



# Episode: #115

## Understanding Your Dog's Language

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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SG I've often said dog training is like [a conversation between two friends](#), but I'd like to ask you, is your conversation eroding the trust between you and your dog or building it up? Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Today's podcast is kind of a summary of past podcasts, but it also has been prompted by some of the training that I have been encouraging people to do in [a challenge that we're hosting on social media](#).

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And I'm trying to help people be better dog trainers for their dogs. And what I see is a very common mistake and it's a mistake that's put a lot of assumptions into dog training. And today I'm going to give an example of how you teach a dog to retrieve. So, I'd like to have you start thinking about if you had a new puppy or a rescue dog, how would you go about teaching that dog to retrieve anything to you? You know, let's just say a toy. Let's start with a toy.

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Because traditionally, any kind of training happens in one of two ways. It's a lured behavior, in that I don't know, I guess it would be difficult to lure a dog to retrieve something. But traditionally behaviors are trained either with a food lure to get a dog to follow that. And in that case, you create the behavior with food, but the dog really doesn't understand the behavior. It relies on many, many repetitions of you luring and the hope that the dog will identify the pattern where patterning the repetition. And after hundreds of patterns of getting them to do the thing, they will figure out what that thing is. That's one way people have been training a dog.

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Another way is what my mentor, Bob Bailey calls "lumping behavior". And that is you create behavior either through encouragement or through enticement, and quite often the retrieve falls into that one. I'll get to that later. But think about this, this has happened to me and maybe it's happened to you.

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I have traveled to many European countries for the Dog Agility World Championships. And in many of these countries, people don't speak English. And so, I like to go to the grocery store and buy fresh fruits and vegetables. Being a vegan, I often will make my own food when I'm overseas. And so, it can get problematic for me.

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Take for example I'm in a grocery store and I'm asking for a carrot. Now you might think that's simple, but it's difficult to like meme out "I need a carrot". And just for fun I had a few members of our team share with you how they say carrot in their native language. How much fun is it? I love that we have a global team. And so, think of what you would do. This is what we all do. We want to try to convince this person who doesn't speak our language "I'd like this carrot". And so, they look at you quizzically like "Carrot?" and you go "Yeah". And you try to shape out, you know, "Yeah", eating it like "Carrot!". So, you might say a little louder. And they go "Uh?", and you go "CARROT!", like they're deaf. And then you might say it slower "Ca-rrrot".





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None of that helps because you're not speaking a language that they understand. And yet it happens with dogs and their owner. So, what will happen is they will say to the dog, I don't know, like "Yeah, fetch!" or "Get it". And maybe the dog doesn't get it. Maybe there's another distraction going by. Maybe there's another dog nearby.

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Maybe the grass is wet, and they've not done it when the grass is wet. You say, "Get it" and they look at you like you've got six heads, "Huh?". And you tell them again, "Get it" and they might start scratching their head and then you might put your hands on your hips and say, "You know what I mean".

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And you keep babbling at them, "Get it, get it, get it". There's actually [a scientific paper](#) where they've done an MRI on 12 dogs I believe it was. And they did an MRI on the brain when dogs are given specific cues that they know and that have meaning that they know "Okay, this means that", they've been trained "Okay, I got it" versus when a person is babbling things that they have no clue what they're meaning. Right. So, "You know what I mean. What are you doing? Come on, get that whatever." when you're babbling that, it actually increases the brain activity which you may think sounds like a really cool thing, but it isn't.

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Because what's happening, the scientists believe, is that the dogs who understand if I can please you I could earn a reinforcement or maybe avoid a punishment. Let's not go there. If I please you, I could earn a reinforcement. So, the brain starts firing up "I don't know what they want. What do they want?!" versus when they have clarity.

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And Brené Brown says "Clarity is kind". When they have clarity, the brain doesn't have to fire up. And so, you've got to ask yourself, are your cues creating that clarity for your dog? Or do you have your dog's brain fired up when you're trying to train with them? I'll give you another example. Imagine that you are a young driver from Australia and you're with your parents visiting Canada for the first time.

