Are You a Communicator or a Puppeteer? How your mannerisms effect your dog's knowledge and understanding. - by Kelli Bausch of Camo Cross Training

Click [http://www.camocrossdogtraining.com/1/post/2013/12/are-you-a-communicator-or-a-puppeteer-how-your-mannerisms-effect-your-dogs-knowledge-and-understanding.html](http://www.camocrossdogtraining.com/1/post/2013/12/are-you-a-communicator-or-a-puppeteer-how-your-mannerisms-effect-your-dogs-knowledge-and-understanding.html) to read original blog including VIDEO examples by Kelli Bausch’s Blog on Camo Cross Training’s web site

**ANGEL PAWS NOTE:** Although this article refers to the importance of being a communicator not a puppeteer having to do with transitioning to off leash work it is also essential for therapy teams even though they will work on leash. A loose leash not only makes the dog more comfortable and less stressed it also inspires confidence in those we visit who may be feeling quite fragile. A tight leash begs the question; “what if they let go?” It should be obvious to all that our animals are well mannered independent of our physical control. This is an essential element of our responsibility to inspire confidence at all times.

Anyone who has done any training at our facility knows, when it comes to equipment we like to keep it simple. Not just because of our owner's pocketbook, but because most "training equipment" does not train your dog to do anything, it just successfully avoids behaviors, as long as your dog is wearing said equipment. This develops a dependency on equipment to get behaviors. I HATE dependency. The real world is unpredictable and your dog needs to learn behaviors that will be consistent no matter the circumstances and no matter what equipment they are wearing or not wearing.

Most dogs HATE these around their muzzle...
(they may learn to tolerate them but the excitement you may see when it comes out is not because they like the halter it's simply because they get to go somewhere with you)

Now, enough of my soapbox on extra equipment. This week I want to focus on a piece of equipment that is necessary but should NOT be used to achieve behaviors: THE LEASH.
I tell owners the leash has 3 jobs:

1. It keeps you in compliance with leash laws
2. It is a safety net should your dog encounter an unexpected distraction you and he are not readily prepared for.
3. It gives you a boundary for leash walking (your dog is allowed the 6 feet your leash gives them).

The leash should NOT be used:

To control the dog.
To teach new behaviors.
To cue learned behaviors.

Why am I so picky about use of the leash, you ask? Well from the very beginning of training, I am concerned with two transitions in your dog's training: replacing treat rewards with other life rewards, and OFF LEASH WORK. If you spend the foundation of your training developing a dependency on the leash to get behaviors, you have created an uphill battle for yourself when it comes to off leash work. Many owners get very frustrated with their dogs when trying to transition behaviors to an off leash consistency. They think their dog instantly stops listening when they are off leash "because they know they can get away with it". While I am not going to pretend that there are not more distractions to off leash work. Many times the behavior goes away when the leash does because we have made the leash a fundamental part of our communication model.

It all starts when we have an unruly puppy in puppy class that has not learned very many good behaviors yet. We are convinced our puppy is the MOST unruly puppy in class (everyone else is thinking that about their own puppy, by the way!)
So, we tend to keep them on a tight leash regardless of their behavior in hopes of keeping them under wraps and our embarrassment at bay.

The dog goes toward the other puppies= tight leash, the dog sits politely by you=tight leash, the pup chews on your shoelaces=tight leash, the puppy lays down next to you= tight leash, puppy runs toward the trainer to jump on her=tight leash.

So, the first topic I want to address is this: constant tension on the leash– owner or dog?

I have had owners come into class telling me the dog pulls CONSTANTLY and will NOT stop pulling for ANYTHING! Then I proceed to observe a dog who does have an issue with pulling on the leash. But I also see an owner who is guilty of keeping tension on the leash even when the dog is not pulling. This teaches the dog that tension is the ONLY option, "when I am on a leash, it will be pulling on me, so why not pull on it?" Refer back to the examples above, only TWO of those instances was the DOG the likely culprit in pulling on the leash, the others were
A Short Leash vs. a Tight Leash

Now, the answer is NOT to simply let them run free (boy that would be an interesting, albeit unproductive, puppy class!). There is nothing wrong with keeping a little shorter leash to keep the puppy from jumping on the trainer or turning class into recess with the other puppies. There is a difference between short leash and a tight leash. A tight leash makes you a puppeteer and not a communicator, holding a dog so tightly that it's only option is to sit right next to you is not communicating with the dog and showing it how to make the right choices. Keeping a short but loose leash is communicating by limiting your puppy's choices so he is more likely to choose the right one on his own and learn how rewarding pleasing you can be!

