

The Empathic Dog Trainer: Considering the Dog's Point of View

Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC

Dog trainers and behavior consultants love to discuss training methods, and rightly so. The more we share and compare our ideas and applications of learning theory, the better we can use those skills and ideas to transform the lives of our clients and their dogs. There is another aspect to dog training, however, that I think merits considerably more attention than it gets — the concept of empathy in training and living with dogs. In my book, *The Human Half of Dog Training*, I define empathy simply as “one’s ability to see things from another’s point of view” (VanFleet, 2013, p. 61). Webster’s Online Dictionary defines it as “the capacity to recognize or understand *another’s* state of mind or emotion. It is often characterized as the ability to ‘put oneself into another’s shoes,’ or to in some way experience the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself. It may be described metaphorically as an emotional kind of resonance or mirroring” (www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/Empathy). Indeed, neuroscientists have been studying “mirror neurons,” discovered by a research group at the University of Parma in Italy in the early 1990s. Mirror neurons refer to special brain cells that respond in the same way whether we are performing an action or we are watching another perform that action. It is believed that mirror neurons are at the root of our capacity for empathy, but much remains to be learned about them.

So what does empathy have to do with dog training? It is likely that most of us use empathy to some extent in our work with dogs already. Essentially, when we make an effort to see the world from our dogs’ points of view, we are more likely to understand their motivations, feelings, reactions, and behaviors, and in so doing, we are in a better position to intervene effectively when needed. Empathy not only helps us apply dog training methods better, it also helps ensure that we are interacting with dogs in a manner that is humane and in their best interests.

Perhaps one of the most important skills a canine professional can develop is the ability to recognize and understand a dog’s body language. This involves watching the many individual parts of the dog’s body — eyes, ears, tail, stance, mouth, eyebrows, breathing — as well as making astute, in-the-moment observations of the *whole dog* — all of the individual features in combination with each other (see, for example, Carol Byrnes’s wonderfully informative CD, *What Is My Dog Saying?*). It is also important to put all this *in context*, i.e., to consider the environment surrounding the dog and how that

might inform our understanding of the dog’s reactions in that particular place and time.

Although one never perfects the skill, I was reasonably comfortable reading dog body language at the time we adopted our fifth current dog, Katie. Katie had escaped her origins in a puppy mill and had lived alone in the woods as a puppy. She was deathly afraid of people, other dogs, and the tiniest changes in the environment. Because she refused to eat and seemed motivated only by the chance to run away, I had to come up with a different way of working with her. There were numerous aspects to my work with her (see the March/April 2010 issue of *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog*), but for this article, I will focus on the use of empathy.

Katie was too traumatized and avoidant to use any type of operant conditioning with her. A variety of counter-conditioning methods were useful, as was the use of dog-dog play, but I needed to try to see the world through her eyes in order to avoid mistakes that would send her crashing through gates and doors in a frantic attempt to escape. It was through this process that Katie reminded me of the importance of empathy when working with any other sentient being, fearful or not.

The process was very simple. I watched her reactions very carefully, and then figured out what had happened just ahead of those reactions — the *context* of her behavior, the *antecedent conditions*. I could then either avoid those conditions in the future if they had elicited bad reactions, or I could recreate those conditions when she had a positive reaction. (In the early stages of Katie’s rehabilitation, I defined any neutral reaction as “positive,” as she did not show what most of us would consider positive reactions at all.) Using this approach as my guide, I learned what Katie considered okay and not-okay, and I made relatively few mistakes. Progress was slow but steady, with a few setbacks here and there.

The Treat-Taking Mystery

One observation that illustrates this use of empathy in dog training occurred after Katie began to be more comfortable with our family. She found her “spot” from which to take treats when we came indoors. It was on a couch to the side of the other dogs who were seated on the floor. Sometimes she took the treat eagerly and ate it; sometimes she took it but spit it out where it was promptly scarfed down by one of the other dogs; and other times she turned her head away from it entirely. I couldn’t figure out why her behavior was so different from one time to the next when the situation seemed the same to

me each time. It took me several days to figure it out. Since I couldn't see any changes in the external environment myself, I tried to think through the scenario from Katie's point of view. Once I did that, a possible solution to the mystery occurred to me — was it possibly the size of the treat? My hypothesis was that she was perhaps taking the smaller treats, but spitting out the larger treats. The larger treats required chewing into smaller pieces that fell from her mouth, and the sudden movements of the other dogs to eat them off the floor where they had fallen might have been too much action for her at that stage. I tested the hypothesis, and sure enough, she took the small, bite-sized treats every time, and she either spit out or turned her head with the larger treats. From that point forward, I gave her only smaller treats until she became more comfortable with the situation.

A Present-Day Mystery

In the four years that she has lived with us, Katie has come a long, long way. In many ways, she is a pretty normal dog. She seeks out our touch; she plays with the other dogs and with us; and she has found her voice, letting us know clearly and loudly when she wants something. She is shy of strangers, but she warms up much more quickly than before. We still see signs of progress in her social behaviors and her ability to handle new situations.

There are still setbacks occasionally, and when they occur, it takes me back to the old tried-and-true empathic method of trying to figure out what is triggering the fear reaction. Usually it's pretty simple to determine the antecedents of the behavior and to make adjustments or to help Katie cope better, so the skittish periods don't last long at all.

