

Listen and Learn

Opening Hearts and Minds to a Deeper Understanding

By Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA



Humans are quite good at talking to dogs. Or it might be more accurate to say that we talk *at* dogs. It's my mission as a dog trainer to enlighten people about both sides of the conversation and to focus on how humans can listen more than talk. I'll point out that the words "listen" and "silent" are composed of the same letters. If we are silent, we're better able to listen.

You might wonder what's so important about communicating with dogs. Communication is the underpinning in any successful relationship because it helps us to understand each other. Understanding engenders connection through empathy and compassion.

The most open, compassionate, and effective communication with dogs happens at the juncture of the intellectual and the intuitive. To make heads or tails of canine communication we can combine the science of canine behavior with the spirit of the heart. We must appreciate both the academic and spiritual components of this two-way conversation.

While we can only have a human comprehension of the world, dogs can only have a canine comprehension of it. Learning to communicate with dogs forges a solid, reliable bond. It's not about simply training for improved obedience or molding our dog's behavior to conveniently fit our lifestyle. It's about building a trusting partnership and a healthy learning environment, which is empowering for both ends of the leash.

Effective communication happens through mindfulness (the state of being conscious or aware of something—of being present.) In training, we must be present to win. When I say *win* I'm not talking about competition or domination. Here, winning means a commitment to being in the moment, being nonjudgmental, and holding compassion in our hearts. A skillful communicator is a good listener and a perceptive observer. I have witnessed these qualities in top authorities on canine behavior. Many of these authorities are human, and many of them have four legs and fur.

To communicate open heartedly with dogs we must engage in active, respectful listening. Active listening is more than passive hearing and observing. It means making a conscious effort to understand the complete message being communicated without projecting our own emotions or premeditating a response. As such, we do not suppress the uncontrollable spirit of dogs, but join them. If we allow it, dogs can be guides who gently take the lead and show us the way to our own true spirits.

The deepest understanding occurs where hearts and minds converge. We need a full comprehension of how dogs think and learn plus an open, compassionate heart. In addition, we must know our own dogs and have realistic expectations. We have a duty to let go of our egos in order to understand and communicate with the dog we have, not the dog we might wish we had. In the space where science connects with spirit, we will hear more than we speak and learn more than we teach.

In training, I say that we must meet the dog where they are. After all, where else is there? We miss the meeting place when we let words, expectations, egos, and over inflated goals get in the way. Relationships can be challenging, but overall, the desire on both ends of the leash is for it to be fun and loving. Two-way communication opens the door to having that fulfilling relationship.

If we are attentive to the needs of the dog instead of our egos, we facilitate understanding and communication. These are the pillars of a real and satisfying relationship. If a dog is not giving us what we command, perhaps we should take a different approach. If she's not learning in the manner that we are teaching, then let's change our teaching style to accommodate her learning style.

We can be empathetic, effectual leaders if we pay attention. The greatest leader is the one who says the least and listens the most. This is true in both the canine and human world. The best leaders don't actually lead anyone; they guide them. Furthermore, followers of benevolent, compassionate leaders retain a sense of control in the situation. They feel valued because there is a sense of participation and cooperation as opposed to domination. Trust is engendered.

Too often we fail to listen to our dogs and to our own spirit. Everyone simply needs to be heard. If we tune in to dogs, they can show us their amazing ability to follow their spirit with honesty and spontaneity. Let them guide us to our own spirits by listening—really listening to them *and* hearing them.