

Editor's Note: Irith Bloom's essay was a great contribution to the Dogwise John Fisher Essay Scholarship, so we wanted to showcase it here. Many of us have come to dog training as a second, third, or tenth career, and this piece got us thinking about all the ways in which our earlier careers, whether animal-related or not, have influenced us. Maybe your work selling cell phones made you great at marketing. Or perhaps your time as a kindergarten teacher conferred boundless patience. If you would like to share how your earlier career has made you a better trainer, please let us know. We will share your stories in a series of upcoming articles.

Before I became a full-time pet trainer, I was a professional translator. In September 2002, I was hired to do interpreting at a cocktail party related to the imminent release of "Road to Perdition" in Japan. My assignment was to help three executives from a Japanese film distribution company make conversation with other attendees at the party, including Tom Hanks. When my charges met Mr. Hanks, I was aware that the Japanese executives' first instinct would probably be to bow, while Mr. Hanks's first instinct would likely be to extend his hand. I was prepared to leap in and smooth things over if any awkwardness ensued. Fortunately, everyone had been coached in advance. Both parties bowed and also extended their hands, and I translated the pleasant small talk that followed.

My skills as a translator continue to serve me well in my role as a pet trainer. Just like people who speak different languages and were raised in different cultures, dogs and humans often need help understanding each other. Some days my job involves translating intricate human speech and movements into deliberate, consistent cues that are easier for a dog to learn and understand. Other days it involves explaining the cultural differences between a human's view of the world and that of a dog. No matter what the specific situation, though, translating between different species is at the core of everything I do.

Educated positive reinforcement dog trainers understand both human and canine language and culture. This makes us uniquely equipped to bridge the communication gap between dogs and humans. Unlike the average person, we know that behaviors that seem rude to humans can be completely appropriate among dogs. Our understanding of operant conditioning and how to use positive reinforcement also allows us to convey information more clearly.

Thanks to these skills and knowledge, we are able to function as translators between humans and dogs. One way we do this is by explaining to our clients how dogs experience the world. For example, dogs are not born understanding English (or whatever languages are spoken by the people in their households)—though they often do a good imitation of understanding since they are such fine readers of body language. Unfortunately, as humans busily chatter and wave their arms, dogs are often unable to figure out what it all means, no matter how hard they try. They may pick out a familiar word here, or a recognizable gesture there, but in large part, to paraphrase Gary Larson, it's just "blah, blah, blah" to them.

Teaching clients how to communicate more effectively with their dogs is crucial. Due to a lack of body awareness and a tendency to babble, humans often send dogs complex,

conflicting signals. The resulting lack of clarity can cause anxiety, as dogs struggle to figure out what's important and what is not. Using our knowledge of the differences between human and canine language, we dog trainers can teach clients to be aware of the signals they send, and show them how to cue more clearly.

Even when cues are clean, humans often have conflicting responses to the same behavior, based on criteria that are completely outside the dog's understanding. It's not fair for a dog to be banned from the couch when guests are around if she's allowed on it when just the family is at home, for example. Unfortunately, humans don't always understand that what is a clear difference to us (the presence of guests) may be opaque to a dog. A major part of our job is guiding clients to define reasonable standards for their dog's behavior in light of how dogs perceive things.

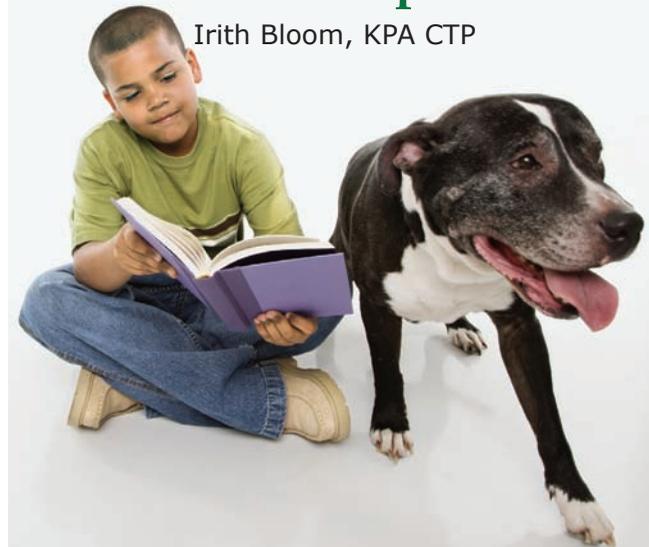
We must also show our clients how to reinforce desirable behaviors promptly, while ignoring undesirable behaviors lest they be accidentally reinforced. Once again, we are acting as translators. For example, a human usually views saying "Bad dog!" when a puppy steals a shoe as punishment. It's our job to explain to them that, to the puppy, the words "Bad dog!" have no inherent meaning and may even function as reinforcement in the form of attention.

In addition to sending mixed signals, humans spend a great deal of time misinterpreting their dogs. When a dog yawns, most people assume that indicates boredom. If they come home to find their dog has eaten a shoe and the dog slinks away after they walk in, they interpret that behavior as a sign of guilt. When a dog growls, they think the dog is showing dominance. Misinformation about dog language abounds, both in popular culture and in published literature.

