



Why Commands Get in the Way of Training!

Many people are obsessed with teaching dogs to respond to various commands. While I wholeheartedly understand and support the pursuit of an obedient dog, in reality many 'command obsessed' people are merely teaching a dog to misbehave until he hears a command. While it's great to have a dog that responds to various verbal commands, I prefer my dog to know what's expected of him in any given situation and behave the way I'd like him to by default. I don't want him to act like an idiot until I issue a command of some sort.

Teaching your dog to respond to a command is great and necessary. Teaching your dog to behave in a manner you approve of in any given situation is an entirely different thing. For dogs to learn how to behave they must be taught to problem-solve. If you mindlessly instruct them constantly they never get to think for themselves and work out the consequences of their behaviour on their own. For example, if you constantly tell your dog to 'Sit' before allowing him out of the car, he learns that he can jump around like an idiot until you tell him to sit. However, if you consistently wait patiently for the dog to sit calmly without being prompted before opening the car door, the dog will learn that car doors do not open for him unless he's sitting calmly.



Think of it this way, when you're travelling in a car to a destination you've never been to before with someone who is giving you directions, you mindlessly follow the directions without really paying attention to where you are. If asked to complete the same journey the following day unaided, you will probably get hopelessly lost. If you had been forced to find your own way to the destination on Day One, you would have a better chance of reaching the destination successfully on your own on Day Two.

People often over-command (read nag incessantly) their dog to the point that they become something their dog wants to avoid. The dog then 'acts up' which is often avoidance behaviour in any case, e.g. rolling on the ground, mouthing, jumping up, tugging the lead etc. Believe me, if you become something your dog wants to avoid you have no hope of getting him responding to any command.

On the other hand, when issuing commands humans often believe the dog is learning. What the human thinks the dog is learning and what the dog is actually learning are often at odds with each other.

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Today I sat and watched in class as the owner of a young Golden Retriever repeatedly asked the dog to 'Sit' whenever the dog jumped up. The dog willingly complied each and sat as instructed every time.

So did the command help to decrease the jumping up behaviour? No, it actually INCREASED the behaviour, here's why:

Firstly, let's take a look at it from the human's point of view:

1. Dog jumps up
2. Tell dog to 'Sit'
3. Dog 'Sits' momentarily

Now, let's take a look at it from the dog's point of view:

1. Jump on human
2. Human issues 'Sit' command
3. Comply with 'Sit' command
4. Receive treats, praise and attention

The human hoped that by issuing the 'Sit' command that the dog 'understood' that he was not to jump up and should sit instead. What the dog actually learned was that if he jumped up he was given a command that, if complied with, would result in treats, praise and attention, i.e. if he jumped on a human he was given an opportunity to earn reinforcement.

In dog training lingo this is called a 'Behaviour Chain'. Put simply this means that the previous behaviour reinforces the next behaviour in the chain. The Retriever wasn't being devious; he simply learned that jumping up was part of the behaviour chain.

After I watched this for a while I interrupted. I explained to the client that the dog was jumping up in order to earn an opportunity for reinforcement. I asked him to wait the dog out when jumping without saying a word. Next I asked him to reinforce the dog for volunteering a 'Sit' without being prompted. Once the dog learned that sitting OF ITSELF would be reinforced we could barely get him up out of the sit to do the remaining class exercises!

People are often too impatient to wait for the appropriate behaviour and reinforce it thus teaching a dog how to behave. Many are often obsessed with verbally (or otherwise) commanding a dog. The dog in turn learns that he can basically do whatever he likes in the absence of a command.



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I often have clients proudly announce to me that, in preparation for receiving access to their dinner bowl that their dog will:

1. 'Sit',
2. 'Leave'
3. 'Stay'
4. Eat only upon hearing the command 'Ok'

Personally, I would find it undesirable (and so would my dog!) to have to issue my dog with four commands (I'm betting that they also get repeated several times!) before allowing him access to his food. Why not just teach him that his dinner bowl will not touch the ground unless he's sitting, and that he will not gain access to the food until you release him to eat - period. I can put my dog's food down and simply walk away, releasing when I feel like it, knowing that he will not touch his food until I've granted permission. Leaving his food until released is DEFAULT behaviour. The sight of the bowl is my dog's cue to sit quietly and patiently until he's granted access to the bowl. When using the four command method the dog gets to leap around like a lunatic until he's told to sit, it becomes part of the behaviour chain!

As I was writing this article my husband accidentally dropped a Chicken Twistie on the floor. Our dog, Stevie, was sitting patiently nearby, eagerly anticipating the possibility of Paul sharing Twisties with him. As the Twistie dropped to the floor Stevie did not move a muscle until Paul said 'Take It' and offered the wayward Twistie to him. We have taught Stevie that the default behaviour for dropped food is to leave it until it is offered to him.

In summary, I do some of my best training when I wait patiently for the dog to offer the right behaviour and make the rewards contingent upon this. Rewards can be anything you like, access to indoors/outdoors, opening a car door, attention, treats, a toss of a ball, greetings etc. If you continually command your dog then you will never build any default behaviours. It must be said at this point that I am one of the world's LEAST patient people; I do this because it works, not because I'm patient by nature.



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