

'Whisper Schwisper' - taking the mystery out of 'dog whispering'

Karin Larsen Bridge

Get S.M.A.R.T dogs
Delta Behavioral Trainer

Animal 'whispering' has been around for some time now. First there was the Horse Whisperer – books, seminars and movies then came the 'dog whisperers'. In recent years at least three books have been written by different trainers with 'Dog Whisperer' in the title, yet the methods used by each are markedly different. So what is meant by 'dog whispering' is it a mystical talent you are born with or a skill you can acquire?

Though there is no one definition for animal 'whispering' a common thread is the idea that there is a better way of communicating with animals than shouting commands at them. This is because non-human animals are not verbal communicators. So using words as your main communication tool with your dog is very human but not very effective. 'Dog Whisperers' and smart trainers by any name, take the time to observe and learn how dog's perceive and interact with their natural world and incorporate the information into their training methods. Dogs are social creatures who communicate chiefly through smell and through body postures. While we will probably never be able to utilize the first, the second can be learned by anyone with good observation skills and a desire to learn.

Silence is Golden

You could train a dog to be perfectly behaved with only one spoken command or cue (*you'll have to wait to the end to find out which word that is!*). Like Eliza Doolittle in the musical 'My Fair Lady' who sings "Words Words Words I'm so sick of Words!" – our dogs must wonder about all the spoken 'commands' we direct there way. As we are suppose to be the smarter of the two species it makes sense for us to compromise and learn a little more about how dog's communicate with one another and the types of signals and cues they find easier to perceive rather than merely continue to talk 'at' them all the time. In reality most of what we say in the course of a day is not directed at our dogs at all and when we do direct a few words their way we expect this non-lingual animal to immediately decipher the information and respond. So let's consider what clues our dogs *are* using to understand what we want and whether we could train them better with a little less conversation and a little more action.

What clues does your dog use to guess what you want?

1. Consequences

If a behaviour leads to 'good things for dogs' your dog is more likely to do it again. For example if you put your dog's dinner bowl down only when he is sitting, dinner becomes a consequence of 'sit'. If the dog gets up prematurely the food bowl rises back to the kitchen bench. Through your actions (not words) the dog soon learns that the consequence of getting up is the withdrawal of dinner while the consequence of sitting is a short wait and a full tummy. In this sense 'consequences drive behaviour'. You can control consequences by your actions and your actions train the dog.

2. Context

Dogs are very good at context learning or from their perspective: 'in this situation, if I do this, I get that.' In the above example the dog learned that in the kitchen, at dinnertime if he sits his dinner is delivered. The context becomes the cue for the dog to sit and wait rather than a verbal command. This type of training is ideal for general manners training in any routine situation such as before attaching a lead for a walk or waiting at the door.

Even if you were to add the words 'sit stay' to the kitchen scenario, it is unlikely that your dog would easily generalize the words 'sit stay' to other areas such as the park. It is not because your dog is stupid or stubborn it's just that he finds it difficult to transfer the meaning of words from one context to another. This is because the command words are only one of the clues your dog has used to understand what you want back in the kitchen.



Other contextual clues were:

- the time of day,
- hunger in his stomach
- the right room,
- the sound of the can opener
- the smell of his dinner

All these clues are easier for him to recognize and associate with 'sit stay' than your words 'sit stay'.

3. Body Movement and Posture

In 'The Other End of the Leash'*, by animal behaviorist Dr. Patricia McConnell, the natural body language of canines and primates are compared. It appears that dogs may be man's best friend *despite* of the fact that we use body language in vastly different and often conflicting ways. Dr McConnell provides many examples of how our respective body 'talk' provides miscommunication rather than communication. In one example she looks at calling your dog to 'come'.

"We primates want to stand facing our dog.... To your dog you can look just like a traffic cop stopping traffic. So if you're calling "Come" and walking forward your voice says "Come over here" while your body says "Stay there."

