

Temperament and Personalities in Dog Training

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Canine temperament and K-9 handler personalities have a profound effect on the performance of working K-9 teams. The first evaluation of dog temperament and handler personality should take place when the two are chosen. The dog needs to be suited for the job. If a patrol dog, the dog must have sufficient working drives, steady nerves and work ethic to perform the duties required. Some jobs require a sharp or combative dog; others require a sociable dog. If the job is narcotics detection in constant contact with people, the dog must be friendly, sociable, steady and with sufficient retrieve or hunting drive to search. The dog to be trained must be chosen with the end result in mind.

Choosing the Handler – Dog Team

Just as the dog needs to have the temperament to be trainable for the work, the police K-9 handler needs to like dogs, be patient, have good judgment and police skills, and be willing to do the 110% needed to produce a successful K-9 team. Unlike a police cruiser that can be parked in a garage for long periods of time, a dog needs care 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. The dog is completely dependent on the handler for his maintenance, training and mental and social health. Good K-9 work requires constant training and awareness of what is going on and how the dog is going to react. It requires trusting the dog and working longer to resolve what seems at first to be an irresolvable problem. Time after time, good dog teams persist at a search and eventually find that which seemed impossible to find.

Creating the right match between the handler and dog is also important to the success of a K-9 team. Some handlers do not get along with every dog, and not every dog is for any handler. Hard dogs require strong handlers, soft dogs require understanding handlers. One of the worst combinations is a hyper dog with a hyper handler. The dog gets hyper and hectic, and if the handler becomes hyper and hectic at the same time, the dog just gets worse. The hyper dog needs a controlled handler, someone who will bring calmness and leadership to his life. Conversely, the match of a hyper handler and calm dog can sometimes drive the handler crazy because he thinks his dog is slow, but usually the steadiness of the dog keeps the team performing correctly.

Physical size means a great deal to dogs. A very large handler can be intimidating to a sensitive dog. The large handler needs to be very skilled or have a dog that matches his size and temperament and doesn't care how big his handler is. Working a K-9 requires strength. A small handler should not be matched up with a dog too strong for the handler to physically control, unless the handler is very skilled in training and can get around their physical limitations. Besides the physical ability to control the dog in an emergency, any dominant or strong dog that knows his handler does not have the ability to physically stop him may take advantage of that fact. While a skilled trainer or handler can keep ahead of a large, strong dog, a novice handler cannot.

Leadership of the Team

The handler is supposed to be the pack leader of the working team. If the handler does his job correctly, the dog cannot help but look up to the handler. Being a pack leader means looking out for the team, and providing for the dog's well being as well as giving direction to the dog, who is supposed to be subordinate to the handler. Research on dominance in dog packs shows that the truly dominant leader rarely has to use any physical force to show his or her position. Using physical force actually is a sign of lower rank within a dog pack. The truly dominant members rule by their confident bearing, sense of knowing what is going to happen next, and control of resources needed by the pack. Dominance in a human and dog relationship should be based upon simple behaviors, like asking the dog to do a simple obedience exercise (like a sit) before access to the things he wants, like food, a trip outdoors, exit from the vehicle, etc. In these contexts, simply withholding the food, not opening the door, etc., rather than using physical force, can establish in the dog's mind who is in charge. Physical force only causes stress and apprehension in the dog's mind and can result in the dog going into a panic and attacking the handler if the force is extreme.

The handler's ability to act like the leader in the dog/handler team has a profound effect on how the dog performs. Handlers who show nervousness, unsureness and lack of understanding of what they are supposed to do next in a training exercise communicate to their dog that they are no longer a leader. This is why "trial" or performance nerves often get the best of teams in certifications. If the handler is not acting as if he is in charge, a dog with strong temperament may decide he had better take charge. The dog of

weaker temperament may freeze up because his handler is unsure. In protection work, this results in a dog that won't follow commands or decides he'll take care of the bad guy himself. This problem can be fixed in training by a clear understanding by the handler and trainer of what will be happening in each exercise and not progressing faster in training than the dog or handler can progress. Trainers need to hold the training sequence back to accommodate the slower handler rather than to accommodate what the dog can learn at that time. Once the handler loses his ability to understand which command to give when, the exercise will break down because the dog will not see the leadership he needs.

In street work, the handler must act decisively, even if he doesn't know exactly what to do. He needs to act like he is in control of the situation to convince the dog he is still in control. Since confident body language goes a long way in intimidating suspects, this is the best route to go no matter what is happening.

Since the handler becomes the dog's leader, over time the dog will reflect the handler's personality because the handler is a role model for the dog. This is especially true with young dogs. I have known some people who could never raise a puppy because they always ruined the dog by over dominating it, or caused the dog to become a punk bully because they did not give it proper discipline and did not serve as a good role model. Dogs who never see good leadership can't understand what being a leader is. I knew one handler who raised three dogs of two different sexes and three different breeds and saw the same sort of personality in all the dogs he raised. Young dogs need guidance and some discipline, but they also need to be free to explore the world, socialize with people and other animals and experience life. Raising a dog properly is not easy. The best of puppies can be ruined by poor upbringing. Conversely, a marginal puppy can be made to look much better by proper upbringing.

