

Do You Hear What I Hear?

2007 Dogwise John Fisher Essay Award Winner

by Dorothy Turley, CPDT

The bumper sticker read, “I know I have the right to remain silent. I just don’t have the ability.” I laughed so hard I almost had to pull my car over as it so aptly described me for most of my life. Expressing myself has never been a problem and I am not known as a reserved or quiet person. It has taken me a long time to learn how to remain silent and to listen but it has begun to serve me well, especially as a dog trainer. This may seem like an elementary skill for many trainers but for some of us, it is something we have to develop.

Listening To Clients

Listening can be especially difficult when we are new to the field of dog training and people counseling. I remember being very nervous for my early private lessons that dealt with any type of behavior issue. I went to every appointment prepared to not charge the client and refer them onto someone more experienced. As they talked my mind was racing, trying to analyze and solve their problems. I quickly discovered that it was best to just be quiet and let the entire history come out uncensored. Sometimes there were also questions for me to ask, but very often letting the client just talk answered most of them. Even the time spent wandering to the topic of the “good” dog they lived with for years and was now gone gave me insight into their relationship with and expectations for their current dog.

When working with a client in a private lesson, listening is often the most difficult part. It is sometimes very obvious to the trainer what is going on from the first few minutes we begin. I have learned that often the best option is to wait until they can trust me enough to reveal the entire story. I did not learn this lesson as a dog trainer but as a retail store manager. Janet was the manager of the customer service department for a retail chain that once employed me. She was a very patient and wise woman. It can be frustrating to deal with an angry customer. It is easy to become skeptical and cynical about people when you spend most of your day dealing with mostly dissatisfied customers. She taught me to really listen to what the customer was saying and give them time to vent their problem. As long as they remained civil, I continued to listen. I offered solutions when they asked for them.

This could be frustrating as very often, I knew the customer was not giving me the entire story. At times, I was sure they were at least exaggerating and possibly lying. Janet’s most sage words would ring in my ears, “The truth is somewhere in the customer but we don’t get to hear it.” This simple phrase was life changing for me. Most of the time, customers were not deliberately trying to deceive me but were presenting what they believed to be important and true. They knew all the facts but were unlikely to share them with me because they either thought they

were irrelevant or genuinely could not pull them to the front of their memory.

My clients begin in many ways as dissatisfied customers. Things are not going the way they think they should with their dog and they want someone to make it right. It is important that I take plenty of time to listen to what they have to say in order to gather as many details as possible. I cannot let them go on forever as the clock is ticking, but I can guide the conversation with questions that will lead to more pertinent information. I am still amazed at how many clients answer a simple question such as, “Has the dog ever bitten a human?” with a negative only to reveal later that indeed there have been bites. “Oh, just a nip” or, “Well, once during a dog fight” or even, “Once when my nephew tried to take his rawhide.” It seems like such a simple yes or no question to me but obviously it is not so black or white for my clients. It is not that the client is trying to hide the truth. They truly have changed the incident in their memory so that it no longer qualifies as a bite. The truth is in the client and it is my job to listen so that I know what it is.

Listening To Dogs

I don’t talk or whisper or even yell much to get dogs to work with me. Well, actually, that is not entirely true. I confess, I do all of those things at various times, especially with my own dogs, but

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