



My Philosophy on Dog Training

I remember back when I was teaching karate, people would always ask, “What style of karate do you teach?” It didn’t matter what my answer was since most people had no clue. It was just the right thing to ask. Not much has changed, now I hear people asking the question, “What method do you use for training dogs?”

It seems everything in life has to fit into a neat little box for it to be accepted. If people can’t identify with it, it must be wrong. I’ve found that anything that’s worthwhile usually can’t be fit into a box or put under one “style.” People who are looking for a one word or one sentence answer are oftentimes misguided. Dog training is complex in its essence, yet simple in its execution. Anyone who labels his or her “style” of dog training with a simple label is probably just trying to use the latest catch phrase in order to fit in.

For the hundreds of dogs that I’ve worked with, whether with private clients, rescue organizations or those doomed at the shelter, the style of training I use was never an issue, the results proved themselves. My style of dog training varies depending on the dog I am working with. What are his issues, his fears, and his problems? How can I best help him in a way that he understands and in a way that is *fair to him*?

So I am writing this article to give you a little insight on my philosophy on dog training.

Dog training must be open and encompassing. It must take into consideration that each dog is a unique being and must be approached as such. Some dogs take well to treat based training, others don’t respond. Some dogs are aggressive because of major fear issues; others are dominant and must be approached as such. Some dogs understand a correction in the form of withholding rewards; others need a physical correction to move them into the place where we need them. Dogs, like all animals, have a unique personality that must be addressed instead of trying to fit them into our neat little box.

Whenever I approach a new dog, I start with a blank slate. The dog starts at 0 and works his way up from there. I give every dog a fair chance to show me who he is. I don’t expect scared dogs to be fearful or dominant dogs to be aggressive, I observe them and give them a chance. I can gather more information from watching a dog for 3 minutes than from a report from the owners.

When I train a dog, everything starts with positive reinforcement, motivation and games. I believe that properly approached 90% of dogs can learn and benefit from this method of training. Dogs require patience and neutrality. Most people make a huge mistake in approaching a new or strange dog in a playful way. There are dogs that are not playful (albeit a few) and there are dogs that interpret playfulness in a way we don't want them to. If you approach a dog in a fair and neutral way, you will see the true personality of the dog. Allowing a dog to see us in a way that neither threatens nor initiates him, allows his personality to come out, and not ours, or a reflection of ours.

As humans we are primarily ego driven. One way we can see that is the way people approach strange dogs; they start petting them and playing with them. Its as if to say, "See all dogs like me and I like dogs." We strive to be liked and we will make sure other people see that. Dog training and behaviorism is not about being liked by a dog, but instead about helping him and addressing his issues.

Many of the dogs that I work with live in a tiny cell at a shelter waiting to be killed. Some are completely in shock and have broken down, while others are in a state of rage. I can promise you that most trainers, let alone lay people wouldn't approach these dogs. It would be a bad idea to approach these dogs in a playful way, because, even if they were going to play with you, you'd probably get bit the way these guys play. There have been plenty of dogs that I've worked with that have turned completely around and have gotten adopted because of the work I did; these successes keep me going.

The number one rule I always ask is, "Is this fair to the dog?" This holds true in every aspect of training. If I tell a dog something, I cannot expect the dog to do what I am asking unless I am 100% clear he knows what I am asking for. In this case, a correction whether its physical or withholding of the reward is unfair if I'm not sure that he is 100% clear on what I'm asking. If a dog is not food motivated, is it fair to starve a him before training in order to get him to comply? I don't think so. A physical correction on a full stomach is much more fair to some dogs than a morsel of food in order to gain compliance. Yes, treat and toy rewards are the best method for training most dogs, but there are those that will not comply unless they are starved. In order to be fair, we want the dog to know that we have his best interest at heart.

Strong dogs often require a stronger approach. This is not to say that we hit, strike or abuse dogs; even yelling at a dog can be abusive. Physical corrections are merely a method to physically move a dog into a position that we want him in. I equate physical corrections with guiding a dog into compliance. Moving a dog into position using a long line or leash is an example of a physical correction. Some dogs can be lured into position using a treat; others require the use of a collar and /or leash correction. As I said before, whatever is fair to the dog is the best method. When we take our ego out of the equation, we can better serve the dog.

I've seen people who insist on using a treat to lure a dog that is not at all interested in treats. They will nag a dog to death luring and baiting him, all of this when one physical adjustment would show the dog just what we are looking for.

Dogs look to us for guidance; they look to us for leadership. If you can't be a good leader to a dog, maybe you should consider a cat. Dogs play rough and don't take a physical adjustment with hurt feelings. I can assure you that most dogs would rather be shown what you are asking for rather than be nagged and confused.

One of the most important things that I believe is that NO training should begin without first building a proper relationship. Too many people are so anxious to get started on training that they put aside the most important part, and that is the relationship / bonding phase between you and your dog. The first thing I see people do is asking the new dog to sit, come and fetch, and the dog has no idea who you are or why he should do these things. The relationship, and how your dog sees you, will go a long way in how he relates to you in training. If you've built a solid relationship with your dog, he will want to please you, and no matter what training method you use, it will work.

As an animal rights activist and dog lover I've had many arguments over the right way to interact with dogs. For the most part, I don't believe in strong physical corrections; I feel they are a lazy mans tool to fixing a problem. A positive approach is always the #1 choice. And, as I said before, more than 90% of dogs will comply with this method. The key to getting any method of training to work is to cement a solid relationship with your dog long before you begin training. That being said, I've seen countless people give up on their dogs, and these dogs end up in shelters. If their way doesn't work, they move on to the next dog. They think it's unfair to be strong with a dog that requires a stronger approach, so instead they take their politically correct stand and don't bend. With a little work and dedication I've turned many of these dogs around in a very short period of time. And, so often, these dogs make the best pets.

I remember working with at-risk kids and the attitude they would give me in the beginning. I never gave up until I won them over. Eventually the kids that were the hardest convert where the most dedicated ones. I hope you'll understand that dogs are beings that deserve a chance. Dogs are not humans and should no be treated as such. We must be fair and understand that dogs are dogs and if we want to be fair to them, we must approach them as such. If you want to be fair to your dog, understand what he needs and give him that. Put your ego aside and approach your dog with a positive attitude and confidence. He will love you and respect you for it.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

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