

When To Add A Verbal Cue... Don't Make These Mistakes

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Maybe you have a dog who responds really well to your verbal cues at home but not so much when you get away from home, or if you've ever just thought, "Well, my dog knows this, but she's choosing to ignore me." Your dog's not broken, you are not broken. There's a very good chance your cue has been poisoned.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett, and this is Shaped by Dog, where training finally makes sense at both ends of the leash. If you've ever given your dog a verbal cue and met with a non-response or a different response than you were looking for, basically, if your dog has ever failed to respond to a verbal cue the first time you ask them, it could very well be that what your dog's behavior has done has exposed a truth. Your cue has been poisoned.

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And once a cue is poisoned, it no longer prompts the behavior that you intend. What it does is it prompts maybe confusion or ambiguity. It prompts something other than what you're looking for, and that's exactly what you're seeing. Now, cues can get poisoned for a number of different reasons. It could be from the lack of clarity in the trainer's mechanics.

It could be by the inappropriate use of punishment. It could be by the inconsistent use of reinforcement, or it could be as simple as the timing of when you added that verbal cue into your dog training. Today I'm going to show you when the ideal time to add a verbal cue to your training really should be, what is the timing that you really don't want to have happen?

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I'm going to share the most common mistakes people make when they're adding a verbal cue. And finally, I'm going to share with you a system that will allow you to create powerful, clean, and effective cues for your dog. And it all comes down to this one very simple truth.

A cue doesn't actually prompt behavior. A cue reveals the training that came before the use of that cue. Does that make sense? I promise you, if that line didn't bring clarity to you right now, then this episode will be even more revealing for you.

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When I talk about a dog training cue, I'm really referring to a verbal cue. I know there's a lot of other different ways to cue behavior, but for this episode let's think verbal cues: 'sit,' 'down,' 'stand.' Whatever it is that you say to your dog in hopes of them giving you a behavior.

A cue is not a threat. A cue is not a demand. A cue is not the promise of reinforcement. A cue is not a word of praise, and it certainly isn't something that should be used louder if you didn't get the response you wanted in the first place.

A cue should be effective information for your dog that prompts a behavior you would like to see. It tells the dog what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. How is all of that possible? It's possible because a cue carries the reinforcement value and the effectiveness of the training that created the behavior that comes before the cue.



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If the system was engaging, the cue is empowering. If the system build confidence, then the cue creates safety. If the system was clear, then the cue feels easy. However, if the system was rushed, then the cue can create confusion. If the system was unsafe, then the cue can create anxiety. If the system was confusing, then the cue can create hesitation.

When you understand all of that, you'll be more intentional about how you add the cue and be more protective of how those cues are used. Because the bottom line is a verbal cue doesn't live in isolation. It inherits everything that comes before it, including the trainer's emotional state.

If you're a regular listener to Shaped by Dog, you've heard me talk about antecedent arrangements, [the ABCs of dog training](#). Antecedents are where verbal cues are won or lost, and this is a part of the foundation that a lot of people skip with their dogs. When your training system creates clarity and confidence to the dog, the verbal cue is the last step in the system. And it almost feels like it's a redundant step.

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Remember, antecedents are everything that we intentionally or unconsciously include in the training environment when we're training a dog. It comes down to how we're holding our reinforcement, how we're holding our training prompts, what kind of distractions are in the environment, what we're allowing to be built into the training that we're doing with that dog.

The antecedent arrangement can't prevent mistakes. However good antecedent arrangements make the correct response very obvious, especially early in your training when you're minimizing the distractions that are around for that dog who is learning. Good antecedents reduce guessing, reduce frustration, and invite the dog to freely offer behavior.

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With a poor antecedent arrangement, you will find cues being repeated, pressure being added, tone being added to the cues, and possibly a dog being blamed when behavior isn't being produced the way it's expected to be. And here's the irony of the situation. If you feel you need a verbal cue to create the behavior, then there's a very high probability that the behavior isn't good enough to add a verbal cue.

The antecedent arrangements that inspire your dog to offer that great behavior comes first. The verbal cue is a trigger to remind the dog of the history of success that came previous to them ever hearing a verbal cue.

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Consistent, confident behavior earns a cue. It doesn't happen the other way around. A verbal cue doesn't produce consistent, confident behavior. But you might be one of the people thinking, "Well, if I don't tell my dog what I want, how are they supposed to know?" And I'm glad you asked because that's such a common question. As a matter of fact, early on in my dog training, I might have asked it myself.

