

Risk vs. Reward and the Canine Mind

Life is full of decisions and we make hundreds of them every day. Some are split second while others are more thought provoking - but in the end we usually make a choice.

You're approaching an intersection and the light turns yellow. Do you stop or do you gun it?

If you stop you have to wait – if you go, you could run the red, receive a fine or cause an accident. If the intersection is clear and no police officer is visible, the reward may outweigh the risk but if the intersection is known to have a red light camera or a cop is present, the risk trumps the reward. This is an example of “risk versus reward” and we perpetually make these types of decisions.

Dogs are no different in fact, because they always live in the moment the individual choices they make have a lasting effect and shape their behaviours accordingly through association. It's widely accepted that the canine brain thinks in a cause and effect way. Let's look at the cognitive canine brain another way – risk versus reward.

Dogs are really good at doing what works for them – especially when a reward outweighs the risk. Every decision a dog makes is partially based on previous associations with similar situations or environments. If a handler consistently rewards a dog's recall regardless of how long it takes, the recall becomes more reliable and response time decreases because the reward for returning to the handler overrides the risk. When a recall is reprimanded or punished, it continues to deteriorate in both reliability and response time because the risk of returning to the handler outweighs the reward. When a handler mixes praise with reprimands the dog becomes confused resulting in unreliable responses to the cue. Because the canine brain is causal in nature confusion directly translates to stress and anxiety for a dog.

Think of it another way; black, white and gray. Although many things are either black or white, some situations have a “gray area.” Let's take a look at another traffic analogy.

When you approach a stop sign, by law you must come to a complete stop – a simple black or white scenario. However, a traffic light offers three options; red means stop, green means go and yellow is open for interpretation. The yellow light represents the gray area.

Back to the original question: Do you stop, or do you gun it? My point is that we can process this type of decision but our dogs can't.

The human brain is capable of creative thought and will often navigate these gray areas with little or no stress or anxiety. However, the canine mind is cognitively different. A dog cannot negotiate these gray areas because they think and learn through cause and effect associations. They're capable of understanding the red and green light but not the yellow – it's simply beyond their physiological capability because they're brains don't work that way. In fact, the yellow light considerably increases their stress and anxiety. Many canine behaviour issues exist because the handler doesn't understand how a dog's mind processes information resulting in unrealistic expectations that set the dog up to fail – just for being a dog.

The Universal Theory of Cause and Effect states that every action has a reaction and that everything in the universe is subject to it. Think of the universe as an infinitely huge body of water. Now throw a pebble into the pool. The pebble causes ripples to form and spread across the pool.

If a star goes super nova, it manifests as a black hole that eats all the matter around it. If we spew crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, the planet faces an ecological disaster. If you smoke, you'll likely

develop health problems. If you get caught running a red light you'll likely get a fine. If you correct your dog on a recall its recall will deteriorate.

So you see, it can be argued that dogs are more in touch with the universe than humans. Imagine a planet with no people, where dogs run the show. There would be no war, no genocide, no crime, no starvation, no poverty, no pollution, no greed and no gluttony. Kurt Vonnegut's novel Galapagos tells a tale of the de-evolution of humankind because our brains got too big and we made everything too complicated. Let's face it – we really do over complicate everything.

Learning to think in a cause and effect way not only allows us to live in the moment and understand our dogs better; it gives us greater empathy for all living things and further insight into the inner workings of the universe. Cause and effect is all around us - embrace it and keep things simple to yield a healthier, happier, and more productive, stress free lifestyle.

The model of the canine cause and effect brain is in my opinion the most important concept dog trainers and handlers need to grasp. It all begins with understanding the creature you wish to co-exist with – then doing so within its physiological capabilities in a peaceful, respectful and humane manner.

At the end of the day, isn't that how we'd all like to be treated?

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