



K9 Living Case Studies

Serena the Solitary

Serena had a classic “Leave me alone!” personality. She would give hollow stares when praised, yawn when offered a treat and turn the other way when her owner wanted to pet her. Serena found her way into Kathy’s training class after several run-away attempts. Her personality was not one conducive to a successful training program – especially since she was not accepting of rewards.

Therefore, Kathy decided to ask Serena’s owner not to talk to her for one week, except to put her leash on or crate her. After the first few hours and days, Serena hadn’t noticed the family wasn’t speaking to her – she went around the house in her usual fashion, ignoring them all. Kathy expected this and advised the owner to keep it up. Finally, on the sixth day, Serena exploded. She began throwing toys at them, nudging her nose under their hands so they would pet her and offering “sit” after “sit” so they would praise and reward her with treats. From that day forward, the relationship was improved – the family finally owned a dog that wanted and enjoyed attention and interaction.

Muffy the Paw Whacker

One of Kathy’s students announced that she had taught her Mastiff Muffy to sit in five minutes. It sounded like quite a feat, except that each time the dog sat, she would take her paw and hit her owner on the leg. The owner sheepishly admitted that Muffy did this every time, but that she ignored the behavior since she was just happy to have the dog sit. After Kathy observed Muffy’s sit a few more times, she identified the reason for the behavior. Each time the dog sat and slugged the owner’s leg with her paw, she received a treat. Hence, Muffy thought she was being rewarded for the sit and the foot action. Although the owner thought she was ignoring the behavior, she was actually rewarding it!

It took about twenty minutes for Kathy and the owner to re-train Muffy to sit without the foot action. This experience is a good illustration of two points. First, we may know why we are rewarding our dog, but our dog may have a different interpretation of why he/she is being rewarded. Therefore, sometimes the answer to the training problem is as simple as seeing the situation through the dog’s eyes.

Raven the Distracted

At one of Kathy’s training lessons, Raven’s owner put the dog in a sit/stay and walked to the other side of the yard. Before the owner was five feet away, Raven shifted onto her hip. Since the owner wasn’t watching, the behavior was not corrected. When the owner reached the full distance, she turned around and smiled at Raven. Raven then felt something behind her ear and rotated 90 degrees to scratch her ear. Her owner still did not say anything. Finally, Raven got up and started walking away, at which point her owner went to correct her for breaking the stay. Clearly, the dog – who had shifted her hip, rotated around and scratched – had not been doing a focused stay, but the owner didn’t notice something was wrong until Raven got up to leave.

Kathy decided that the feedback Raven was receiving from her owner made her feel that her actions were acceptable. Kathy explained her theory to Raven’s owner, then suggested keeping a close eye on the sit/stay, correcting every movement not in the definition. By the end of the week, Raven’s stay problem disappeared. What was the lesson learned? That dogs only know what we tell them – either by action or our inaction.