Verbal cues become powerful, effective, and meaningful to our dogs because of the history of reinforcement the dogs received for doing that behavior. So how do we get that behavior? There's four common ways to create behavior or to get behavior from a dog.

The first one is just to capture it, and [we've talked about this](#) many times on this podcast. So, your dog wakes up in the morning, and you know they predictably will stretch. Then you can just reinforce them when they stretch.



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When you know that there's predictable things your dog will do, maybe you have Husky that likes to “woo - woo - woo - woo” when you come in the house. You can choose to capture that by reinforcing it, and then it will become more and more predictable. Once a cue is predictable because of the antecedent arrangements, time of day, where you are, then you can start adding a cue.

But you only add a cue only when you have a rich history of capturing the behavior in many different environments, because we reinforce behavior, then we generalize that behavior to different environments, and finally, we grow the value of that behavior before we add the cue.

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The second way you can create behavior is [by shaping](#). Now, unfortunately, shaping in some circles has got a really bad rap because many people think shaping is just sitting there with a big bowl of cookies and a clicker, waiting for the dog to offer something so you can click it and then reward it. But that isn't effective.

That kind of shaping, although it's fun to do, can create a lot of frustration in the dog. Shaping behavior always happens in intentional layers of learning. Take for example, Shaped by Dog [podcast episode number 322](#), where we talked about how to create loose leash walking with your dog. Yes, we shaped that behavior, but we didn't just sit in a big room with a bowl of cookies and a clicker.

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There were many layers that did involve some targeting and sometimes a dog offering. We created behaviors like [a Hand Touch, like a Paw Target](#), like value for [Reinforcement Zone](#). There were many layers. Yes, it was entirely shaped, but it was shaped in layers of clarity and understanding. And during the shaping of that behavior, the behavior is morphed until it's independent for the dog.

And that's the only time we would name the behavior. Another easy way of growing behavior is, as I just mentioned, through targeting. That could be front paw targeting, back paw targeting, it could be nose targeting, it could be shoulder targeting. Any number of ways that you get your dog, that you bring meaning to areas of the dog body in order to create understanding and behavior.

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If you go to my YouTube channel, you'll find a very popular video called [Perch Work \(Pivots and Spins\)](#) and I teach people a very simple, very effective way to help your dogs, target their front paws to a small target. Do we start with a small target? No, we start with a big blanket because we're creating an antecedent arrangement that makes success probable very early, and we grow it from there.

Of course, when we're using targets to create a behavior, we need to fade, eliminate those targets before we add the cue. Otherwise, we're creating that ambiguity that I spoke about right off the top of this episode.

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The fourth way that you can create behavior is probably the most popular way, and that's what's [using a food lure](#) or a toy lure. The challenge with that is you create artifacts to the behavior, just like targeting, you have to eliminate them all.

Unfortunately, most people are taught to [add a cue](#) when the dog is in an incomplete stage of learning. “Sit, sit, sit, sit” with a cookie, “down, down, down, down” with a cookie, and you likely have spent hours, maybe days, maybe weeks, maybe months doing ‘sit, sit, sit.’



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Yet when you cue your dog to sit, sometimes they lie down and you go, "There's something wrong with my dog." It's the incompleteness of the system that had you add that cue at the early stages of learning rather than as a cherry on top of the late stages of learning.

So, for me personally, shaping, targeting is a big part of the antecedent arrangements that I make sure are in place for every single behavior I teach. So, to recap, we first reinforce behavior through one of the four ways I suggested. We then [generalize that behavior](#) to all new environments. Starting with low levels distractions, adding more and more distraction.

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How do I get my dog to sit in [Crate Games](#)? Well, it's the history of reinforcement feeding high and at the back that when I touch the door, the dog sits. I never have to cue the dog with a verbal cue to sit. So, we create the history of reinforcement that prompts the behavior, we generalize that behavior, take it on the road, [we eliminate any targets or lures](#) that are part of the creation of that behavior.

We grow the confidence of the dog in offering the behavior. And then, when the name is almost redundant, that's when we tell the dog what it is, and here's how we do it. We know when I throw a cookie behind me and I look down to my right hip, my dog's going to fly into Reinforcement Zone.

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So, as the dog picks up the cookie, I might say "side" so that he will learn what 'side' is. When you know your dog is about to do the thing you want to name, you say the cue. How many times you say it? You say it once and then you wait. Your dog will show you what they've learned.

Okay, super important. When should you not add a cue? I would recommend you not add a cue when the dog is clearly struggling, when there's inconsistency in their behavior, when sometimes they jump right to it and offer it, but sometimes they sniff the floor, sometimes they look off to the distance, sometimes they'll sit and scratch. We don't add a cue if the dog still needs your help.

