



ASK THE PRO

trust, respect, duty and conflict

By Andy Attar

DID YOU SEE THE MOVIE “MY DOG SKIP”? Our family did many times. The end gets me every time. Skip watches Willie leave for college and appears so alone and betrayed. The bond has been broken; but not in Skip’s mind. So many years of relationship building and so many experiences to build this relationship seem to be forgotten by Willie.

Of course the movie takes us through an anthropomorphic journey regarding dog and human relationships but we dog folks know that much of this holds true. Practically speaking, we can identify some of these elements and apply them to our training journey. The words Trust,

Respect, Conflict, and Duty will be key elements in our discussions.

First of all, understanding a few basic elements of a dog’s personality is important. They possess an inherent need for order and routine. We see this in our retrievers in training where they thrive on routine. As a matter of fact, to remove a dog from their routine many times causes stress. Airing, feeding, and “off time” are all elements one must monitor to ensure a less stressed environment for our dogs.

As pack animals, their survival depends on strong boundaries between relationships. Dogs have an incredible capacity to cooperate with each other. In a

wonderful book on animal behavior, “Adam’s Task, Calling Animals By Name,” Vicki Hearnes states, “In nature there are no laws, just consequences.” This point illustrates how important cooperation is for a dog’s survival. But in making this point, we must be aware of a dog’s introduction into our world and how the environment of communication is so different. Whether they are hunting in a group or having to remain orderly in a litter, dogs function together well as a group. We tap into this capacity to cooperate by becoming the dominant leader, a position we earn by gaining trust and respect and perhaps more importantly, by becoming an unconditional care giver. Let’s look into this further.

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Developing Conditional – Unconditional Relationships

Understanding how dogs relate to us is very important. When a dog enters into our world, she may attempt to relate to us as it would to another dog. It is right at the beginning of their lives that we need to positively introduce the dog into our world. And it is in this world she must stay. Retrievers are very adaptable and can easily enter into our world with the right start.

We have all heard the term unconditional love. Consider for a moment that a person's love for a dog must be conditional in a training sense and unconditional in a custodial sense. What this means is that training involves appropriately changing or shaping a dog's behavior so it fits our needs, fits into our world and yet assures a quality life for the dog. We take a dog's basic, intrinsic want and ability to communicate and expand this into our world.

Through proper conditioning, and eventual problem solving techniques, the dog learns to make proper choices. We will not accept behaviors of unwillingness, aggressiveness, etc. We have become the matriarch, yet along with this position we have become a provider as well. As a provider, we will earn trust by supplying all the necessary factors for survival including affection, social bonding, providing a safe, healthy living and training environment, and consistent communication and training which will lead us to a trusting relationship. Once dogs are trained, their relationship to us will be unconditional. Our roles of head task master and primary care giver must parallel each other!

The growth of our relationship regarding efficient communication with our dog can be summed up with these concepts in mind.

Between stimulus and response there lies a space. In that space lays the freedom and power to choose a response. In that response lays growth and freedom. (Dr. Stephen Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People")

It is a very fine line in our training between conditioning (controlling responses) and allowing dogs to choose a response. Too much freedom and not enough

conditioning will allow dogs to make poor choices therefore reducing the chance of behavior change. Not enough choice and too much conditioning results in dogs not tapping into their own ability to reason through a problem. When this occurs, dogs perform poorly in new environments and cannot solve complex problems. As a friend and colleague has said to me many times, "A smart dog knows what to do when it does not know what to do!"

Read this over and over. We will apply this to much of our basic training. Think about force fetching for a moment. Initially, teaching to hold occupies our training. Small amounts of pressure are applied and the conditioning process has begun. Next, we are applying pressure routinely and the conditioning process continues. Eventually, we begin to allow the dog to make a choice, and if she makes the wrong choice, in a timely response, we correct the wrong choice and encourage the proper decision. This is it! Our training will involve these important principles everyday. From teaching to sit, to correcting the dogs for a mistake out in the field, these principles permeate the most important and fundamental aspects of our controlling the successes with the dogs.

Decision Making

Our over-riding objective in our training is to teach the dogs to learn and make decisions themselves. We want good decisions to be second nature. A good example could be a dog that after going through the force fetch procedure drops a bird on the return from a mark and begins to play. The handler is away from the dog and orders fetch. The dog has 2 choices: the right one and the wrong one. We know that we have taught and enforced the fetch command but will the dog respond appropriately? Hopefully the right choice is made but if it is not, then we have a reminder lesson involving force fetching procedures. Not a big deal because we have sound training practices in place.

Another example could be when a dog attempts to go around the water instead of in it (assuming the dog has been through yard work and is ready for this challenge).

If the dog makes the wrong decision we simply stop and handle into the water. If this does not work we stop again and nick with the collar and then handle. We have the tools in place to correct the bad choice and are offering the correct choice with a handle. The correct choice (going into the water) becomes the "right" decision for the dog because we have been teaching this in smaller steps such as swim-by and cheating singles. The dogs are always making choices and the more choices they correctly make, the more secure or habitual the behavior will become.

Remember the key words at the beginning of our discussion: Trust, Respect, Conflict and Duty. Proper training encourages trust and respect when conflict arises. We want the dog to trust us to make a consistent correction and not turn the situation into a nightmare where they shut down their brains and go into survival mode. We want the dog to respect our authority enough not to continue to challenge us and finally, we want to encourage the dog to develop a sense of duty to confidently complete her work and reach her goals.

As trainers we have taken on a tremendous responsibility. We must be aware of the awesome power of learning and wholeness that takes place through a dog's life. Our retrievers are like sponges that soak in what we teach, good and bad. By teaching efficiently, we can progress our dogs at a faster rate and keep their attitudes strong. The elements we have discussed will anchor training for the rest of our relationship with our dogs. We will define the relationship through unconditional love, unwavering care and the creation of a trusting environment. We will demand attention through proper and fair training which will create boundaries and conditions in the world in which our dogs live. It's a great journey from beginning to end. ■

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