

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?

By Dorothy Turley, CPDT

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The bumper sticker read, "I know I have the right to remain silent. I just don't have the ability." I laughed so hard I almost had to pull my car over as it so aptly described me for most of my life. Expressing myself has never been a problem and I am not known as a reserved or quiet person. It has taken me a long time to learn how to remain silent and to listen but it has begun to serve me well, especially as a dog trainer. This may seem like an elementary skill for many trainers but for some of us, it is something we have to develop.

LISTENING TO CLIENTS

Listening can be especially difficult when we are new to the field of dog training and people counseling. I remember being very nervous for my early private lessons that dealt with any type of behavior issue. I went to every appointment prepared to not charge the client and refer them onto someone more experienced. As they talked my mind was racing, trying to analyze and solve their problems. I quickly discovered that it was best to just be quiet and let the entire history come out uncensored. Sometimes there were also questions for me to ask, but very often letting the client just talk answered most of them. Even the time spent wandering to the topic of the "good" dog they lived with for years and was now gone gave me insight into their relationship with and expectations for their current dog.

When working with a client in a private lesson, listening is often the most difficult part. It is sometimes very obvious to the trainer what is going on from the first few minutes we begin. I have learned that often the best option is to wait until they can trust me enough to reveal the entire story. I did not learn this lesson as a dog trainer but as a retail store manager. Janet was the manager of the customer service department for a retail chain that once employed me. She was a very patient and wise woman. It can be frustrating to deal with an angry customer. It is easy to become skeptical and cynical about people when you spend most of your day dealing with mostly dissatisfied customers. She taught me to really listen to what the customer was saying and give them time to vent their problem. As long as they remained civil, I continued to listen. I offered solutions when they asked for them.

This could be frustrating as very often, I knew the customer was not giving me the entire story. At times, I was sure they were at least exaggerating and possibly lying. Janet's most sage words would ring in my ears, "The truth is somewhere in the customer but we don't get to hear it." This simple phrase was life changing for me. Most of the time, customers were not deliberately trying to deceive me but were presenting what they believed to be important and true. They knew all the facts but were unlikely to share them with me because they either thought they were irrelevant or genuinely could not pull them to the front of their memory.

My clients begin in many ways as dissatisfied customers. Things are not going the way they think they should with their dog and they want someone to make it right. It is important that I take plenty of time to listen to what they have to say in order to gather as many details as possible. I cannot let them go on forever as the clock is ticking, but I can guide the conversation with questions that will lead to more pertinent information. I am still amazed at how many clients answer a simple question such as, "Has the dog ever bitten a human?" with a negative only to reveal later that indeed there have been bites. "Oh, just a nip" or "Well, once during a dog fight." or even, "Once when my nephew tried to take his rawhide." It seems like such a simple yes or no question to me but obviously it is not so black or white for my clients. It is not that the client is trying to hide the truth. They truly have changed the incident in their memory so that it no longer qualifies as a bite. The truth is in the client and it is my job to listen so that I know what it is.

LISTENING TO DOGS

I don't talk or whisper or even yell much to get dogs to work with me. Well, actually, that is not entirely true. I confess, I do all of those things at various times, especially with my own dogs, but I am very clear about what they accomplish. Most of that verbal communication is for my benefit. It makes me feel better and certainly

there are times when verbalizing can be very appropriate and even enjoyable for the dog and human. But, when I really want a happy, comfortable dog I do much less talking.

With dogs I have learned to listen with my eyes. If you lived with my dog, Lucky, you would know that without a doubt dogs do verbalize with their mouths. But as any good trainer knows, it is their body language that does most of their communication. A good dog trainer has to learn this language and spend much time trying to improve their skills in this area. To me, the bigger success is to share and teach it to my students.

My friends and I have spent many hours discussing how difficult it is for humans to see their dogs. Not only in the simple sense of just watching them but also missing the bigger more striking picture of their real "dogginess" and what they are desperately trying to tell us. In many ways our inability to see our dog's body language translates to deafness to their communication. We not only don't listen, we can't because we do not know their language.

I have recently taken on a client, Susan, who adopted a lab, Sadie, who was taken out of a hunt training program because her hips were not good. Sadie came to her almost fully trained but completely hesitant when asked to do any work. She would comply with the request but she was slow and there were some behaviors that she "knew" but rarely did the first time she was asked. Susan was thrilled that the dog knew so much but could not understand why she was so hesitant at times. She knew there was a breakdown in communication but did not know why. She looked at Sadie and saw a pretty Lab that seemed stubborn. I saw Sadie and knew she had been given too much and possibly even very harsh instruction. If I "listened" to her body language, it was obvious she knew that she was supposed to respond in some way to the requests but they were either not clear to her or carried a history of negative associations. Her ears were never up, her tail seldom wagged and her gaze was virtually never directed at her trainer.

