Speaker Key

SG   Susan Garrett

Transcript

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There's so much I want to share with you in today's podcast. And I believe it's an accumulation of looking at how training has progressed in the 30 years that I've been a professional dog trainer. Well, probably more than 30 years. I think it's 33 now.

Where we are headed as a community of people who choose to train without the use of physical corrections or verbal intimidation in our dogs. And if that is you, you can check what's greater when you're training your dog, your level of compassion you have for your dog, or your level of ambition you have for what your dog can do.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And there's so many things that I've observed over the past week, reading some of our online student's work, some private messages that I've received from some of our instructors, as well as just being out there in the general space, looking at what people, or how people are training their dog.

And I recognize, at the end of the day, 99.9% of the people that I interact with or that I see post things on social media, I assume absolutely love their dogs the way that I love my dogs. And the decisions they make for their dogs are the best decisions that they can based on what they have as their priorities now.

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But I want to ask you to maybe question the priorities. Like take for example if you get a brand new puppy home. Like, first day with this new puppy. And the new puppy nips at you. Are you like disappointed, shocked, frustrated, alarmed? What action do you take? Do you give it a firm "no"? Do you give it a scruff?

What is it that you do? Because your actions are based, yes, a lot on your history, what your mentors have taught you, the people who surround you, but they're also based on your ambition you have for that puppy. I want this puppy to grow up to be a dog who's good with children, who I can trust in any environment that would never put their mouth on people, that's the ambition I have for my adult dog.

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And so, the compassion we have for this puppy who might be over-hungry, who might be overstimulated by their new environment, who might be overtired from the big day of transferring from their litter mates and their mom to your new home. The level of compassion we have is not higher than the level of ambition that we have.

In podcast episode number 64, I spoke about that when I referred to the use of non-reward markers and how people will use something to freeze a dog from making a poor choice. And sometimes that non-reward marker would right out and out be a punisher like, "ah", "no", "hey", "stop". That all of those things are meant to get the dog to freeze, don't take any forward motion.

They also could be a non-reward marker like "oops" or "try again." And usually these seemingly more pleasant non-reward markers are sung, like a little sing song.

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The dog is trying to do something and you're not going to reward them, and you would like them to know with a nice little sing song. "Oops." "Oh no, what happened?" "Try again." I read one last week that kind of got me thinking about this thread. Their student uses the word "loser" when their dog makes a wrong choice.

Now, I don't know about you, but me just saying it, that kind of hurt my heart. And I try not to be judgmental of the person who's doing the best they can, calling their dog a loser in the middle of training. But I don't want to get wrapped up in that with this podcast. I want to talk about just the general use of non-reward markers.

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So, if you're training your dog, people will say, "Susan, a non-reward marker is so valuable because it stops my dog from making and repeating the same choice over and over again. So, I'm actually being super kind by using the non-reward marker." But I actually work to never use a non-reward marker in my training.

People will say, "Well, my dog is stubborn." or "My dog is a slow learner." And I really have a struggle trying to believe that. Because I believe that I, in all the dogs I've trained, I've never seen a dog who's stubborn or a slow learner. All that I observe is the behaviors of the dog in the environment that I put them in and the education that I've given them.

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So, in podcast episode number 64 where I talked about non-reward markers I said, it's important that when you're training that you have the reinforcement that you know your dog will work for and is keen to have, that you have arranged so that the environment doesn't influence the choice the dogs make, and you have a really good training plan.

And that really good training plan minimizes, or should minimize the response options that the dog has, because what we're doing, like all learning happens with the ABC model, right? Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence. And so, we know that when I've talked about the thing before the thing, how we are trying to undo problem behavior, but ABC is actually how dogs learn things too.

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So, if your dog is offering you a response that you feel the need to stop them, so that you won't let them repeat this option, it could be that your plan is flawed, that the antecedent arrangement didn't set that dog up for success. I'll give you an example. Let's say I want to get my dog to take a ball out of a muffin tray.

So, you might say, "Well, why would I want that?" Well, maybe I want them to start using rolling a ball with their nose. And this might be a fun way to get the dog to start interacting. Maybe they use their paws. I don't know what they would do, but it's a fun game that we try to get dogs to offer shaping by playing what we call the Muffin Tin Game.

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So, here's an example of shaping where antecedent arrangements didn't create clarity for my dog. And I spoke about this on podcast episode number 245. But I first wrote about it on my blog when I was talking about shaping. And that there's so many people shaping their dogs, but they aren't manipulating the environment.

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They aren't following a great plan, maybe even not using ideal reinforcement for the situation they're trying to create. So, in the situation that I'm talking about, my dog, I believe it was like from the early nineties. I was shaping Stoni, and the goal was to get her to leave me, go 10 feet away and jump on a cooler that would have a slippery surface as most coolers do.

