

Honest. Straightforward. WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get). These features make dogs appealing companions. Dogs aren't deceitful. Once we learn to read their body language accurately and interpret it within context, we can believe what they are telling us. We can take their communications at face value. Simple. Uncomplicated.

Their owners, on the other hand, are anything but uncomplicated. Although our human clients are the same species as we are, and probably speak the same language, it can be challenging to decode what they are telling us. With our well-developed capacity for self-awareness, we can adjust our words and expressions to give the impressions we want others to have of us. We can omit vital information or put the emphasis on what we want the listener to hear. Communication also becomes more complex when it is infused with emotion.

People often seem more concerned with saving face than with straightforward statements that can be understood directly as they are given — at face value. Recently a client

Face Value

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told me that her veterinarian had suggested that she euthanize her dog. Her dog had some medical problems that were fueling some snappish, aggressive behaviors. The client and I had been making progress by creating a more comfortable environment for the dog, putting less pressure on him to engage in potentially painful activities, and applying some simple counter-conditioning for the handling necessary for his care. The dog's condition was not yet life threatening, so it surprised me that the vet would recommend euthanizing him simply because the dog sometimes growled or snapped under stressful conditions. My knee-jerk internal reaction was anger, but I did not express this to my client. I knew the vet, and something didn't add up. I asked my client's permission and then spoke with the vet directly.

Interestingly, the veterinarian's story was rather different. She told me that my client had arrived in an agitated state, reporting that the dog had growled and snapped at her as she was putting him in the car. My client, still shaken by this episode, told the vet that there had been little progress with me and that she was feeling fearful that the dog would bite her. The vet had told her that *if* the medical condition was worsening and *if* our behavioral interventions couldn't reduce the aggression, then *eventually* a "decision" would need to be made. The vet had not recommended euthanasia at all, but had simply outlined some contingencies.

I was able to discuss this fully with my client and get our plans back on track. This situation is not unique, however, and its lessons can help us avoid unnecessary emotional reactions or friction with other canine professionals.

Should We Believe Our Clients?

Experiences such as this one can create a jaundiced view of our clients. How can we trust what they tell us when so often it is tainted by emotion, inexperience, or misunderstanding of canine behavior? Can we really take what they tell us at face value? Should we?

This question needs to be reframed. Most of the time, our clients are not trying to deceive us. More often, they do not share our frame of reference about dogs. Some don't read canine body language very well, if at all. Others think that dogs will train themselves. Many might secretly fear that their dog's behavior reflects their own inadequacies, and their defensiveness about this leads them to blame the dog. Similarly, some might omit vital information for fear it will reveal their ineptitude. Most of the time, clients are not deliberately misleading us, but their communication comes from a rather different perspective from ours. Perhaps the question needs to be, "How do we create the conditions in our interactions that will yield the most accurate information?"

There are a number of things we can do to enhance our ability to understand what our clients want us to know and to obtain the information we need to help them with their dogs. Approaching our clients with skepticism is

not useful. They will sense our disbelief and become more cautious with what they tell us. At the same time, if we believe every word they say, without considering the ways that emotions can alter their words and perceptions, we are likely to bump into disappointment. Instead, we need to create the right climate, listen carefully, ask for specifics, be straightforward and genuine with our own communications, and speak directly with other professionals involved.

Creating a Climate for Communication and Collaboration

It's safe to say that most of our clients want to be good caregivers for their dogs. They probably wouldn't engage our services if that were not the case. They can quickly become defensive if our comments suggest that they have been unkind or downright wrong. Defensiveness is deadly to communication. To prevent this, we need to provide a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which clients can tell us what is on their minds. The things they tell us might be full of assumptions and expectations and reports of bad interactions, but we need to hold back on our judgment in order to hear the information fully. Friendliness and a light-hearted tone can help establish the right climate for communication. Being more mindful of the things we say to our clients and how those comments are likely to be received can also help. Remember that if there's something you dislike about what the clients are doing, you will have time to work with it. You need not correct clients for that before you even have a relationship with them. Building a relationship in a collaborative way will make change much more possible before long.

Listening Carefully

In *The Human Half of Dog Training* (VanFleet, 2013), the chapter on empathic listening is the longest because it is one of the most useful skills we can learn and use with our clients. Learning to listen for the intended message and recognizing the emotions behind clients' statements can keep us on the track to accurate understanding. Simple restatements in our own words to ensure that we understand what our clients truly *mean* can make a huge difference in the entire training process. Not only does empathic listening convey our interest and nonjudgmental stance, it allows clients to clarify what they are thinking and conveying. There is no other skill that helps us understand our clients as well as this one. It is well worth the time to cultivate an ability to put our own thoughts and feelings on a back burner for a while, really try to grasp what the client is trying to tell us, verbally summarize the key information and emotions, and then permit the client to confirm, clarify, or add to it.

Ask for Specifics

The words and labels we use for dog behavior are often rather general. When clients tell us their dog is "reactive," we might *think* we know what they mean, but we really don't. It is easy to make assumptions that take our understanding far afield. Instead, it is better to ask clients what they mean specifically. Asking them to describe the behavior in detail can help us avoid the illusion of understanding and ensure that we are truly talking about the same thing. When in doubt, dig for the details.

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Be Straightforward and Genuine

When we educate our clients, or when we have concerns about their situation, it is best to be honest and straightforward about it. Sometimes we communicate in generalities that are too vague for clients to understand. Sometimes we “beat around the bush” with our observations. The net result of this is that our clients don’t really understand what we mean, but they might be too polite to tell us that. Being interpersonally skillful does not mean that we cannot say what we think. Once we have a relationship, we might have to break bad news, but when we do so, we need to be direct and specific ourselves. Instead of hinting with a question, for example, it is preferable to state what you are thinking: “Are you sure you want to use this dog as a therapy dog?” becomes “I’m worried that this dog is too fearful to be a therapy dog right now. I think the visits to the hospital are probably overwhelming her. I’d like you to seriously consider stopping that, at least for the time being, until we can see how our work on her fearful behaviors progresses.”

Speak Directly with Other Professionals Involved

Most clients are not trying deliberately to mislead us. Their frame of reference about their dogs is very different from ours. They see things differently, and their perceptions can be tinged with emotions of love, frustration, anger, or a host of other feelings that arise from their own life histories. All communications from us and other professionals involved go through the filter of our clients’ own world views, and emotional situations often result in somewhat skewed perceptions. When more than one professional is involved in a case, a reliance completely on client reporting can go astray. While we probably don’t need to talk with the other professional all the time, whenever we sense that we are

at cross-purposes with the other professional, it’s time for a direct conversation. It’s important to keep in mind that clients do not always convey things as we would, or as the other professional would. Touching base directly can keep things on track.

So, Can We Take Things at Face Value?

Probably not completely. Clients simply do not process or prioritize information in the same way that we do. Emotions, perceptions, and the use of general labels for behavior can mean very different things to our clients and to us. Do clients deliberately try to mislead us? In most cases, no. Usually it is the complexity of human processing and communication that leads to those moments when we shake our heads and say, “What were they thinking!?!?!?” Should we doubt what our clients tell us? Not exactly. They are likely telling us what they think is important.

Knowing that many things can go wrong with human communication means that we can take steps to improve it. Using the ideas listed here allows us to take our clients’ communications *nearly* at face value, but with empathy and clarification that ensure that we are talking about the same things.

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