Even older dogs will change to fit their handler's personality. Dogs constantly read their handler's body language, and even if the handler doesn't openly express or say what he is thinking, the dog will read his approval or disapproval. A classic example is a dog that is handled by an officer who likes intimidating people, but doesn't openly command the dog to do this. Each time the dog barks at someone, whether or not the handler encourages or commands the behavior, the dog will sense the handler's secret approval of his action. Thus the dog will become more and more aggressive. I saw one K-9 program cut when a dog in this type of situation finally bit some officers and an innocent bystander seemingly without provocation. This dog was sold to a civilian who worked him quite successfully in Schutzhund. With

his new handler, who was very easy going and sociable, the dog became easy going and sociable, and the new handler never had a problem with bad bites. The effect of the handler's personality on the dog is one reason why the choice of the handler is vitally important to the success of a K-9 program. Dogs only become a reflection of their handlers. Invariably, a well-behaved, sociable dog with a good performance is the reflection of the same sort of personality in the handler. Aggressive handlers will tend to produce aggressive dogs. Again, choose the handler and the dog according to the functions they will be performing, and understand how these personalities will affect their work. Don't try to put a square peg in a round hole.

Trainers come in different personalities also. Besides being good dog trainers, good trainers need to be good people trainers. They have to adapt their training to the personalities and needs of the handler, the dog, and the handler-dog relationship. The worst mistakes I have seen made in training usually involved trying to do the same exercise with a number of teams when some of the individual teams were not ready for that level of work. If a team is worked below its level, the handler and sometimes the dog can become bored with training. Teams have to be challenged at times, but not beyond their ability to progress. Some handlers are emotionally tough and will put up with criticism. Others need a softer touch and more explanation than rebuke. After a trainer has trained a number of teams, it can become hard to remember that the novice team doesn't know all the things the trainer assumes they know. Unfortunately, it takes about 15 to 20 years of training to get really good at it, and often department trainers retire after that time, taking that knowledge with them. It seems like new handlers start over at scratch again and again without any benefit from the experience of those handlers who have gone before. Compounding this is the fact that every dog is different, and training that works with one dog and handler won't work with the next.

Dog Types

Training a dog is really 100% timing, doing the right thing at the right time. Different dog personalities require different things at different times, so there is no one way to train every dog. The basics are simple: reward the behavior you want and its frequency with increase. Do not reward or discourage behavior you don't want and its frequency with decrease. The problem is all in the timing and knowing exactly which behavior you are rewarding at a given time.

Dogs (and handlers!) can learn only one thing at a time. Something as simple as a "sit-stay" is actually composed of many

different elements: 1) physically getting to the sit position (could be from a stand, down, walk or run), 2) learning the commands that signal the sit position, 3) staying in the sit position for longer and longer periods of time, 4) learning the sit position and command in different locations (dogs don't automatically know that commands apply everywhere) and 5) maintaining the sit in spite of distractions. Knowing which element you should be teaching a dog at any given time is the real knowledge and art of dog training. Each exercise has to be broken down into different small elements, and then the elements are combined to form a finished exercise.

Rather than try to understand what each type of "dog personality" requires for training, it is easier to learn to read the dog and his reaction to training. If the dog is happy, enjoys training and progresses with the elements of the exercises, then the training is correct. If the dog freezes up, acts disinterested or offers behaviors other than the ones the trainer wants, then the training is not correct.

Police dogs have to be environmentally sound to train. If the dog shies away from people, places or things before any training begins, the dog is not a candidate for police work. If there are problems in training, be sure that the dog itself is a suitable candidate to eliminate that problem, something that no amount of training will adequately address.

Police dogs also have to have "working drives" to be trainable, or, in other words, ways to motivate them to work. Dogs with "food drive" can be rewarded with food, dogs with "play drive" with play, "pack drive" with the affection and approval of their handlers, "prey drive" with chasing and catching objects. An otherwise stable dog with no drives makes a great pet, but will not work because he has no motivation to work.

Beyond drives and stability, the dog's reactivity and energy level greatly affect how they are trained. Malinois are legendary for their drive and high energy levels. They can be endlessly motivated to work. What makes them harder to train is that they offer behaviors very rapidly in a short period of time. Trying to reward them for the proper behavior becomes difficult when they give you five behaviors by the time you have decided you need to reward. Using a conditioned reinforcer with a high energy and fast dog is essential, and the handler has to be very experienced and a fast thinker to keep up with the dog. Slower handlers with fast dogs need to have good trainers who break the exercises down so the dog and handler can learn at the proper pace.

Fast and reactive dogs are also prone to become hectic. Once a dog (or handler) becomes hectic and loses focus on the training task, the dog will not learn. Unable to earn rewards and facing the

possibility of being corrected because of his hectic behavior, the dog may also stress out. Again, dropping back to simple elements with simple goals will help the dog to calm down and learn.

Slow and calm dogs sometimes seem to take forever to learn an exercise, but, once they learn it, they are reliable and seem less likely to make up their own variations of what they have learned. The slow and calm dog makes a better tracking dog, staying focused on the scent and following the puzzle out to the end without being distracted by what is going on around him. The hectic dog has a harder time staying focused on a single task. But the reactive dog, properly trained and handled, can make a great detector dog because he can work fast and reacts quickly to small amounts of scent. The slower dog will take longer to work and will react slower in the same application.

Successfully training each type of dog depends on understanding their attributes and shortcomings and adapting to them. There is no one perfect dog or team for every police application. The better dog trainers have learned one fundamental truth: learn to read the dogs and they will tell you how to train.