

# Why You Should Change Your Strategy Rather Than Your Criteria When Dog Training

### Speaker Key

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### Transcript

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SG As a professional dog trainer I get to see a lot of people training their dogs. And one common mistake that I see people make is when things don't go well, they change their criteria in the middle of the training to make it easier for the dog to be successful.

And you may think, "Hey, that makes perfect sense to me." But I'm going to tell you why this is a huge mistake, where it could lead you, and what you can do instead.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Now I've spoken about criteria on this podcast many, many times. You know, criteria is what defines that which is correct for your dog. So, take something as [simple as a sit](#). "This is what I want. When I say the word 'sit' I would like you to do this." We define the body parts.

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We want the butt to hit the ground. We want the front paws to stay still and the back paws to stay put once they hit the ground, we don't want them to sit and get up. So, it's a duration of how long we want them to sit. It's where do we want them to focus when they sit? It's what do we want their voices to be doing when they're sitting? It's how fast do we want them to sit?

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So, all of that is the [criteria that defines that which is success](#). And what I tell my students is, "You know what, things are going to go wrong. They're dogs and we're human." And so potentially our mechanics isn't perfect. Potentially what worked with our last dog isn't going to work with this dog.

But that doesn't mean we change the criteria. We don't change our goal; we change our strategy to get to that goal.

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Think about this. You're going out with your family, you're going to grandma's house for Christmas, and you head out and the road is closed. You don't say to the kids, "Well, guess we're not going to grandma's house. We're going to go to some other grandma's house. We're going to go knock on another door until we find another grandma somewhere else."

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No, we just have to change our strategy. "We can't go the way we always went. Let's go a different way. Maybe that road's closed, too. Let's park the car and get some knapsacks and hike our way to grandma's house. Let's take a boat to grandma's house. Let's take an Uber to grandma's house."

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I mean, there's other strategies to get to grandma's house, but we don't say "She's no longer our grandmother. We're going to go visit some other nice lady." We never change our goal. We never change that which is correct. We change the strategy to help our dogs be successful.



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And I'm going to share with you what that looks like. But I want you to think about maybe you're having a problem with one of your dogs, a problem training a trick or manners. Maybe it's potty training, maybe it's a sport. So, here's a common one I see in agility that we want our dogs to [love agility](#). And so, we have a dog who can get worried, so when they go in the weave poles and they miss a couple poles, "That's okay. We keep going. That's good. You're doing stuff. Yay!"

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No, no. Because number one thing you've got to ask yourself: Is what I'm reinforcing going to make it easier for my dog to understand criteria in the future, yes or no? By rewarding a dog for missing a bunch of poles over and over again, that's actually going to make it harder for the dog to understand 'You actually need to do all the poles.' Right?

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So, when I ask somebody -- running contacts, something very, very difficult to teach a dog in agility, probably one of the more difficult things for people to train their dogs to do. When I'm watching, here's a little inside tip, when I observe my students training their dogs the very first thing that I do is I look at the training through the eyes of the dog.

And if I can't see something consistent that I am getting a reinforcement for, I promise you your dog can't see it either. And so, I've got to be able to tell what in your mind is the criteria for your dog to earn the reinforcement? And if I can't tell then you're in trouble.

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Because you're not going to be progressing towards grandma's house or that end goal. You're going to be meandering off to somebody else's house. And so, when I've asked my students to stop and say, "Okay, can you just share with me what exactly you are looking to reinforce?" "Oh well, you know, I would like this but I'm not seeing this so I'm [rewarding him for trying](#)."

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But dogs don't understand trying, they understand behavior. 'I did this, I got that. I'll do more of this.' Because to a dog, and you've heard me say this before if you're a regular listener, [sometime is anytime to our dogs](#). So, if I can get on the couch sometime? Yeah. I can pretty much get on there anytime, can't I?

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We have decided what criteria is for everyday life with us. What [criteria is for walking](#) down the street and all the things that the dog is - within their control - is part of that criteria. So, if you have your dog at the end of the leash, you know, pulling and pulling you from one side to the other and then seeing somebody he wants to see and crawling his way over, just clawing at the ground and then barking the whole time like "aaaaahhhh!" That's criteria.

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There are people who when they go to just shape the dog, as soon as they sit down with maybe a clicker or a bowl of food, the dogs start spitting and vocalizing. Because you've built that in as part of your criteria. So, what can you do? Now that we know, we never want to change our goal, we only want to change our strategy.



