

Canine Communication

By Steve Diller

Dogs are master communicators; in fact many assessments that dogs make are formed within a second in time. While dogs are talking most of their waking hours, many people fail to recognize just what their canine companions are saying. Dogs "talk" to us much in the same way that they communicate with their own species, problem is we do not know the language. A large part of the reason for dogs' great communication skills are that dogs being pack animals rely on a social structure that allows them to hunt together, reproduce, and protect their pack unit from harm. The first sign of communication among littermate puppies is generally the tail wag that occurs shortly after the pup's eyes open at approximately 14 days of age. Tail wags are a form of communication often misunderstood as a happy gesture. One explanation of the first tail wagging is that as puppies develop a social order during play, when they line up for nursing from the mother, there is conflict with siblings nursing along side of them. The strongest pups demand the most productive nursing station, the ones that produce the most milk. When a pup has a preferred spot and a sibling is nursing close by, conflict is produced by fear of being muscled away from the best spot, and causes the tail to wag. Needless to say, the wag is not a happy one but one of anxiousness. Adult dogs continue to communicate with their tails regardless of how long or short they are. Dogs without tails may wag their entire rear end. Tails can speak many words and never has the mouth opened. Tail wags can be from excitement, anxiety or stress. Tails held high display confidence while tails held low and tucked display fear.

Handlers of professional working dogs learn how to "read" their dog's body language from years of experience and can "see" minute sensory changes in the dogs behavior even from behind the dog. British behaviorist John Rogerson teaches a tracking course that relies on the dog's handler to know if the dog is on the track or lost the track from walking behind the dog. Rogerson explains how many trainers teach tracking by showing the dog every footstep that has been laid by pointing to it. These same trainers often lay the track themselves so that their dog can follow a familiar scent; Rogerson starts a new tracking dog off on an unfamiliar scent and does not allow the dog's handler to see the track being laid. Therefore, if the trainer has not seen the track laid, he cannot help his dog follow it and must rely on his dog to find the scented track. A trained handler knows how well his dog is working whether it is from the front or from behind.

The most common communication signals seen are changes in ear set, head and tail position, licking of the nose, blinking of the eyes, yawning and a variety of vocalizations. In nature, instinct to survive drives animals to behave in very specific ways and social pack animals need to be able to assess their packs behavioral state as well as accurately assess the state of their prey. As part of normal dog communication, when two dogs initially meet they go through a series of postures in an effort to "talk" to the new found friend. Many seasoned dog owners know that the best way to introduce two new dogs is on neutral territory without leashes, which create tension. Normally a dog with appropriate social skills will stand still at a distance allowing the other dog to visualize it

and its gestures. Turning the body sideways and not facing the new dog frontally helps calm both dogs down. Upon approach, most dogs arch instead of a head on approach, this too helps keep emotions even keeled. The dog's with good communication skills may lick their nose, turn their head sideways, softly wag the tail and may yawn as an indication of peace. Play bows, running in a circle, slow approach and rear end sniffing become part of the rituals necessary for a comfortable introduction to a new friend. Less friendly postures might include a frontal stance, hackles (guard hairs on dog's back) raised, excitable rhythmic barking, jumping and stomping the front feet on the ground. Dominant postures displayed by an alpha dog might be placing its head over the neck or back of the other dog, mounting the dog regardless of gender.

Marking an area with urine is a common way for a dog to show fellow canines who owns the territory. Urine marking generally occurs on vertical surfaces, the dog that can mark at the top of the vertical object gains the most clout among his contemporaries. Many of us have witnessed small breed dog's lifting their leg so high to urinate that they are about to fall over; these mighty little guys command great respect in the neighborhood. Should a large breed dog that barely lifts his leg at all when eliminating come across a small breed dog that lifts his leg high, respect is often granted to the one that hits the top of the totem pole. Dominant and territorial dogs will also scratch the ground after elimination in an effort to leave scent in the ground. Dog's sweat through their feet, therefore they can really dig their scent into the ground by vigorously scratching after eliminating. Scratching behavior is often believed to have something to do with covering the urine or stool on the ground as a cat would but in reality it is a territorial behavior and a way for dog's to communicate.

When humans can read dog communication the relationship between the species is at its highest point. Many conflicts among people and dogs have to do with misunderstandings as we have a mental process that just does not live in the minds of dogs. When a puppy owner catches a puppy in the middle of urinating on the kitchen floor and yells NO! Most owners believe that the pup hears " don't do that here, do it outside" when in fact they hear Do Not Urinate, at all! This is a common source of conflict among dog owners and their dogs. Another communication problem has to do with the dog's name being used against it. Butch has his head in the garbage, his owner yells Butch, Butch turns toward his owner with tissues in his mouth and typically his owner then shouts BAD DOG. When a dog is called by name and responds, GOOD DOG can be our only words as we can not use our dog's name against it and still expect our dogs to come to us when we call them.

We can learn from dogs, that if we approach them and they lick their nose, we may have to back off or move more slowly. Upon approach, if they turn their heads and look away from us, this may be a signal to us that they would prefer if we stayed away. When petting a dog, if the dog suddenly becomes muscularly stiff, they had enough for the time being. A couple of my favorite misconstrued behaviors are, showing the belly and showing the teeth. A large number of dog owners view a show of the dog's belly as an invitation to rub the belly. While many of us recognize this as a submissive behavior, we still bend down and rub the belly. Submissive behavior reads out as "I give up" which

means please go away not come and scratch me. Dogs can learn to use the posture as an attention seeking behavior but that should not be encouraged either or they may learn other forms of getting your attention which may result in demanding, inappropriate behaviors. When teeth are bared, it is not good news as lip retraction is a reflex prior to the possibility of a bite event. Submissive smile is a term often used for dog's that show their teeth but do not have an apparent element of aggression. The submissive smile is often shown when the dog is excited. Excitement should not become confused with social. Social dogs with strong nerve thresholds do not show their teeth. Sensitive, nervous dogs that may have conflict show their teeth, they are not smiling and the behavior is best not being reinforced as a friendly one, it is a behavior that shows an element of weakness. Learn to talk dog, and have a life filled with unconditional love because no matter how hard we try, they are not likely to speak English any time soon.