I waited for the right moment to point out what Sadie was trying to say to us with her body. The moment came quickly when we started training new behaviors with Sadie using positive reinforcement. She started to relax and seemed even excited about working. Her body language was dramatically different. At this point Susan began to question the difference in her behavior. It was the perfect opportunity to help Susan learn a new language so that she could listen to her dog.

The other night in class I was explaining to a client how to capture some of her dog's behaviors. As we talked the dog began to lie down. This was the behavior we were specifically working on and discussing. Her husband and son were almost yelling at her to look at the dog. I realized that this woman was a good listener but only to humans. Was it because I was the teacher and she the student? Or perhaps she was raised to be polite and listen well to others? I even speculated that it might have been easier for her male family members to give the female instructor less attention so they were able to watch the dog. Hmmmm...but I digress. I suspect that it was most likely that she was unable to listen to two species at once especially when she did not understand the language of her dog and was not used to looking or listening for what he did or said. It is hard to know for sure but I realized that it was my job to help her see and thus hear her dog. This would help their training and relationship in so many ways once she understood the messages her dog was trying to give her. I knew that if she would miss something as large as "Hey, Mom, I laid down! Where is my treat?" she was most certainly missing more

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subtle forms of communication from her dog. If she could learn these then she would have insight on how to support, train and build a much deeper and stronger relationship with her dog.

LISTENING TO MYSELF

Listening to yourself is certainly a lesson many of our parents try to instill in us from a young age. But the reality is that our culture tends to stress the opposite. We are taught to be polite and follow certain rules of society. This also applies to our work with clients and dogs. We all can perceive much more about a person than

our mind can process in a short period of time. This is that “feeling” you get when in the presence of someone that may be untrustworthy or dangerous. We often ignore our “gut” because we are trying to be polite or professional. These are socially acceptable behaviors that tend to suppress our instincts. During my years in retail, these instincts served me well in spotting customers that were not honest or employees that were untrustworthy. Certainly, I am not psychic but I did pay attention when I felt ill at ease with someone.

Early in my dog training career I heard Sue Sternberg speak and she confirmed that this could also be true for dogs. Listening to my body in the presence of a dog could be the difference between a bite or a calm meeting. We are both living creatures that have evolved around each other. We actually have a long history of living with dogs so even though we may not know why, our body often tells us to be cautious. I listen to myself and the dog very closely to determine whether or not our encounter will be close or distant. I also hear what the client says, but it is only additional information that never overrides my first two sources of information—myself and the dog.

This is a difficult position as the socially accepted norm for dog trainers these days is that we can and will handle any dog we meet. I sometime feel that I must prove myself as an authority or a dog lover or some sort of doggie magician. It seems to be a popular position now that the trainer should come in and take charge of the dog. Many clients really want me to take the dog and fix him now! We should know immediately how to handle a dog and not be afraid to do so. I don't totally disagree that I should pretty quickly know what to do in a given situation but I must listen to everyone involved. Although it is just not very impressive to my clients when I choose not to handle their dog, it is often the right and safe course of action. It also gives me the opportunity to explain why I won't handle the dog at the time. Once I tell them that he is very clearly telling me that he will not be happy and likely won't allow it, I have opened the door to teaching them to listen to their dog. I also explain that this will ensure that I will not be on the list of any officially recorded bites that may haunt the dog for the rest of his life. If the client is also listening, we can usually come to an agreement on how to proceed.

THE BATTLE WITH SILENCE

I am often torn with how my silence might be interpreted. I have been told that silence can be construed as agreement. In general, for me, listening in silence has been a better decision than putting something out there that cannot be taken back. When a client tells me that they purchased their dog from a pet store or have rubbed their pup's nose in urine, I don't recoil and express my disappointment. I also do not ignore the comment. It is stored to be revisited when I have gained their trust. My job is to help the client and the dog and I can't do either if I have alienated them early in our conversation. I look for common ground and focus on the reason they consulted me. This is especially important on phone calls where I have very little time to build a relationship.

So, my ability to remain silent gets stronger with every battle I fight. I choose those battles carefully so that my words are heard with dogs and humans. I do not want to be the Gary Larson cartoon with the dog owner saying, “Blah, blah, blah, Fido. Blah, blah, blah, Fido.” And I certainly don't want my clients to hear “Blah, blah, blah, Susan. Blah, blah, blah.” I think remaining silent can help to build your relationships with dogs and humans by letting them know that what they are saying is important to you. Choosing the time to speak and what to say can also give your words much more value to any species that is listening.