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How can you do that successfully? Now, I'll remind you again, you've got to ask yourself, 'If I reinforce this, does it make it easier for the dog to understand criteria moving forward?' That's a big question. Now, first thing you're going to say is, 'I like to eliminate any of the anxiety in the dog.' And so, is the dog showing any signs of anxiety? That could be feet paddling or spinning or barking or you know, heavy \*panting\*.

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And if they are, then let's just move away from what you're trying to train and let's just create calm confidence. Right? Calm confidence. That could be something as simple as [Crate Games](#). Go in, get reinforcement, listen for the word 'break', come out. You know, you could play a game of tug and they can be excited then, but when we're reinforcing them for being in it's calm confidence. Getting up in the Hot Zone. It's calm confidence.

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So, if you don't care if your dog is barking as part of the criteria of what you're trying to train, this isn't that important, but I just think it's easier for the dog to be more thoughtful if they're not like frantic when they're training. And you can say, "Oh, that's just who they are."

That might be, or I'd like you to consider the possibility that that might be who your dog is with you. And so is there a possible world where that can change? And your dog can learn to be more calm and thoughtful when they're working with you. A lot of that has to do with the frustration of too much failure or unclear criteria. That often makes a dog [very high and hyper and frantic](#) and trying all sorts of things.

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Okay, so we want to change our strategy, we want to create calm confidence, we want to eliminate competing reinforcement in the environment that we're training. So, we want to make it super easy for the dog to understand what that criteria is. Eliminating any competing reinforcement. That could be eliminate the dogs that are running around when you're trying to train because they'd be like, "Okay, I'm paying attention to you. Oh, but what, what are they doing?"

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So, eliminate competing reinforcement. If you're trying to teach something new and you're trying to teach it like in a field where there's horse poop, then that's competing reinforcement and that's going to be difficult for you. Really the best place to teach anything new is in the quiet of your own home.

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So even going to a local dog training class is not a great place to try and teach something new. Always better to teach it at home. Go to that local dog training class to help the dog understand the same criteria is in play in other environments. So, we've worked on our calm confidence. We have eliminated competing reinforcements. And I would say like this is point number three but it's really two-b: we have eliminated distractions.

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And that could be sweeping the floor because there's some crumbs of food from the last training session you did. That could be going to your bathroom, crapper training. It's a great place to train to eliminate the distractions even as much as there are windows around, there's just nothing else for the dog to look at except a porcelain toilet bowl, right?



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And so, you've eliminated the environmental distractions, much easier to get calm confidence, much easier to get a dog focused, much easier for them to go, "Okay, what's next?" Now the next question I would like you to ask is, "Is it possible for me to grow that which is correct without changing the criteria?"

And most of the time the answer is going to be yes by either splitting the criteria into a smaller piece or growing what is correct. So, you could say, "I've got a puppy and currently 'sit' for the next, I don't know, week is gonna be their legs could be floppy because they're just a puppy. I'm not going to insist that they're very tight."

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Does that mean that's going to alter the dog's ability to understand what the criteria of sit is? Possibly. So, you might not want to call that a sit. You might just, like, call it like 'butt down.' I don't know. That's not, that's using the word 'down,' isn't it? Place? I don't know. Call it what you want. Just don't call it a 'sit' if the puppy cannot at this stage of the game, give you all of that nice criteria for a proper sit. So that is not altering the what 'sit' is, it's changing it to a new behavior that will lead us to sit down the road.

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So once the puppy gets older, you might put that behavior up on a plank where the narrowness of a travel plank, what we call a travel plank, will help the puppy sit straight, right? So, can you grow what's correct or can you split what you're currently doing. So, back to my agility example, if the dog is skipping poles, we're going to split by only having two poles out there. So much easier to be correct when all you have to do is run through the middle of two poles.

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And that's going to [help build that dog's confidence](#). That's going to help build the dog's drive because they're going to be get reinforced more often. You're going to be getting 80% or higher pretty much every session now because it's just two poles. So, we've split the behavior from a full set down to something really, really super simple. Now, can you grow that which is correct?

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I'll give you another agility example and then we'll go to another, like a trick. So, an agility example would be I want my dogs to hit their paws on a [target](#), for a lot of training that we do in agility. Now, is it a front paw? Is it a back paw? Is it two back paws? Is it one front, one back? You decide how many that is.

But if the dog can't do it and they're failing and failing and failing and failing, they're going to get frustrated, they're going to get distracted, they're going to have anxiety so just make your target bigger so the dog can have success.