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If you're still like moving to get the dog to offer behavior, if you're still throwing your arms or leaning over the dog to get what it is that you're looking for. We definitely don't add a cue if there's any obvious signs of stress in the dog, if there's any anxiety associated with it.

Remember the cue brings on any anxieties of the environment, the cue brings on any lack of clarity in the system of training. If you've added a cue right now and you think, "Wow, I've got some of the things you're talking about." Go back. Listen to this podcast episode again and rebrand your cue.

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Come up with a new one and just go back and create the understanding by lots of reinforcement for the behavior you're after before you add the new cue. When training fails and your dog doesn't do the response that your verbal cue was hoped to prompt, there's always a reason for it. So, if a cue is added too early, the behavior was not owned by the dog, chances are that cue is not going to hold up.

Number two reason why it might fail is the antecedent arrangement was not prompting success, that it created a little bit of frustration that there were too many other options for the dog. Like we're trying to teach our dog a [recall at the bunny farm](#). The first time we add a cue because we think the dog loves us, they're going to see bunnies and run off in other directions.



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So, we don't want to be training in environments that aren't going to create success. Yes, eventually we can go to that bunny farm, and our dogs will turn and come when we ask. But it doesn't start out that way. Antecedent arrangements early in training need to create confident dogs.

Another reason why the cue failed, it's been poisoned for the litany of reasons that we've already suggested here. Or it could be simple things, like you're using the cue as a word of praise. So, people love to teach people, when your dog has done something, to praise them by using that word.

So, you ask your dog to sit, they have sat and you say, "good sit, good sit." If a cue is sacred and it's effective and it prompts behavior, it cannot be used as a word of praise because now, you're diluting the effectiveness and the dog says, "What do you want me to get up and sit again?"

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Likewise, you want to make sure you're not adding your dog's name before every cue. So, saying, "Rover, sit. Rover down", because 'down' and 'sit' are losing their effectiveness when you are pairing them with a name. Not only that the name is losing its power as well because, "I'm looking at you. I'm here. You're saying my name over and over and over again."

Cues are powerful when you respect their power and you use them once. If you use your cue and you evaluate and your dog doesn't do it, that evaluation period is telling you what the dog learned. So, we alter the antecedent arrangements, we alter our training system.

We don't alter the tone of our voice or our hands on our hip or assume that the blame is to be given to the dog. The system that I train my dogs in, instantly protects the verbal cues because we first start with engaging games. I get my dog excited to want to work with me prior to saying, "Let's learn a new behavior."

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We get engagement and buy-in, which remember I said, the cue brings along all the emotions of your training. So that engagement and buy-in and focus that I get first through playing games with my dogs, that gets built into the cue, which helps to protect the effectiveness of them and make sure that we have a high level of confidence and a very low level of frustration.

The antecedent arrangement builds ownership from the dog. It builds autonomy because they're the ones making the choice. The environment that we've created just encourages the choices that we want. And finally, we don't add cues early. We add cues at the point where they're almost redundant. When the timing of adding that cue is right, it almost feels unnecessary. Like the dog was going to do it anyway.

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I mentioned that I like to fade my targets before I add the cue. There is an occasion where I might just make the target smaller, so it's as small as possible before I add my cue. It really is dependent on the dog's confidence.

So, if I've added the cue and there's still a target, then the cue has got a little asterisk in my mind. I still have to remove that extra prompt before that cue can become salient in the dog's brain. Big takeaway that I really hope you get from this episode is that dog training never fails.

Our dog's response is an honest evaluation, a critique of the effectiveness of the training systems that we put in. The dog's behavior is not a failure, it's a reflection. [It's us who need to make the adjustments.](#) And finally, clean cues create confident dogs.



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Confident dogs don't need to be told twice. Don't need to be told louder. Don't need to be told firmer before they will respond in the way that you expect. Remember, a cue does not create behavior. It exposes the system that came before it. Engineer that system first, allow the dog to own the behavior, and then name the behavior.

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Thank you for joining me today, and as always, stay humble, stay curious, and continue to make life better at both ends of the leash. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

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Resources:

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[Podcast Episode 170: 5 Popular Ways To Train Your Dog With Food](#)

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[Podcast Episode 322: Loose Leash Walking Starts Without A Leash](#)

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[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett's Perch Work Dog Tricks \(Pivots and Spins\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 175: Food Luring VS Shaping In Dog Training: How Science Changed How I Teach Dogs](#)

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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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