And so, there was many, many things that she could do in between that. She could offer behaviors right at me. I'm standing there with a clicker and reinforcement. She's going to be excited. So, she's going to offer a ka trillion tricks that she knows. There's a pole in front of me. She's going to interact with the pole. I want her to know it's not the pole. There's a string. It's not the string.

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Then when she finally gets over to the cooler, I want her to jump on there. So, I reward her for finding the cooler. And then she has to like, know to jump up there, but it's a little slippery so she puts her paws up there and she doesn't want to do it, you know, it took 10 times longer to shape Stoni to do the thing.

It took me like seconds to shape my dog Encore when I shaped her, I think it was 12 years later. And the difference was the antecedent arrangements. I recognized that I needed to manipulate the environment. There's nothing else there, but a cooler and my dog.

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The cooler was slippery. I needed to eliminate my dog's fear, so I cover it with a blanket. I stood right beside it. She immediately jumped up on the cooler. After a few reinforcements there, I took the blanket off and she jumped up again.

So, the antecedent arrangements gave me the outcomes I wanted. Now, back in the early nineties when I was shaping Stoni, I didn't use non-reward markers. I didn't say, "Oops, try again." I didn't stop her, but by not stopping your dog, you are growing the frustration level of that dog. And some dogs, unlike my dog Stoni from the nineties, would just give up and start sniffing.

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If you overwhelm a dog by lack of clarity, by giving them too many choices, a lot of dogs may appear stupid or stubborn or shut down. And what they are is a reflection of the antecedent arrangements that you've put them in. We need to create the environment and have a plan that makes the correct choice just so obvious for the dog.

Because what our dogs crave from us is clarity. And that lack of clarity can come from trying to train with competing reinforcers. And the competing reinforcers quite often come from the environment, but it's about the stage and age of the dog's life. So, if I had compassion for a puppy, I wouldn't take them out to the park and expect them to not you know, want to chase a squirrel.

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And if I had ambition to have a very well-trained dog, I may try to squash the natural drives of that puppy at the park and say, "no", collar correct, you know, expect so much more of them. That's when ambition outweighs compassion.

And it's a no-win situation for you. You end up being frustrated and disappointed, and it definitely is no-win for the dog. So, we need to not overwhelm the dog with the complexity of way too many choices until they've proven to us by making one good choice.

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That they're ready for a mild distraction at a distance. They can make that same good choice in the midst of a small distraction. Going back to podcast episode number 24, where I talked about the Distraction Intensity Index and how we can grow good choices slowly. Doing this in a strategic way eliminates the use of non-reward markers.

And to me, when I was training my dog Buzz in the mid-nineties, he was the first dog I made like a pact with him when I got him. "Hey buddy, nobody else has done this before that I'm aware of, but I'm going to try and train you without the use of physical corrections or verbal intimidation, no verbal corrections either."

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But what I did is I didn't recognize how to manipulate environments to create such clarity that he would always make the right choice. I didn't know how to slowly integrate distance distractions. And so, I relied on non-reward markers. He heard a lot of "oops", or "try again", or "I don't think so", or all these non-reward markers, which guess what happened? Did he like give up and stop and shut down?

No, that wasn't in his DNA. Frustration also drives agitation. He got higher and higher and higher. And so, to me now when I look at videos of me trying to shape Buzzy, every time I say, "oops", or "I don't think so", it's like I'm saying, "Uh, did you guys see me?" "Did you guys see how I didn't arrange my environment so my dog could be successful?" "Did everyone catch that?" That's what "oops" means.

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That's what "loser" means. It's not the dog who has failed. It's us who have failed. We did not set, and you could say, "Oh no, no, no. Well, I only use my non-reward markers when my dog really knows what I want." If your dog really knew what you wanted, guess what? He'd do it. He'd do it. But you didn't step up the distractions or the intensity of the environment in a way that created clarity, right?

Brené Brown, "Clear is kind." Just love that saying. And your non-reward marker indicates that you value ambition more than compassion. And I believe that when we get to a place where we can honestly value compassion, the love and the relationship we have with our dog over the ambition of who we think that dog should be, what we think that dog should be able to accomplish in this environment with whatever distractions we have, when it doesn't matter.

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When we can get to that place, there's a calmness that we get as dog trainers. It redefines our relationship that we have with those dogs. I believe that when we really value ambition is when we would start doing things like a collar pop, an electric stim, or whatever we need to do to stop the dog's behavior.

That is escalating the ambition. "I need you to do this now because time is money, and I don't have time to actually put in all this work that this lady's talking about. I need it to happen now."

