

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG To record my podcast today, I decided to wear my Toronto Raptors, 'We the North' sweatshirt. I wore this sweatshirt for the very first time when I flew out to San Francisco to watch my Toronto Raptors win the NBA championship back in 2019. And guess what, I wear this sweatshirt every time the playoffs roll around. That's called superstitious behavior.

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And believe it or not, our dogs too can have superstitious behavior. Sometimes, well most of the times, we contribute to it. Today I'm going to talk about why we want to avoid it and how you can avoid it. Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. B.F. Skinner described superstitious behaviors back in the 1940s when he was working with pigeons, and he noticed that they would sometimes bob their head before they did the targeted behavior that he was looking for.

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And that behavior would grow in frequency and sometimes making it almost impossible to get rid of. And so, what a superstitious behavior is, is an [inadvertent behavior that gets reinforced](#) unintentionally. And so, in dog training my mentor Bob Bailey used to refer to something as a 'cheap behavior'. I'm going to talk about cheap behaviors and generally superstitious behaviors. And truthfully, I think they all could be blanketed as superstitious behaviors. Let me tell you what I mean.

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A superstitious behavior would be a dog barking in its crate. Now with the asterisk, some dogs truly have [separation anxiety](#). But over the 30 years that I've been helping people with their dogs. I find a lot more is superstitious behavior. It goes like this. Dog barks in crate, hears footfalls in the hall and then it stops barking because it knows its person is on its way to let it out of its crate. Comes out of its crate. Its happy.

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The dogs, the superstition of barking, "If I bark long enough this is what happens. I have to bark in order for it to happen. Like the door doesn't open unless I bark."

My late husband used to do this thing and I know he's not alone. We would pull up to a stoplight late at night, you know the ones that had a sensor and you had to wait there for a little bit of time because the main throughway was always green, and you had to wait for the sensor and the pavement to recognize there was a car sitting there and it would change your light to green so you could go.

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Well John would pull up to these sensors and he would wait for about 10 seconds. Then he would creep ahead a little bit. And then of course he would get reinforced for that, allowing the car to keep ahead of it because the light would change. And I remember saying to him "Just once, let's just see if just by standing still that light will still change." But it never happened. He would always move ahead because that superstition had been reinforced by the light turning green. Same with a dog who "I bark and if I bark long enough, the door magically opens."



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And again, I just want to say yes, some dogs may have separation anxiety. But a lot have learned the superstitious behavior. I've seen it in the sport of dog agility where dogs may spin in front of a jump before going over it. Or I had a student with an Australian Shepherd who had built the superstitious behavior. When the dog was weaving on her left, it would jump high in the air as it exited the last two poles when weaving. It was spectacular how high this little girl would jump in the air. Superstitious behavior.

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I'm going to talk about why we have them and how we can get rid of them. But I also want to talk about the cheap ones. Now the cheap ones happen because it's effortless. And it almost, you know as a trainer you might not even notice it. I'll give you an example. You put a target on the ground that you want your dog to hit with their nose.

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Well, as the dog is going down, their paw may move and they simultaneously will touch it with their nose and their paw, which of course you will reinforce because the nose touched the target. And lo and behold the cheap behavior of moving my paw at the same time as getting my nose on this target grows in frequency. And you have this artifact that is really difficult to get rid of. We'll talk about how you can get rid of it in a minute though.

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Another cheap behavior I see a lot of, and I recognize that you'll see some behaviors more frequently with some breeds. For example, I don't want to profile, but you see a lot of Shelties that before they're asked to do sit or down, they may do a little spin or may vocalize before they do it.

A lot of little dogs, it's not exclusive to little dogs, I've seen a lot of do this one too. Before they're released out of the crate, they will paddle their feet. "If I paddle that makes the door open."

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I don't believe that the dog is thinking this. "I must paddle for the door to open." It's a cheap behavior because the paddling has happened as the door gets opened. And so, it's an artifact of behavior because it has been reinforced by the door opening. You want your dog to hand touch. Some dogs will come in and lick or nip as they hand touch. And that gets reinforced by the cookie that's reinforcing the hand touch because the dog's nose actually did touch your hand.