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And it's like February. And so, you know, your folks say, "Hey, why don't you drive? You know, you've been driving for six months over there." And it's a blizzard. Oh, did I not mention it's a blizzard? So, in Australia they actually drive on the opposite side of the road. See, I didn't say the wrong side. That would be a judgment.

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They drive on the opposite side of the road than we do. So immediately there's going to be some anxiety about performing this behavior. And then you're pulling out of the Toronto airport and its super busy highway and it's blizzarding and anybody who has never experienced a blizzard I don't know how to describe it. Like these big cotton balls coming at your face and it's windy and you can't really see. And then you try to make a change of lane and you go over a little bump of a rut and then your back-end starts fish tailing.

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And all of a sudden you don't know how to control that fish tail, and you grab the steering wheel and all of a sudden, you're not shoulder checking before you change lanes and your parents are going, "Why are you going so slow? Come on. The traffic's going around us. Start going faster." Like "I can't." "What do you mean you can't? You know how to drive. You've been driving for six months." "This isn't the driving I know." And a lot of times that's what our dogs say. "This isn't the retrieve that I know."

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And what I talked about in [episode number 114](#), is we've got to believe the dog's feedback. We've got to be able to take in the dog's feedback. The dog's feedback is their behavior. So, if you ask them to sit, for example in the online challenge that we had, it was a challenge that we put a dog in front of a jump, and then there were three different levels for this challenge. So, number one, you put a dog in front of the jump you lead out and do they stay there, then you praise them and release them and give them a reward. That was like building confidence.

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And then the next challenge was you put the dog in front of the jump, and you put a big pile of cookies out in front of them just before the jump, and then you went out in front. Now, did the dog leave and go and eat the cookies? Did the dog go over the jump when you asked? Like if the dog went to the cookies and started eating the cookies and you're going, "You know how to jump. You know this." "This isn't the jump picture I know."

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And the next level of challenge was you put your dog in front of the jump and you get another dog, while your dog is sitting there you go out and do fun things with that other dog. Will the dog stay there? If the dog leaves, they're just saying "This isn't the jump sequence I know." All right. Just like that kid from Australia driving in the poor blizzard in Canada. "This isn't the driving I know."

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When our dogs give us that feedback, we got to thank them, we got to say, "This is awesome." But what do people do instead? They go "Ah-ah, no! Hey!" And to me it's always been astounding like the dog is giving you feedback. Instead of you going "Oh! That's what is all I trained you? Oh, my bad, my bad." "Ah, that wasn't what I thought I was training you to do. Let's come back and let's go back to a different level so we'll both get on the same page."

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And you can go to any podcast here where we talked about incrementally building behavior or even better still, I did a Facebook live which was so well received. We put it into a [YouTube video](#) so you can find it on YouTube. It's called "How to Make Dog Training Easier". Coincidentally I talked about retrieving on that and I talked about five things that we want to do. Five steps that we can take to train any behavior, leading up to getting it on cue so that the dog understands it.

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But the point is you've got to believe your dog. You've got to believe that feedback because when you go "Ah-ah" to your dog, like what else does that sound indicate? Like if I all of a sudden went "Ah-ah" it would be like I want your attention, right? So, if I'm saying "Ah-ah" to my dog I'm saying, "Is anybody else watching this?"

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"Would you come and witness the cluster that I've done in training my dog to do something I thought that they knew?" So, when you're saying "Ah-ah" you're not saying, "You're bad", you're saying "My bad. Hey, why don't you all come over and see this. My bad.", right? That's what you are really saying. Your dog knows that's what you're really saying. Because no one on the planet knows what the dog has learned except the dog. And the only way they can share with you what they've learned is their behavior. And if their behavior isn't what you expected, you've put them in a blizzard in Toronto. You're bad. Right.

