

## **Superpower Listening - Are You Really 'Hearing' Your Dog?**

“Eureka, what are you trying to tell me?” My Golden is sitting beside me barking. Why won’t she stop barking at me? As she continues to bark to get me to pay attention, my frustration at my inability to continue working to meet a deadline becomes obvious in my stern tone. “Please go and lie down!”

Why am I getting frustrated? Just LISTEN to her!

I see her staring at me as if she is attempting to telepathically burn her needs into my brain. “What do you need, Eureka?”. She barks at me again and pops up and down on her front paws. I think about what she has done so far that day and realize what I think she wants. “Do you want to play Find it?” She spins around and bolts for the door. “Find it” is the game of searching or snuffing for food tidbits in the grass. She loves this game. I prepare small morsels of food in a container then go out on our deck and fling handfuls of the mixture into the grass. My dogs race to find the tasty pieces. When they are busy hunting, I head back to my computer. Eureka spends the next 15 minutes searching for her treats then comes in the house and lies down, completely satiated and content. No more barking.

My friend and fellow dog behaviour consultant calls this my intuitive superpower!

Dogs barking is one of the many unwanted canine behaviours we receive complaints about at our training centre (along with jumping up at people, destructive behaviour, biting leashes, poor leash skills, difficulties in training and more). These conflicts between dogs and humans are largely due to communication breakdown.

Most people are not taught how to “listen” to their dog. They often fail to see actions, body postures and vocalization as a form of “language”. Further, the goals of most training exercises are very human-centric. We want our dogs to do tasks, sports, or behaviours when we ask. This creates small conflicts between us. But what can we do about it? Dogs don’t talk! And humans do not perceive the world the same way dogs do. This doesn’t have to be an insurmountable divide.

The Britannica dictionary defines intuition as:

“a natural ability or power that makes it possible to know something without any proof or evidence: a feeling that guides a person to act a certain way without fully understanding why.”

I believe intuition is important when we are attempting to understand our dogs. Because dogs cannot speak to us by talking, we need to develop our abilities to understand what our dogs need. You know you’re getting it right by how the dog behaves! So intuitive superpower is the ability to interpret what your dog is communicating, take action where needed to achieve fulfillment and peace with your dog, without any hard evidence that you are making the right choice.

Although dogs don’t talk, they do communicate. They have needs, feelings, desires and dislikes. The same communication models that work for humans apply to our dogs. Communication is a continuous feedback loop. The sender transmits a message to the receiver whether verbally, by action, or other behaviour. The sender receives the message and decodes

it to interpret the meaning and then, in turn, sends a message back to the receiver. If the message is decoded incorrectly or if the message is not understood, the feedback will indicate this when the message is sent back to the original sender. And the loop continues!

In human to dog communication, if the human wants the dog to sit, she says “sit” The dog receives the message and decodes it. The dog does not sit but looks at the human - feedback to the human that there was a misunderstanding when the message was decoded. Next the human says “sit” and lifts their cupped hand over the dog’s head. The dog sits - message received and decoded and understood correctly.

“That’s great for a simple behaviour like a sit” you may be thinking. “But what about something like stopping my dog from barking at the front window!”. This is where developing your intuitive superpower and understanding your dog’s communication becomes a game changer!

I use Isa Engleberg of Prince George's Community College in Maryland's 4 Rs of conflict resolution as a guide. They are: Recognize, Reflect, Respond and Resolution.

### **1. Recognize:**

Before you can resolve any conflict between you and your dog, identify what conflict(s) exist. This can be situational or general. I ask people to become very observant and recognize conflicts the dog may be having with us as well as the challenges we feel we are having with the dog.

### **2. Reflect:**

This stage of the process can be the most challenging! Here is where we develop our “listening” skills. We need to become very good at reading dogs’ body language, identifying the nuances in their vocalizations, understanding when they take actions and when they don’t, etc. Next, list the potential causes for the communication. Is the dog anxious? Does the dog need to go to the bathroom?

Example: A dog begins to whimper. He then walks to the door of the house and scratches at it. He continues to whimper.

We could say that this dog needs to go potty. But upon reflection, it may be more nuanced than that! What if the dog was out 20 minutes ago? Is it likely a biological need? Is it the time of day when the dog goes out to play fetch with his person? Or is there a squirrel outside that the dog saw through the window. Attempting to identify what the dog is trying to communicate or what they need takes reflection and excellent “listening” skills and, with practice and observation, you will begin to identify most of what your dog is trying to tell you.

### **3. Respond:**

To build your superpower once you have recognized the conflict and reflected on probable causes of the gap between what you desire and what your dog needs, it is important to respond effectively! Attempt to view things from the dog's perspective. Your response will vary depending, on what your dog is communicating. Some examples:

- If your dog is communicating fear or anxiety in a situation, you need to become your dog's advocate. Protect and support them in these situations. Offer a soothing touch or place your dog beside or behind you. You may need to leave. Scatter small treats on the ground to help the dog remain calm. You are your dog's protector and advocate. Your dog will appreciate you listening and responding appropriately.
- Implement dog-centric cooperative games. Go for a natural walk on a trail. Hide treats around your yard then go "search" for them with your dog. These games build a relationship of mutual understanding and bonding.
- Acknowledge what your dog is trying to tell you. If the dog is barking at the window, walk over, place your hand on your dog and look out the window to see what they are barking at. Acknowledge them for alerting you. This approach will change the entire dynamics in those moments.

#### **4. Resolution:**

There are many benefits from implementing this conflict resolution strategy and putting effort into understanding our dog's communication and needs. Our relationship dynamics improve. Our dogs become more cooperative, including improved recall! Conflict is reduced and therefore our frustration and tension are less. Overall, both you and the dog will be much happier.

To build the ability to understand what your dog is "saying" and what they need (i.e. to build your intuitive superpower) takes practice! This conflict resolution framework is a great way to begin developing your skills and changing your approach to challenging situations with the dogs in your lives and will result in a much richer and more fulfilling relationship experience. You will enjoy your dog more and they will enjoy being around you! And after all, isn't that what it's all about?



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