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With cheap behaviors I see a bunch of what I call the 'killer bees'. So, biting, dogs who might jump up and nip at your arm while they're doing something, like you might ask them to get in beside you and as they get in beside you, they just give you a little nip. So biting is one. Bopping. One of my dogs when he would heel, he would like bop his head into my hip.

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He was getting reinforced because he had beautiful heel position until I recognized what was really going on. Tell you you're going to fix this a lot faster than I did, because you will get the benefit of my experience of the frustration of not recognizing it. So, biting, bopping, bouncing, my little Jack Russell, when I would get dinner ready, she would run up and bounce beside me. And that was part of the ritual. She had to do it to help get dinner ready.



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Biting, boxing. So, if you have a boxer, you know what I mean? Tater Salad does this. His ritual to greet. He knows he's got to greet in the sit position. So, what he does is he boxes with his two paws. And then he goes into the sit. It's a cheap behavior that is an artifact of getting reinforced by the people talking to him or greeting him.

So biting, barking, bopping, bouncing, and boxing. And paddling. Can we come up with a B word for the paddling and the spinning? You get what I mean.

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These are cheap behaviors that we really don't want, but we've got them. So, let's talk about now what we do about the superstitious behaviors. Number one, the best thing you can do is never get them. "Oh, thank you, Susan." Prevent them. So here is how you prevent them. So, if you don't have them, we don't want them. There is really only one effective way of preventing them. And that is please video you're training and review your VTO.

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Here's what we're looking for. We are looking at [reinforcement](#) because that's what causes the behavior. And so, you are looking at not what you are reinforcing. You are looking at what gets reinforced in the dog. Two different things. So, you may say, "Oh yeah. That's when I was rewarding him for that perfect sit when I asked him to sit. It isn't what you are reinforcing. It's what the dog gets reinforced.

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And how are you going to tell the difference? Because you're going to look at what grows in frequency because that which gets reinforced grows in frequency. So, if your dog is paddling or if your dog is lifting up one paw, as you go to feed, if your dog is barking or bouncing, then [that is what you've been reinforcing](#) along with what you intended to reinforce.

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So, it's not what you are reinforcing. It's what the dog is getting reinforced. And what the dog is getting reinforced might be more complex than what you think you are reinforcing. Super important. So, you're going to look at your videos and ideally you can look at some previous videos because this is going to grow in intensity. So, we want to identify that.

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Now you may be listening to this going, "Susan. Yeah, I already know what I've got, and I am just waiting for you to help me fix this." Alright. So, you know you might have one of the killer bees, you might have a spin, you might have something else. Here's what you need to do. You need to now take some data from your training.

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I want you to look at the success percentage, and I want you to look at [the rate of reinforcement](#). Because a lot of times, especially the killer bees, a lot of times those are there because the dog is overwhelmed or over faced in the training. So, here's what you're going to look at. Success percentage. How many reinforcements did the dog get her attempts? So, something simple, like if you were working weave poles and you sent the dog to the weave poles 10 times and you rewarded him two times, then your success percentage is....(I'm a mathematician). Watch how I can do this one in my head.



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Two divided by 10 times 100, your success percentage is 20%. And that may be okay depending on the dog and the stage of training, but I certainly wouldn't want it to be 20% for more than one session. And 20% is getting a little bit low by my standards. So, we're looking at the success percentage. Next, I want to look at the rate of reinforcement. And for that we're going to look at how many minutes did you train and how many rewards did that dog get per minute.

So, if you train for 30, please don't train for 30 anything unless it's seconds. So, if you train for 3 minutes and the dog got 30 rewards, watch this math wizard work one more time. The number of reinforcements you gave divided by the time that you trained, you are now reinforcing it at 10 reinforcements per minute, and it doesn't matter.

