

**Chapter 13: Tools for Effective Communication**

In this chapter, we will review some recommendations to help you establish and maintain good communication with your dog. We will detail some of the techniques and exercises that will help you communicate effectively with your dog. This is not an exhaustive list by any means. Think of your skills as a handler as a set of tools. First, you will acquire a basic set, learning through time and experience how and when to use each tool. As you become proficient with the basics, you will continue to add more and more to your toolbox.

**Tools of the Trade**

Rewards and Reinforcers – For most dogs, food is considered the Primary Reinforcer, meaning that it is innately rewarding for them. They know it, they enjoy it, and it does not change from one handler to the next. Other rewards like verbal and physical praise are known as Secondary Reinforcers, and their value can be established or strengthened by coupling them with a primary reinforcer. Pairing a stronger reinforcer with a weaker one is an example of Classical Conditioning. Nearly anything can be established as a secondary reinforcer, including but not limited to: toys, clapping, funny noises, access to enjoyable activities. Some things will be more naturally rewarding than others for each individual dog. The dog must enjoy the reward in order for it to function as a positive reinforcer.

Event Markers – A clicker or verbal “Yes!” are considered event markers. They are NOT reinforcers by themselves. The dogs have learned through classical conditioning that the event marker is a promise of food reward. It acts as a “bridge”, buying you extra time to deliver a food reward. Always link event markers with food reward. That means if you use an event marker you should feed your dog, AND if you intend to reward your dog with food you should use an event marker. The event marker should be given at the moment the dog completes the desired behavior, then the reward can be delivered several seconds later. In order to maintain the dog’s understanding, avoid giving any other signals or praise between the event marker and food delivery. You may also have opportunity to use a No-Reward Marker, such as “Not Now”. This is typically used when your dog indicates a familiar target that you do not need at that time. It functions as a way to communicate to your dog that although they are correct in indicating something familiar, they will not be receiving a reward on that particular occasion. If used consistently, a No-Reward Marker is a good way to let your dog know that you want to keep going without diminishing their willingness to indicate that location the next time.

Raising Criteria and Variable Reward – When you first receive your new dog, you will use food reward nearly 100% of the time for just about everything. However, as you build a relationship with your new dog and start to establish secondary reinforcers, you will begin to use food reward only for the best behaviors and use only praise or other secondary reinforcers for less than perfect responses. This is called raising criteria and should be done gradually so that the dog continues to try to be successful. If you stop using food reward too abruptly, the dog will not understand what it is doing wrong and will likely start to disengage, and behavior will deteriorate. But, by raising criteria slowly, you can actually build the dog’s enthusiasm while simultaneously using less and less food reward until the reward is variable and unpredictable. The dog won’t know when the reward is coming, but they will trust that it is coming eventually and keep trying, just like a gambler playing a slot machine. Your rate of reward should always be increased again when presenting your dog with anything new, or if you notice a decline in their work or behavior.

Verbal Praise and Voice Inflection – As noted above, praise typically functions as a secondary reinforcer, and can be strengthened by pairing with a primary reinforcer (food). But it is also vitally important to develop meaningful praise by figuring out what your dog is most naturally responsive to. Learning to use your voice inflection effectively can be difficult, but you will find your dog is better able to respond if you can alter the tone of your voice to reflect what you are trying to communicate. For example, commands should be given in a neutral, direct tone, annunciating clearly: “Juno, Sit.” You may be able to develop an effective verbal correction by using the word “No” in a low, firm tone. And praise should be given in a higher pitched, excited tone of voice. Many new handlers have difficulty expressing genuine praise, or your dog may not recognize it initially. Spend some time experimenting with different voice inflections, different words or phrases (“Atta boy!”, “What a star!”, etc), and even funny noises like a “kissy” noise or “raspberry”. Figure out what your dog naturally responds to, then follow up with a bit of food reward to make it even stronger.

Physical Praise – As with verbal praise, it’s important to develop meaningful physical praise that your dog actual enjoys and finds reassuring. Contrary to popular belief, most dogs do not enjoy the classic “pat on the head”. And guide dogs in particular are generally less receptive to physical praise while working in harness than they are while relaxing at home. You may find that your dog enjoys most any kind of physical contact at home but doesn’t have the same response while out working. Experiment with physical praise with your dog both in and out of harness. Try petting different areas of the dog's body as well as varying the pressure and speed of physical praise. Many dogs enjoy a scratch under the chin or chest, a gentle ear massage, scratching/petting the rump, or “combing” your fingers down the sides of the dog's ribcage. Your instructor can help give you some insight as to what types of physical praise your dog might enjoy most. Try to develop “tail wagging” praise. When your praise elicits tail wagging, you can be fairly confident that your dog is enjoying it and reaping the reinforcement benefits. You’ll also find that you can affect your dog's emotional state with different types of physical praise. If you need to calm your dog down, slow, firm strokes along the chest and body can be helpful. If you need to build your dog up or activate them, light, quick scratches or pats may be more effective.

Timing and Dog Awareness – Developing your ability to read and understand your dog's movements and behavior is one of the most important things you will need to do as a handler. This coupled with the timing of your responses can have a significant impact on your relationship, and ultimately your success as a team. At first it may be difficult to tell what your dog is doing at the end of the leash and you will need to physically reach down and touch them to check their position or determine if they have completed a behavior. But as you work together, you will begin to tune into their energy and build a better understanding of where they are relative to your position as well as picking up on the subtleties of their movements. This is where timing will become a key factor as well. You’ll need to abide by the “3 Second Rule”. Dogs can only connect their behavior to a consequence (positive or negative) for approximately three seconds. Anything longer will likely cause confusion and undue stress in the dog. This is fairly easy to accomplish for behaviors that you wish to reinforce with the use of an event marker. As long as you mark the behavior within three seconds, you can take a bit longer to actually deliver the food reward. Without the use of an event marker, the reinforcement must take place within three seconds of the behavior. The 3 Second Rule becomes even more important when it comes to undesirable behaviors. In order to be effective, a correction must be administered within three seconds of the unwanted behavior, and the shorter that time frame is, the more effective it will be. Learning to recognize unwanted behaviors as soon as they occur is the first step toward managing them effectively and consistently.

Leash and Harness Corrections - The most common way that you will communicate to your dog that they have made a mistake or that their current behavior is unacceptable is through the use of leash corrections. A well-timed correction using good technique can effectively curb unwanted behaviors. A good leash correction has several essential characteristics. It must be given with some slack in the leash initially, so you are able to snap and release. The snap is what makes up a correction; pulling on the leash will accomplish nothing except to make the dog pull harder against you and build stress and frustration. A correction given properly does not harm the dog in any way, nor does it cause pain to the dog. The intensity of the correction should match the intensity of your dog's misbehavior. This will vary dependent on your dog's temperament, and from one situation to another. A good rule of thumb is that the correction should be strong enough to create the desired effect the first time it is given, but not so strong that the dog becomes reactive or intimidated. These parameters can also be applied to the use of a harness check as a correction while working. Though it falls under the quadrant of “positive punishment”, correction should be considered simply a consequential action to turn an incorrect response into a correct one. Correction should always be followed up with redirection and a quick shift back to positive reinforcement.

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