

HOW TO HAVE A WAY WITH DOGS

Julia V. McDonough

www.FortunateK9.com

I've heard it my entire life: "You have such a way with dogs!"

Sometimes it is in admiration, as I handle an otherwise incorrigible dog and show his owners the potential he has. Often it is used as an excuse; an owner will compare the way his dog works for me with the uncontrollable animal he has contended with for weeks, months or years, and with that simple statement, abandons all hope for his own success and abdicates his responsibility in the dog's failure. "A way with dogs" can be a compliment, and it can be a condemnation (for the dog in question). But the one thing I tell every person who accuses me of having "a way with dogs" is that it is a fiction.

What? Everyone knows that some people have "a way" with animals. That ease of communication and grace of execution seen in the best dog trainers, horsemen and other accomplished animal people seems almost otherworldly. Unfortunately, some opportunists market it as such and make a tidy sum living off of their reputation as "whisperers", "communicators", etc. However, I am here to tell you that "a way with animals" is something that a human being can learn, if only he or she is receptive to what that "way" truly means. It's really a matter of a few basic principles that the dogs themselves seem to grasp and employ in their own interactions.

1. BE RESPECTFUL

As I write this article in the Get Acquainted Room at the shelter, I am accompanied by my dog Luther and a little DRU dog named Caroline. Caroline is everybody's favorite these days: small and plump with a wistful expression and a sweetly affectionate demeanor, no one can help but fall in love with her. Introduce another dog to the scene, though, and watch as a canine Mrs. Hyde emerges.

Strapping, solid Luther isn't anyone's idea of a pushover. But when Caroline raises her lip and stares a warning at him as he dares to approach her personal space, he backs down and gives her some room. In the past half hour, the two of them have worked out a grudging respect for each other's spots and have even allowed some up-close time as they greeted a guest. If Luther had not been as deferential and respectful of Caroline's space, the two of them could not be sharing the same room quietly right now.

A famous caricature that dog trainers love to trot out when describing scary incidents with foolish people is the following. A person rushes up to pet a strange dog and is asked by the handler to refrain from doing so. The enthusiastic greeter persists in her efforts, arms outstretched, eye contact full blaze, bearing down on the dog's space while cheerfully offering the disclaimer: "Oh, don't worry, I have a way with dogs." This anecdote usually ends with the trespasser being snapped at and sometimes bitten. The irony arises from the fact that if this

person truly did “have a way with dogs”, she would never rush into the space of a dog she hadn’t met properly, in a manner that bespeaks aggression and rudeness to a normal dog.

The first step in having a way with dogs is understanding that their space and the rituals surrounding it are sacred. A well adjusted, properly trained dog should allow the friendly attention of a respectful stranger. He should not always be expected to welcome the loud, full frontal assault of a well-meaning but obnoxious dog lover. Watch how dogs work out their sharing issues amongst themselves to learn about respect, deference and the trust that follows a proper introduction.

2. BE QUIET

Anyone who has taken a lesson with me has watched me start their dog with an exercise called “The Foundation”. The Foundation utilizes a 15’ longe line, a training collar, and a completely silent handler. Owners who complain that their dog “doesn’t listen” are stunned when three minutes into the exercise, the dog is happily trotting alongside me on a totally slack 15’ line, following my every move with rapt attention. The fact that I haven’t spoken a single word to the dog is the reason they say “You have such a way with dogs!”. But that is perfect proof that this mysterious “way” is learnable. Unbelievable as it may seem, everyone is capable of keeping his mouth shut when dealing with his dog. We have been conditioned to treat dogs as if they are human children rather than the beautifully natural creatures they are meant to be. Unlike the child who even at a very early age is sophisticated enough to pick up the nuances of almost everything his parent says to him, the dog is living by his senses first, and his comprehension second. If we don’t build a bridge between the two, we will always have the “dog who doesn’t listen”. In fact, we are looking at a dog who has never been taught how to hear us.

One of the most important lessons I have learned after nearly a quarter century working with dogs is that the less you say, the more they listen. The corollary to that is that the less you stare at them, the more they watch you. Show your dog what you want by leading him confidently, as if you were his trusted pack leader, rather than nagging and cajoling him as if you were his wishy-washy human mother.

3. BE AWARE OF BODY LANGUAGE

When teaching a class the “sit/stay” exercise, I will often warn a handler, “Remind him, he’s going to break position.” If the handler reminds her dog with a well-timed “Good sit”, she may notice nothing beyond her dog sitting up a bit straighter. If she chooses to ignore me or reacts too slowly to my suggestion, she is likely to watch as her dog stands up or lies down as if on cue. “How did you know that?” is the question that follows. The answer could be a vague, “I have a way with dogs, of course!” But the truth is much simpler. Every dog has a vocabulary of gestures and physical positions that literally tell observers of his intentions. By watching for one of these “tells”, a handler can literally predict what the dog will do next, and can redirect him onto task rather than correcting him for failure after the fact.

As you read above, dogs are not verbal creatures, yet they communicate with us and with each other very efficiently through a number of physical signals, some overt, some so subtle that it takes another dog to recognize them.

