dogs – all dogs – including her own puppy. She undoubtedly projects that through her lack of willingness to engage.

We have to fix her, not her vocal chords. We have to fix how she feels about her dog. We have to convince her that she has the ability to be in charge.

If we can't convince her, we can't help her.

How do we teach people to project assertiveness?

We do it through one-on-one coaching and practice, practice, practice. There isn't any one exercise that's specific to assertiveness, because myriad things are involved. When a student pays attention to this aspect of what we teach, it's remarkable the kind of results that are possible.

We had one gentleman in our last class to whom we spent six weeks teaching assertive behavior so he could assume leadership with his two dogs. They are large dogs. He was a meek, easy-going, well-mannered kind of a guy, and he probably tries to avoid conflict. Not that he's necessarily afraid of it, but I think he'd just rather not have it.

After he had completed our course he returned to our kennel and thanked us. He said the class had dramatically improved not only his relationship with his dogs, but also with the people he supervised at work. One of the guys he supervised had showed behavior that indicated he might be a bully, and this man had given the bully way too much leeway. As soon as he set up clear boundaries for this employee, he said, it transformed their relationship for the better.

He also created black and white boundaries for his dogs at home, because they had been walking all over him as well. And dogs are very black-and-white creatures. They don't understand gray areas.

Dianna Young is a certified, professional dog trainer and canine behaviorist from Camano Island, where she operates Camano Island Kennels Dog Boarding, Grooming and Training Facility. She can be reached at (360) 387-DOGS or at info@camanoislandkennels.com.



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