The best way to call a dog is to bend down as if in a doggie play bow, turn and run away from your dog. Standing and facing looks more like a 'stay' signal. Dog's notice and are attracted to things that move – an obvious advantage to an animal that once depended on hunting skills to survive. You can use movement to get your dog's attention to move in your direction or to play. If you want your dog to sit quietly however, you'll have a lot more success if you stand tall and still and just wait than if you bend up and down, trying to push your dog's bottom to the ground while waving your arms and chanting 'sit'. As a general rule, activity begets activity and stillness begets stillness'.

Visual Cues

By now it should be clear that dogs read body language far more easily than they are able to decipher words. This is obvious to agility competitors who use their feet, face and shoulders to indicate the obstacle the dog is required to take next. Many agility handlers find their dogs run a course more accurately when they stay silent rather than distract the dog with words. In any case, calling out the name of an obstacle will rarely override a visual body cue. If you say tunnel while pointing at a jump the dog will take the jump. It makes sense therefore to teach visual cues – most commonly hand signals - for many basic behaviours such as heel, sit, stand, down, come and fetch. There is no one hand signal that is 'correct' as long as there is a clear distinction between signals and each is used consistently to mean the same thing.

Verbal Cues

Because humans are language orientated, most people like to teach words or 'verbal cues' to their dog as well. The best time to do this is after your dog understands the visual cue such as a hand signal. To teach 'sit' in this way you would say the word 'sit' followed by the hand signal for 'sit' followed by a reward. Because you know 'sit' will happen (in response to the hand signal) the dog soon learns the association between the word 'sit' and the behaviour. This avoids taking the risk of having to repeat 'sit' over and over again while the dog is still learning (and perhaps sniffing or ignoring you) resulting in a weaker association between the word and behaviour. Ideally most dogs are taught both a visual and verbal cue for common behaviours.

But my dog knows lots of words

Most pet dogs appear to know quite a few words of 'human' and there is no doubt some dogs are much better at discerning words than others. However there are usually several cues the dog is picking up on which all contribute to word recognition:



1. Intonation.
Dogs are much more in tune to intonation than pronunciation. In other words your dog is far more likely to think 'bit' or 'hit' is the same as 'sit' if said in the same tone of voice than if you said 'sit' with an unusual squeaky voice. Consistently using the same tones for words and phrases is even more important than using the same words.
2. Your relative position to the dog.
Many dog's have learned that if you stare at them face on, they should sit. However if you asked for a 'sit' while you were lying down, had your back to your dog or were in another room the result might be different. Give it a try and see!
3. The context.
For example if you said 'din-dins'? as you stand in the kitchen it is more likely to be understood that if you said it in the park.
4. Any accompanying movement or gesture.
For example 'Walkies?' as you walk toward where you keep your dog's lead or when you are wearing the right shoes!
5. Any accompanying sound.
For example, 'come for a drive?' as you pick up your keys.

All of the above examples are easy for a dog to learn because the same phrase, said in the same way, in the same situation predicts a highly desired consequence.

One Essential Word?

Your dog's name! Your dog should respond to his name by looking at you immediately. Your dog's name means, attention please, what follows is of value to you. Once your dog has given you his attention a visual cue is probably just, if not more effective than a word cue. This is why the greatest difficulty in training deaf dogs is simply getting their attention. Once you have attention, they are as easily trained as any other dog.

Praise

The point of this article isn't that you must not talk to your dog but rather that it is more difficult than people realize for a dog to understand and be obedient to a word cue alone. Praise should always be provided in ample supply as information to your dog that he's on the right track. Praise is not a command but rather positive feedback. Praise is also good for building relationship - people enjoy talking to dogs and I'm sure most dogs enjoy being spoken too.

A world of whispers?

To me, whispering is all about making the effort to see the world from our dog's point of view and learning just a little of their language instead of always expecting the dog to learn ours. When we close our mouths we begin to open our eyes and may well discover so much more about the animals we love.

*The Other End of the Leash by Patricia B. McConnell Ph.D. Published by Bantam books 2002