There are many books on the subject of canine body language, and anyone who really wants to learn how to “speak dog” should get their hands on one. One of the highest compliments one dog

trainer will pay another is to say that his colleague can “really read a dog”. Understanding the difference between a raised, stiffly wagging tail (dominant posturing) and a relaxed, slowly wagging tail (friendship and recognition); divining the outcome of a staring contest; and forecasting the downfall of a sit/stay command are just a few examples of reading a dog. Learning how to use your own upright, bipedal body to communicate effectively with your four-legged canine companion is of equal importance. When a good handler is working well with a dog, it appears as though the two of them are dancing. While nary a word or command escapes the handler’s lips, a complete conversation is taking place between them on the physical plane. And while the dogs who share our lives originate from all over the globe, the canine language is universal, as is the body language of good dog trainers and handlers. Perhaps each individual dog has his own accent or dialect, which is why the more dogs one handles well, the more one can “speak” with future dogs. Watching the delicate fluency that a “well spoken” dog exhibits in dealing with his world will teach you most of what you need to know about communication with another species. Psychic abilities are not required.

So how did I know that the student’s dog would break the sit/stay? Maybe the dog yawned. Maybe he scratched himself. Maybe he was panting and stopped panting. Maybe the expression in his eyes hardened. Maybe I just have a way with dogs....

4. BE SINCERE

Several years ago, I was at a dog event with my great DRU dog, Jane. Anyone who has seen Jane in action will agree that she is a very high-drive, super sensitive Doberman who requires a strong handler with a soft touch. Jane and I had been strolling about the conference area, looking at the exhibits. As usual, Jane was in proper heel position, walking quietly by my side. Every once in awhile I would look down at her and smile my encouragement at her mannerly behavior. Earlier that day she had caused a stir when a nosy Border Collie invaded her spot beneath my chair, and she responded with a loud (and embarrassing) correction to the offender. I was pleased to see that she had decided to follow my commands now instead of her own coarser instincts.

We stopped for a moment outside of the main seating area and Jane sat at heel, as she has been trained. Another conference goer caught my eye, and suggested, “You should praise her.”

No one knows how to train a trainer’s dog better than another trainer, better still if the other trainer has never before laid eyes on the dog in question.

“Thanks,” I replied, “But I am praising her.”

My zealously helpful colleague belonged to a school of thought that requires a handler to constantly gush words of adoration at the dog, to reward the merest act of civil behavior with a torrent of praise that I would prefer to save for the day my dog drags me out of a burning building. True, some dogs seem to thrive on this type of overwrought attention, but more seem to be unimpressed with it once a big distraction comes along, and a few of the cagier ones almost look a bit disgusted with it! What my colleague didn’t understand is that my soft eye contact and my gentle smile (and only a Doberman would think I have a “gentle” smile) were meaningful enough to Jane that she warmed to them and continued to be a good girl.

The dogs I work with will quickly lose focus on the task at hand if for every tiny success they received a barrage of words and celebration. Far more meaningful is a smile, a quiet “e’s a boy”, a fleeting pat on the head or flank.

When you deal with a dog, infuse your words with meaning and sincerity by keeping perspective on what you are trying to achieve and how hard your dog is trying to get it right. Don't devalue your positive attention by throwing false enthusiasm at your dog every time he blinks his eyes. On the other hand, if you are a more taciturn type and the best praise you can squeak out is a flat, wooden "Good boy" even when your dog has just had a major breakthrough, try to see things through your dog's eyes and understand how fulfilling it would be if his Trusted Boss and Pack Leader smiled down and gave him a genuine, hearty scratch beneath the chin and a few words of encouragement. While I won't anthropomorphize dogs by attributing to them such human traits as spite and jealousy, I will stand by my belief that a dog is an honest creature who can tell when his person is truly invested in him.

5. BE HUMBLE

Always the hardest charge for someone dealing with dogs, but a necessity for success in "having a way" with them. The very best dog trainers in the world, the people who have the kind of bond with their dogs that the rest of us dream about, share a common trait: they treat every new dog they meet as a teacher as much as a student. While pride in one's work and even a bit of arrogance are not unheard of in the profession, that sense of superiority should be tempered by a healthy dose of humility when a leash is placed in one's hands. I have listened to Dobe owners insist that they could not learn anything from my staff or my colleagues because they've "had dogs all their life". Now that their current dog is displaying unacceptable behavior that is new to them, they rest on the sparse laurels of having owned perhaps five or six dogs in the past, and they refuse to open their eyes to the learning experience in front of them. Instead, their dog is turned into our shelter with a laundry list of behavioral defects that would have been easily addressed if the owner just swallowed his pride and opened his mind. Ironically, one of the most often heard disclaimers from these folks is "Well, I have a way with dogs, and if Bruno here won't listen to me, then there's something wrong with him!"

** sigh **

Having a way with dogs isn't exactly easy. It takes open eyes, a quiet way of expression, a strong character and a controllable ego. However, a way with dogs is not some magic gift conferred at birth, either. If you want to be one of those people who really does have a way with dogs, begin by following the guidelines above. Then let the dogs do the rest.

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Julia V. McDonough

FortunateK9

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Trainer@FortunateK9.com