

Key points of keeping the relationship central to all you do with your dog.

By Suzanne Clothier

When your approach to training is "relationship based" this means the relationship is always the central & key point of all you do. At every step, you ask yourself how your goals & actions fit into a healthy, loving relationship, and how any of your choices & actions may affect the relationship between you and your dog. Offered here are key points that I teach in my seminars, many of which are described in much greater detail in my book, "Bones Would Rain from the Sky: Deepening Our Relationships With Dogs" (Warner, 2002).

Key Points

Connection How much connection do you want? or need? can offer the dog? You can't give scattered attention, or accept disconnection, and then complain because your dog isn't deeply connected! Connection must be practiced continually. Easiest way is to have a 'crush' on your dog - maintain a heightened awareness of where he is and what he's doing when he's with you, and be super sensitive to any shifts in his mood or posture. Make connecting with you worthwhile. Be available to the dog with your energy, your smile, your touch, interactions and rewards.

Commitment Want 100%? Give 100%! If problems are due to your limits, skill level, or challenges as a handler, don't expect your dog to compensate for you. Work on yourself outside of dog training time to become a worthy partner who gives 100%, even under stress.

Empathy Step into their umwelt. Use the 'magic microphone' to interview the dog and get his perspective on the situation. It may be helpful to have a friend play your role while you play your dog's role. Think like a dog, meaning draw straight lines from one thing to another; no rationalizations permitted! Try to be the dog in any given situation & guess at how it may be affecting him. He'll tell you if you've gotten it right, then adjust your behavior accordingly - the 'right' interpretation & solution will result in an improvement in the dog's response.

Understand That Dog's Behavior = Dog's Best Guess Know that in any given situation, the dog's behavior tells you what his best guess is as to how to handle the situation. If you don't like his best guess, it's up to you to find a way to help him find another response. If you hear yourself saying 'he knows better,' then consider that if that is true, why would he not do it? He has a reason!

Orchestration Set the dog up to succeed by considering, evaluating, assessing any given situation, identify possible problems in the situation for your dog, plan how you'll manage or avoid the problems, and remain alert. Trust in the dog's response in any given situation is possible only when the dog actually has the skills to deal with that situation. Hoping the

dog will handle it well may be a very bad choice. Here's a terrific goal to set for each outing with your dog: To have it end with all involved feeling good about themselves, about you, about the situation and looking forward to more. At the very least, plan to exit any situation with your dog feeling as good as possible about what just happened.

Leadership Earn the respect. This begins at home. In this seminar, you can begin rewarding the dog for voluntarily checking in with you - make it worth his while to do so! (See my article on Leadership Basics.)

Respect for limits & preferences Your world is NOT your dog's world. Your dog may find chasing squirrels more fun than what you'd prefer he do. A compromise may be possible, but be extremely fair about what you ask from the dog - he is not a volunteer, he's a draftee.

Observation Really seeing someone else - human or animal - is a sacred act of love. Bring your attention very deliberately to seeing your dog as if for the first time, as if you had never met him before. Can you see your dog with clear eyes? Touch him with your eyes closed? Smell him? Listen to him? Take your dog for a walk, and look closely at what he finds fascinating. Is he using his nose? His eyes? Sense of touch? Really look at the phone pole he finds intriguing (sniff it if you dare! It won't kill you.) Go poke around in the leaves or dirt or grass with him. Share his interest. (It's worth it just for the look on your dog's face!)

Response to response (feedback loop) Are you really listening to what your dog has to say & really seeing his behavior & body language clearly? Sometimes, we are so busy looking for what we expect/hope to see that block ourselves from seeing what the dog offers us in response.

Clarity of intent What is your motivation? Is your ego involved? Is your enjoyment shared by the dog? Are you trying to prove something to yourself? To others? To please someone? To reach a goal because it will make you look good? Be careful saying that something is for the dog's good - ask him if that's true! Be clear about what you expect or want from your dog and why it's so important to you.

Technical toolbox Understanding training principles & applying them with skill is important - love alone isn't enough. Don't drown in technical know-how and forget the heart & soul of the relationship, but also don't sacrifice good technique for pure emotional involvement. Balance is important, and technical proficiency can help smooth the way for the kind of profound relationship you want. Remember, solid training skills are actually solid communication skills, and clear communication is critical to a healthy relationship.

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Forgiveness Be forgiving with yourself & dog; all relationships include mistakes? learn from them, don't repeat them!

Detachment It's not all about you! The dog has his own world, his own interests, his own fears or struggles or challenges, his own limitations, his own delights and passions. Don't take it all so personally when you don't get what you want from the dog.

Generosity When offering rewards, do it while having a party you'd want to attend! The dog will tell you if the payoff is worth it to him. Do not mistake cookie dispensing as generosity. How many ways can you generously invest yourself in interacting with the dogs? How much can you achieve without any cookies at all? Remember, dogs don't run around popping hot dogs at each other. They invest themselves in the interactions. Food rewards are great backups, and certainly valuable when trying to make a behavior worthwhile to a dog who might prefer to do something else. Some stuff is just plain old work, to us and to the dogs; no one has to pay us or our dogs to do that which we are passionate about.

Stretch Give more than you usually do, even if that means being silly or dramatic for your dog - forget what others

around you might think. It's what your dog thinks that matters! Remember the farmer in the movie Babe? When his pig is sick and possibly dying, the usually quiet farmer who had little to say stretched himself to the utmost, singing and dancing for the pig.? And it worked!

Cooperation weighs nothing Weight & strength are meaningless when an animal or person cooperates with you; weight & strength are only important when you need to forcibly restrain the dog, or try to force his cooperation or compliance using equipment like leashes, collars, head halters, harnesses. If you are aware of your dog's strength being used against you, know that this is a sign that something is amiss - he's working against you, not with you. Could be that in that particular moment, you simply have to hang on, restrain, manage, do what has to be done to keep all safe. But once the moment has passed, carefully evaluate what happened, why, and what needs to be done in the future.

Buck Naked Training A relationship based approach does not rely solely on equipment or treats but will work even if you're buck naked on a mountain top in Tibet with your dog. The relationship is always with you, and the connection possible between us and our dogs is powerful. Strive for it!