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But the difference between what I'm suggesting, and alternatives is you might get the appearance of behavior, but that behavior is tied to a tool. And when the tool's gone, chances are the majority of that dog's understanding of the behavior is gone as well. When you value compassion, what it does is it lights a fire in your belly for curiosity. That curiosity creates this hunger for knowledge. This hunger for knowledge means you're going to do everything you can to learn more about the ABCs of dog training.

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You're going to do everything you can to learn more about strategic plans of action to create any behavior. Something as simple as we have this game to get young dogs or puppies or even older dogs, rescue dogs, dogs who have only been lured in their lifetime. And we want to shape a behavior and they just stand there, and they offer nothing.

Big belly button gaze. And people say, "Well, my dog, he's not like your Border Collies. He's a little bit slow so he doesn't offer anything." No, he's been raised in a world where we get a cookie and put it on his nose and show him what to do. He's not stupid at all.

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He just hasn't been allowed to choose what he wants, because good dog training encourages and inspires a dog to make choices. And we set up the environment so the choices the dog makes are the ones we actually want him to make.

So, to get a dog kickstarted in this direction, we play something called the Muffin Tin Game. In the Muffin Tin Game, the goal is to get a dog to move balls outside of a muffin tin. So, they're kind of in the Muffin Tin, how do we get them you know, we want to get the dog to use their paws or use their nose and roll them out.

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Why would we do that? One, it's just creating behaviors that we can click and treat for the dog. But two, maybe you want to get your dog to you know, use their nose to roll a tennis ball or use their paws to dig on a blanket. There's so many other uses, but let's just for example say we just want to get that dog to offer behavior.

So, the first thing you would do is you would consider the emotional state of the dog. So, would you take that muffin tin with a ball in it and put it, you know, the dog's sleeping and just put the ball in front of them and go, "Hey, do you want to do this?"

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The dog would be like, "What are you talking about?" and go back to sleep. Emotional state, very, very low, not engaged and not doing it. Or would you take that muffin tin and a ball and you're walking your dog, and he starts lunging at a cat. And would you then say, "Hey, do you want the muffin tin and a ball?" "No, no, no, no, no."

Emotional state way too over the top to care about your muffin tin or your ball. So, you get your dog somewhere in the middle where he's keen to interact with you. And I might like cover all of the holes of the muffin tin, except one, and I'll put a cookie in there. The dog will stick their nose in and eat the cookie.

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I might do two or three of those. Okay, you've got the idea. I know you're not afraid to stick your nose in the muffin tin. So now I'm going to put a cookie in there and I'm going to take a pair of rolled up socks, and I'm going to cover the cookie with the rolled-up socks. Why would I do that? Because it weighs a lot less than a tennis ball and it's a lot easier to push it out of the way and get the cookie.

You don't actually even have to move the socks out of the muffin tin. The dog probably can just move it out of the way and grab the cookie. I'm all in on that. I might do a couple more of that and then I'll put maybe a smaller ball, or it might go right to a tennis ball.

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So, the dog has to work at that tennis ball to get the cookie. And all of a sudden, we have a dog who's willing to offer behaviors. Meanwhile, every time they try something, move the sock. We're going to click and reward that.

We have created an environment. How many times do we have to say, "Uh-oh, no, try again." Zero. Why? Because the antecedent arrangements, because we've manipulated the environment, because we've made the reinforcement so high.

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Because the correct option is the easy option. When you approach your training like this, I promise you, you won't consider that your dog is being stubborn. You will never consider that your dog is stupid. And I think eventually you will get out of the habit of saying things like, "oops", "no", "uh-oh", "what happened?", "try again".

The use of these non-reward markers will be dramatically minimized. In my own training, I hope that I never use them again. And honestly, I can't tell you a time I use them with my dog, This!y.

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I would use the lack of reinforcement for what she was doing, I'll give you an example. If I was teaching her a running contact, I want her to hit her paws on a mat. Maybe it's on the ground, maybe it's on a plank. It doesn't matter where it is. If I set her up correctly, she knows this behavior and she's going to offer it.

Once I add distractions, she might miss. When she misses, I won't give her a reinforcement for not hitting the target, but I will give her a reinforcement for resetting again. So, the lack of reinforcement for that behavior gives her feedback that, "Hmm, something was different about this one." But the reinforcement for setting her up for trying again encourages her to keep trying, "The game is fun."

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And if she continues to miss, which she rarely would do, I would know, okay, experimental design - flaw. The dog is not flawed, guys. It's us, our plans, how we set things up.

We all have brilliant dogs. We all have dogs who are wanting us to become the best dog trainers we can. And we will get there.

As I mentioned in [podcast episode number 64](#), when we can value compassion way more than we value our ambition. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

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Resources:

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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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