The image on the left is of a SHORT leash but not held tight by the owner. This can keep your dog close to you without holding them there. The images on the left are of a handler holding the dog beside them with the leash. Notice the difference in body language from the dog?

Body Blocking

Another very effective way to communicate with your puppy what is expected of him is body language. Dogs communicate heavily through body language and respond to this type of communication from their owners quite naturally. For example: if you do not want your dog to go visit it's neighbor during class, as it takes a step in that direction, place your body between your dog and the others. As your dog focuses back on you praise and reward! You just communicated to your dog that his neighbor will not be reinforcing but you will! This is especially helpful for very strong or big dogs who get distracted (I know when we round up cattle, unless we have a horse to help us, it is MUCH more successful to stop a bull by getting out in front of it than to
rope it from behind and try to drag it back to you! Heck, even with the help of a horse, dragging a cow backwards is quite challenging!

In the top photo, the handler is holding the dog beside her with the leash. Even though the dog is staying with her, where is the dog’s focus? (on the other dog). The bottom photos show the handler getting in between her dog and the other dog. The leash is loose and where is the dog focused? (on the handler!)

The next area that the leash seems to creep in on us is to "assist" us in teaching new behaviors or cue already learned behaviors. I have to admit, every time I see someone get their dog to sit by jerking on the leash I cringe. Not just because it’s certainly not the nicest way to gain compliance but because the leash pop actually becomes a cue for the behavior.

Once they associate the leash cue with sit, you are either forced to give it anytime you want them to sit or you have to spend time transferring the behavior to a different cue (I’m not sure about you, but MOST of my clients are not looking for MORE work when it comes to training their dog!).

Furthermore, if you do not transfer it to a different cue (which happens more often), it should make sense that your dog does not have a reliable sit when off leash (sans leash cue).

Finally, why do all the work for them during THEIR training? Physical molding (pushing the dog into a sit or yanking up on the leash) may accomplish teaching a simple behavior like sit but does not challenge the dog to figure out how to offer you good behaviors, only how to be MADE to do good behaviors.

If you are constantly having to MAKE your dog do behaviors, who is really doing all the work?

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A Special Note for Reactive Rovers and Leash Tension:

We have some very popular classes called Reactive Rover for dogs who have certain emotional triggers like dogs or people that make their behavior go off the deep end. Whether it is because of fear, overstimulation, or anxiety, these dogs can be very hard to handle! Unfortunately, many owners develop the response of tensing up on the leash when they see something they think will set off their reactive rover. What they don't realize is their reflex is compounding their dog's issue!

Imagine I had a friend with some social anxiety so I convinced her to go to a party with me.

Knowing she would get uncomfortable when each guest arrived, I grabbed her arm and forcibly pulled her to me. Not only would said friend be aggravated with me, she certainly would not develop any warm and fuzzy feelings about the persons entering. She may even start to feel some anger toward them for MY behavior! While reactive dogs can be a very complicated subject (heck, we teach an entire class on it!), tensing up on the leash every time you see something they may not like is certainly NOT the best response. In fact, I encourage owners in my Reactive class to invest in a hands free leash system to help them break that habit!

Blame it on the fact that we are primates, or that we learn our entire lives to manipulate things with our hands. Hey, it serves us pretty well in most of our every day lives! But in dog training, manipulating our dogs into "doing" behaviors by using the leash as a tool is not a good idea. It almost guarantees issues when transitioning to off leash and many times fools you into thinking they know a behavior when in reality, you are just puppeteering them into obedience. Let's challenge our dogs to think harder than that and get THEM to figure out the right answer by setting them up to be successful instead of doing the work for them!