Katie still reacts a bit to thunderstorms or sharp noises, but now she runs to my feet and stays there, accepting some relaxing touch. In the past, she ran behind my desk, often bumping the surge protector and turning off all the electricity to my computer. Recently, though, we had a setback, and I couldn't figure it out. For apparently no reason (i.e., no reason I could determine — there's ALWAYS a reason!), she began running behind my desk again and hiding for longer periods of time. I kept looking around and listening, but could determine no trigger that could be causing this behavior. This happened four days in a row, and I knew something was triggering it but hadn't hit on the answer yet. Because she had not behaved like this since our earliest months together, I began to pay more attention, engaged more of my empathy, and that's when I figured it out.

I moved some of my desk drawers aside (they are on wheels) so I could observe Katie in her hiding place without disturbing her. What I saw involved her eyes, not her ears. She was staring with that wild-eyed look at my oldest dog, a nearly 16-year-old Beagle who is deaf, rather feeble, and who doesn't see very well. Jagen was

across the room settling down on a padded mat she likes to sleep on. I could see absolutely nothing that Jagen was doing that could cause a reaction as strong as Katie's. Jagen was oblivious to others around her, just settling in for a nap after tottering into the room from the kitchen.

By watching through Katie's eyes, however, the answer came to me. Several days earlier, Jagen had rolled a bit while sleeping on her mat, and she had accidentally popped open a door at the bottom of our television stand. It's the kind of door that you push on to open and then close. It makes a clicking sound, and I remembered how in the distant past Katie had avoided the television when she heard us clicking the door (which we rarely do, as we don't go into those doors much). I then remembered that Katie had scooted across the room when Jagen had caused the click. Seeing Katie staring worriedly at Jagen, I realized that Katie was reacting to Jagen moving onto her mat. Her fear had generalized from the door clicking to Jagen being in that particular position on her mat in front of the television stand doors!

To test my theory, I got Jagen to move to another location, and sure enough, Katie came out of her hiding place in a few moments. It had taken me several days, but when I could really see the world through Katie's eyes, it all fell into place. The solution then became a very easy one using management. I simply moved Jagen's mat over about a foot, to where it was no longer in front of the clicking door. While I might eventually do some counter-conditioning with Katie with the clicking door, my hands are full right now since three of our five dogs are dealing with fairly serious aging issues. Since clicking that door is a very low-frequency event, moving the mat was a simple way to ensure that Jagen doesn't accidentally click it open again. Katie's fear reactions to Jagen subsided after just a couple weeks, and she resumed sleeping on the floor quite close to Jagen on her mat. Once again, the method I used to understand her view of the world allowed me to help make that world a safer place.

And a Final Mystery in the Rain Solved Quickly

Just yesterday, I had an opportunity to employ my empathy with Katie again. Each spring, we put up a ten-foot tent covering in the area where she does her "elimination business," to provide some shade and shelter from the rain. She typically gets used to it within a few days. She and the other dogs were outside, and it began to rain. I noticed that Katie moved out from under the tent, where she was now getting wet. Since the other dogs were staying under the tent, her behavior caught my attention, as did her mildly wary body language. This time, my empathy was at the ready, and I stepped out from under the tent with her and saw her quickly glance at the top of the tent. I noticed the soft plopping of raindrops on the canvas and realized the source of her reaction. With that knowledge, I will be able to help her

Continued on next page

become more comfortable with the sounds of rain on the tent using some simple counter-conditioning.

Conclusion

The use of empathy during dog training is not limited to fearful dogs. It can be used when working on any problem behavior. It is simple and doesn't take much time, in most cases. It involves four steps:

1. Shifting one's focus to look at the situation from the dog's point of view, including very careful observations of dog body language.
2. Reviewing the immediately preceding situation and searching the environment, including one's own behaviors, for the antecedent conditions
3. Making adjustments in those antecedent conditions and observing the dog's reactions to determine what is influencing the dog's behavior patterns.
4. Either managing the situation to avoid those conditions in the future and/or applying all those other dog training skills to help the dog cope with the situation more effectively.

For most problem behaviors, the answers are there in what the dogs are communicating to us if we just listen well enough and make an effort to see the world through their eyes.

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*Pooch Program in Boiling Springs, PA. She is the author of dozens of books and articles in the play therapy field, and her book, **Play Therapy with Kids & Canines**, won the Planet Dog Foundation's Sit. Speak. Act. Award for best book on service and therapy dogs, as judged in the 2008 DWAA competition. She also received 2009 and 2011 DWAA Maxwell Awards for best magazine series related to dogs and best training article in any magazine, respectively, for articles that appeared in **The APDT Chronicle of the Dog**. Her latest book, **The Human Half of Dog Training: Collaborating with Clients to Get Results** was recently released. She conducts seminars on both animal assisted play therapy and the human half of dog training, trains play therapy dogs, and consults about canine behavior problems. The recipient of several national awards for her seminars, she was just honored by the Pennsylvania Psychological Association for Distinguished Contributions to the Science and Profession of Psychology. She can be reached through www.playfulpooch.org or at rise@risevanfleet.com.*



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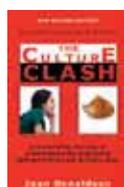
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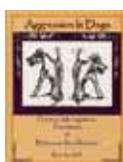


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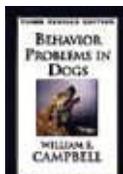


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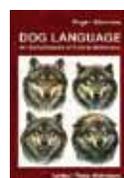
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