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There is no number. I can say, "Well, you got to get 12." It really is dependent on the behavior you're training and the dog and the stage of training that they are at. For example, if I was working a 50 yard go in a straight line that I'm not going to get 10 reinforcements in per minute, because 50 yards is a really long way for the dog to go.

If I'm working with a puppy on something like a hand target, I'll probably easily get 15, maybe even 20 reinforcements per minute. So why do I want you to look at this data when I can't give you a number to aim for? Because what I'm looking for is patterns. And if you have a dog who's over faced or overwhelmed and is showing you some killer bees, and you have a rate of reinforcement that's somewhere around four or five, then you might have the answer.

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So now let's go to the next step and that is your training plan. Because this by far is one of the big areas people go wrong. Either they don't have a plan, or they have a very sketchy, incomplete, non-detailed plan, or they have a plan that's one big lump. They haven't split things. They haven't worked on the [layers of learning, the 5Cs](#).

They can't tell me, are you working on clarity or are you working on connection? Are you working on confidence or are you working on challenge? Where are you working? And so, your training plan has got to be so detailed. If you have a killer bee, I'd be willing to bet you have a training plan that needs some tweaking.

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And so, what are you going to tweak? You're going to split your training plan into smaller layers and work on one layer. And if you have something like a dog whose nose targeting and using their paw at the same time, then you're just going to create a way for those two behaviors to become incompatible.

For example, you could either raise up what you're targeting with their nose targeting so that you are reinforcing the feet still and then as you gradually get it closer to the ground, you put a barrier in front of the dog. So, they would have to lift that paw up and over something before they could get it down.

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That way you're going to create a reinforcement history that is filled with success and not frustration, which is going to decrease the killer bees and is also going to decrease that paw movement. So, think about what you've got and how can you create an incompatible behavior. We've got a dog who has created this pattern of 'I must bark in my crate in order to let you know that I need to come out.'



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Again, I don't want you to think your dog is conniving going, "Okay watch, I'm going to bark or I'm going to be quiet now." So, all that we can do is how can we reinforce a dog, so we get away from that behavior. Here's where a remote feeder would really come in that you are, when you know that your dog would tend to bark in the crate you would start giving them random reinforcements from a remote feeder.

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And you know that you might reinforce that, 10 seconds. You might reinforce that 30 and somewhere in between a reinforcement you will go in and let that dog out of the crate. Set the dog up so that you are creating an incompatible situation. So, they're not going to do one of the superstitious or cheap behaviors that you currently are looking at.

It could be that you're going to teach your dog to target their front paws on something if you've got a paw lift every time you go to reinforce. The biggest thing guys is you have to become aware. What have you got? Is there overwhelm? What is your training plan look like? Do you have to split that?

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Can you create a way that you can create reinforcement for a behavior while splitting off that cheap or superstitious behavior? And then can you use targets? Targets that the dog can, you know, put their paws on something so that it's impossible for them to do the other behavior. So, if you have a dog that's biting you and you're heeling, can they carry something for a little while?

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Think outside the box and know that it was just not being aware of what was giving your dog reinforcement that created the problem. And therefore, the use of reinforcement is the only thing you can do to help get you out of that problem. Now here's a superstitious behavior I'd like you to try. If you are not a subscriber to this podcast, go ahead and subscribe now.

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If you're watching this on YouTube, hit the subscribe button as well as the notification bell. And then you're going to hear a bell that's going to remind you it's going to help you to create a superstitious behavior. Hear a bell, go and watch the latest episode because that's the reinforcement you get when you do subscribe.

I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 141: Average Or Better Dog Training Question: What Did You Just Reward?](#)

[Podcast Episode 2: Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 125: Why Isn't My Dog Learning What I'm Training?](#)

[Podcast Episode 139: Remove Confusion And Build Your Dog's Confidence With One Simple Dog Training Habit](#)

[Podcast Episode 21: The 5 Critical Dog Training Layers for Confidence with Anything](#)

[Podcast Episode 98: Puppy Home Alone: Are You Creating Chaos or Calm?](#)



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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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