Learning how to interpret dog language correctly is crucial to a successful human-dog relationship, and we can help with that as well. >

Translating Between Different Species

Irith Bloom, KPA CTP



Another misapprehension many of our clients have is that dogs do things “to spite them.” This is a case of cultural differences interfering with communication in the worst possible way. Since we humans can think, plan, and decide to do things that might create trouble for others, dogs must be doing the same thing, right? Just as I would explain to a Japanese client that a business letter to a U.S. trading partner does not need to start with a five-line salutation discussing the weather (and that pushing back his eyeglasses with his middle finger might create conflict in the United States), trainers must explain to clients that dogs live mostly in the moment, and that they weigh “safe vs. dangerous” (as Jean Donaldson so aptly puts it) against a background of reinforcement and punishment histories, rather than passing moral judgments that an action is good or bad.

One classic example of how canine instincts and poor communication can have devastating results is the all too common story of the rescue dog who has been placed in a new home and has a touch of separation anxiety due to several recent transitions. When the dog finds himself left alone in the house, he panics, urinates, and scratches at the door. While it’s dangerous to anthropomorphize, it’s reasonable to assume the dog is stressed at being isolated from his new-found family, and he may even “think”—in some canine way—that the family will never return now that they have left.

The family comes back at the end of the day to find their home a mess. They yell at the dog, who throws all his best calming signals at the family in an effort to placate them, and becomes even more anxious about the situation in his new home. At some point, the family leaves again, and the anxious dog engages in more destructive behavior. Day after day, this pattern continues. The family is sure that the dog knows he’s being bad while they are out, since he “acts so guilty” when they come home. This makes them yell at him even more.

Unfortunately, they don’t understand that the dog does not associate the family’s current anger with actions he took hours earlier, and that his behavior has nothing to do with guilt. The dog has learned that when the family comes home, scolding ensues, so he throws calming signals at the family in an effort to avert it. He doesn’t understand why his calming signals aren’t working, or what exactly is causing his family to be so angry. This makes him more and more anxious, so he becomes increasingly destructive. In the end, the dog’s fear of permanent separation from his family is realized, when the family, at their wits’ end, drops the dog off at the local shelter.

This entire scenario could have been prevented if proper communication between the family and the dog had been established in the first place. The family likely had the best of intentions, but they didn’t understand the dog’s point of view, and they never learned to communicate with their dog in a way that he could understand. Had they grasped that their dog was merely expressing his anxiety at being left alone, rather than “rebellious,” they might have put an end to this vicious cycle with the help of a good trainer. Unfortunately, not everyone has the knowledge and

experience to read situations like this correctly. It’s up to us to translate and spread the word.

When I meet a client whose dog barks and lunges at people or other dogs (or anything else that triggers a fearful or aggressive response), my first task is to bridge the cultural gap for the client. I begin by explaining that the dog is most likely feeling fearful or anxious in the presence of the trigger. I then discuss common fear triggers in humans, asking the client if he or she happens to be afraid of snakes, spiders, etc.

Once I have a “good” phobia to work with, I ask the client how he or she feels in the presence of their trigger, and if he or she would want to be flooded with that trigger. I’m phobic about cockroaches myself, and I find that even people who claim to have no phobias shudder when I talk about locking them in a room with hundreds of loose cockroaches. If the client hasn’t already made the connection, I spell out that their dog feels equally uncomfortable in the presence of an abhorrent trigger. I then describe humane methods for treating anxiety in the presence of a trigger, using either my or their phobia as an example.

I also explain that while I would love to be able to tell the dog that lawnmowers are not going to attack them (to pick a random example), even if I and the dog had the necessary linguistic abilities, it might not help, any more than it helps me to know that cockroaches are harmless. Once a client understands that the dog is acting out of anxiety or fear, rather than being deliberately “disobedient,” we’re halfway to solving the problem.

Clients who have gotten into their dog’s head (so to speak) through this kind of analogy tend to be much more sympathetic to the dog’s plight. They understand the purpose of training at a safe distance or intensity, and that it’s important to proceed slowly. By translating the dog’s behavior into terms the client can relate to, I have given the client a window into the dog’s world and have engaged the person’s natural sympathy, which encourages better training.

As dog trainers, we are translators. It is our job to facilitate better communication between people and their dogs. Sometimes our job is relatively straightforward, as when we point out behavior that indicates a dog is uncomfortable, or help a person figure out which part of a sloppy cue is really the signal to which the dog is responding. Other times, we must bridge more profound gaps, helping humans understand the world as dogs see it and helping dogs navigate our puzzling human world. The better we understand our role as translators, and the better our translation skills, the better the outcomes for our clients, both human and canine.

Irith Bloom, KPACTP, is the Director of Training at The Sophisticated Dog (www.thesophisticateddog.com), serving the West Side of Los Angeles, including Bel Air, Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, and Westwood. She has been training animals since the 1980s. Although her focus is on training dogs, Irith also has experience training other animals, such as cats and rabbits. She is fluent in English, Hebrew, and Japanese. She can be reached at musicitb@gmail.com.