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No big deal. We all do it. We all do it. And you can backpedal and go "Okay, we can fix this. I can create clarity so that every interaction isn't firing off neurons. So that every interaction is creating calm clarity for you. That's what I want. That's what I'm looking for." All right. So, ask your dog every time your dog does something unexpected that you thought they knew, ask yourself "What's my dog trying to tell me? What, what is it?" It's really obvious.

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That's why whenever I train my dog, I always have a video camera on so I can look back and go, "Okay, what's my dog telling me now?" "Oh, she's telling me that she's super confident with this behavior and I've done a good job." "Okay. Well done Susan." "All right. What about this one?" "Ah, yeah we look like we got a little snowstorm going in Toronto here." So, I got to backpedal go back to something that she knew really well and then add those layers slowly. So that I can grow that confidence.

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Okay. Let's talk about the retrieve. Typically, when somebody teaches a dog to retrieve, what do they do? They get the dog excited about the toy. Maybe get them "oh yeah!", they're going to interact "look, they like this toy" and then they throw it. It might be like a puppy that knows like so little. Right. A puppy that has so little relationship with you. Yet we make this big toss of a toy and say, "Yeah, go get it".

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And guess what? I would say a good percentage of the puppies or rescue dogs will chase that toy that you've got them excited about. "Oh yeah. We're prey driven. We'll go out and we'll chase that toy." And then what happens? They have no value for bringing it back to you. So that's where the old "Come on, bring it back. What are you doing? Come on over here. Come on, come on, bring it back, bring it." "Oh, what were you going... ah-ah. No. No." "This way. This way. Give it to me. Give it to me. I'll come on mamama. Come on, bring it on mommy. Bring it to mommy. Mommy's got a cookie!" And you go through this whole routine.

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And what cracks me up is people do it for years. For years. And honestly it doesn't take that much. So, I want to teach my dog to retrieve, and I want to do it with clarity. So, first thing I want to do is establish what's value. Now this is exactly how I taught it in that YouTube video I spoke about. And also, if you refer to [episode number 113](#) where I teach how to teach a cue, you'll see very similar steps. We need to establish what's value. Food? All right. Now I need to transfer that value to a thing. All right. It could be a position like a sit, a down, a stand.





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It could be to an action in this case you know, pick up or hold a toy. It could be to a location, like get on that dog bed. This is an action and a position. So, we want them to move and hold position on that dog bed. So, we've got established our value. We want to teach the dog that you can offer behavior and you can earn value. Then we want to transfer that earned value to something that we want the dog to do, a thing. Let's call it a thing. And now we're going to get many repetitions of that thing.

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So, we're going to transfer the value and the dog is now offering it. We got to put it on cue. Right. You want to see this in action, go to that YouTube video where I actually shaped my puppy to do this with a frisbee. I kind of screw her up a little bit too you'll see that there. So, shaping behaviors using value I'm questioning, what do you understand now?

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There's 10 layers to how I teach a retrieve. You know, I don't throw a toy out. I do everything really, really close to me so that the dog can have success. They don't have to try and run, chase, pick up, carry, deliver directly to me, let go when I asked. Those things all get broken into layers, so we have clarity. You want to create clarity for your dog so that the neurons don't go firing when you're working together and that you don't end up babbling. Because babbling means you're asking that dog to drive in a snowstorm and that's just not fair.

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So, clear is kind. And if you are trying to help your dog by luring them with your body or "Attaboy, attaboy, you got it. Get it, get it, get it, get it." then it's time you ask yourself that question. What is my dog trying to tell me now? That's it for Shaped by Dog. I'll see you next time.

### Resources:

[Try the Training Challenge in our Dog Agility Masterclass](#)

[Blog Post: Distraction Work in Dog Training: A Conversation Between Friends](#)

[Paper: Awake fMRI Reveals Brain Regions for Novel Word Detection in Dogs](#)

[Podcast Episode 114: Dog Agility Training: 3 Big Mistakes All Dog Owners Should Avoid](#)

[YouTube Video: How to Make ALL Training Easier \(Especially Dog Agility\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 113: Your Dog's Verbal Cues And Hand Signals: How To Effectively Train Both](#)





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### About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.

A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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