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Once you've got success, then you could make it, or take it away and say, maybe my dog is missing because I haven't done enough [flexibility work](#). I'm going to leave that, I'm going to help them be successful by 'can you get four paws in a little box?' And if they can't, well then maybe they can't get the four paws on a target that's the size of the box that you're trying to get them to touch. Does that make sense?



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So, grow that what's correct, split the behavior either into a small part of the behavior like weave poles, or a small behavior that you can take away, come back to. And often fitness is just such a great thing.

I have a student who, when the dog was going fast in the weave poles would skip one of the poles and I would say, "Well, let me see the dog turn around on a plank." Well, he can't do that. Well, if he can't bend to turn around on a plank, how can he bend to get back on that weave in the weave pole when he is going super-fast? Take it away.

Make it easy to be correct. Come back with the new skills.

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So those are four simple things that anyone can do. So, let's look at something like a trick. Common trick that I see people change criteria is '[back-up](#).'

So, when I say the word 'back' to my dog, I want them to reverse walk. So, if they walk front right, left rear, left front, right rear, that pattern of footfalls, I want them to just do the opposite when they're walking.

So, I don't want them to like shuffle in their front and bump and hop in their back. I don't want them to throw all four feet up in the air and land and throw and land. I want a reverse walk. That's what back means. And it's a great, great exercise for fitness. I like to teach my dogs to back-up stairs, to back over things.

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So, the most common way people will teach you, and you can Google this on YouTube, I'm sure there's a lot of different ways that people will teach you and a lot of them I'm not fond of. First one, people will tell you, "Walk into the dog and your physical presence is going to intimidate them so that they'll move away. And when they move away, start saying 'back, back, back' and give them a cookie when they move away."

Problem with that is they're not going to move unless you move into them. It's going to take a very, very, very long time for that dog to figure it out. And they really don't know what they're doing because they're moving away because of your pressure, right?

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So, let's keep the criteria of what we want but change the strategy. That's not a strategy that's going to work.

Here's one of the very first things I did was I used my couch and a coffee table. And I called my dog between the couch and the coffee table, and then I was there the dog couldn't turn around and so they just backed up and I said 'yes,' and I rolled a cookie between their legs, and they kept backing up to find the cookie that I rolled between their legs. Simple.

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But the problem with that is then you have to fade the couch and the coffee table. So, you could just shape. And I gave you the hint to how I like to shape it. And that is I'm watching the dog, any motion back I click, and I roll the cookie between their legs.

Eventually I don't even use a clicker, I just throw the cookie between their legs. And I want them to back-up straight.





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So, I'm very cognizant of 'are they backing in one direction or the other?' Now, the final way that I like to teach a back-up is to teach the dog to target their back paws on something.

So, these are all different strategies. If they can back-up one step to get those paws up on a target, and the target could be like a couch cushion if you want, then move them like one step away from that couch cushion and they're going back-up two steps. And throw the cookie between their legs. I like to reinforce them coming forward and backwards, so I get balance.

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Because if you don't have balance, then you're going to get a dog that just throws himself backwards. So, there's what four or five different strategies for one behavior. We can change the strategy but changing the criteria just grows confusion in the dog and confusion will lead to frustration for both of you. Because at the end of the day, you're not getting the behavior you're hoping to and your dog is desperately trying to figure out how to earn that reinforcement, but there's a lack of clarity for him.

And at the end of the day, remember our dogs are always doing the best they can with the education we've given them in the environment that we've put them in.

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So, we need to change the education or the environment in order to help them be the best for us. It's a win-win for everybody. Does it make sense? Let me know what you think. Come on over to YouTube and leave me a comment. I love reading your comments.

We've had a little break over the holidays, and I can't wait to get back and read what you think about not changing the destination. Still go to grandma's house, just change your strategy. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 155: 10 Ways To Teach A Sit WITHOUT A Food Lure! Unreal Results For Puppies And Dogs Of All Ages](#)

[Podcast Episode 172: How To Teach Your Dog Anything With My Training Plan](#)

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

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

[Podcast Episode 27: Do Dogs Need Rules?](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Loose Leash Walking with Susan Garrett](#)

[Crate Games Online](#)

[Podcast Episode 110: Is Your Over-Aroused Dog Just Over-Faced In Training?](#)

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

[YouTube Playlist: Target Training for Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 87: Canine Fitness: Why ALL Dogs Need It And 3 Easy Exercises To Start](#)

[Podcast Episode 32: 20 Easy Ways to Exercise Your Dog at Home \(Includes Back Up\)](#)



## Why You Should Change Your Strategy Rather Than Your Criteria When Dog Training

### 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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