

Both Ends of the Leash

Knowing what your dog knows

Patricia B. McConnell

“I know he knows better!” I must have heard that a thousand times. So has every dog trainer in the country. We could decorate the sky with the worlds “I KNOW he knows,” encased in scalloped pillows like the speech of cartoon characters, floating in the air above our heads. There's just one problem: These words are trouble. Big trouble. “Knowing” is a shaky concept at best, and the word can mean so many different things that it can end up meaning nothing at all.

It's understandable that we dog owners are quick to assume that our dogs “know” better. After all, the dog who urinated on the carpet when you went to the movie has been housetrained for months. Surely he “knew” better. My Great Pyrenees Tulip knows perfectly well what “Come” means, but last night she stared at me as if I had morphed into an alien speaking in tongues when I asked her to come back into the house. How many obedience competitors have a dog who nailed the broad jump in every fun match in the state, and then trotted around it like a silly puppy? But the dog “knew” it, right?

Yes, the word “know” is a dangerous one, in part because it presumes that knowledge is all that is needed for anyone, human or dog, to do the right thing. But think of it from our own perspective: Every one of us “knows” how to obey the speed limit when we're driving. If you can drive your car out of the garage, you have the mental and physical tools necessary to lighten up on the gas pedal. Does that guarantee that you have always obeyed the speed limit? No? But you “knew” better, didn't you? Perhaps you simply weren't paying attention, as you should have, because your mind was on something else. Or maybe you were in a hurry and consciously pushed the envelope, hoping to avoid cars with pretty red lights on top of them so you wouldn't be late to an important meeting.



I'm not excusing speeding. I'm simply pointing out that “knowing” the speed limit doesn't guarantee that any one person obeys it, any more than a dog who “knows” not to pull on a leash is going to behave in a perfectly responsible manner every time she goes out on a walk. Just as you are aware of the speed limit, but have your reasons for not always obeying it, your dog may be aware of what “Heel” means, but not always perform it perfectly.

There are myriad reasons why your dog might not perform an action that she seemed to have mastered the day before. For one thing, it takes energy for any of us – human or dog – to focus our attention, especially when we're overwhelmed with other things to think about. Perhaps, on your way home from work last night, you were thinking about a tiff you had with a co-worker, and as you replayed the conversation in your head while driving, you inadvertently started to speed up. In a similar way, your dog may have broken her heel because she was thinking about the dog around the corner who growled at her last week. Your dog wasn't being disrespectful, or “disobedient” (that's another word we'd do well to drop from our vocabulary!); she just did what we all do on occasion – lost focus for a moment.

Learning how to stay focused takes practice for dogs as well as people, and part of your job as an owner is to help your dog learn how to do it. Look at tracking dogs: No one needs to teach them how to smell; they can do that brilliantly all on their own. What they learn in training is to focus on one particular scent and to follow it while ignoring everything else. Tracking dogs who are “naturals” are dogs who are

easy to keep focused (and thus harder to train to come when called if they're on a scent trail). At the other end of the continuum, some dogs seem to have brains that leap from one thing to another like crazed frogs with Attention Deficit Disorder. But most of our dogs simply need help, just as we humans do, learning to stay focused when surrounded by distractions.

On the other hand, you or your dog may be perfectly focused, yet choose not to do what is expected because something else seems more compelling. You might be late to pick up your children, and so you push the speed-limit envelope because you're worried about them standing outside in the rain. Your dog may decide that chasing the squirrel across the street is more important than maintaining the perfect heel that she “knows” how to perform. Knowing what's expected of us isn't always enough to get us to do it, and that's as true of dogs as it is of people. That's no reason to get mad at your dog, but rather a reason to think about what motivates your dog and find a way to make it worthwhile for her to do what you want.

There's a third reason that knowing something doesn't necessarily lead to doing it, and again, our own species illustrates it as well as dogs do. You may “know” how to hit a perfect serve, but that doesn't mean you do it every time. You may “know” your speech by heart, but you still might end up standing on the stage with your mouth gaping like a goldfish and no words coming out. Being able to perform an action in one context doesn't guarantee that you can do it in another. Actors and actresses in plays know this well, when months of practice fall apart on the night of dress rehearsal just because they changed their clothes. People who compete seriously with their dogs in any performance-related activity are well aware that they have to “proof” their dogs carefully in the context in which the dogs will be expected to perform.

But even seasoned competitors have trouble generalizing from one context to another, as do the rest of us. The same obedience competitor who goes to great lengths to help her dog practice sit/stays at fun matches often doesn't know why her dog won't sit/stay at home when visitors come. Just because they practiced sit/stays in the ring doesn't mean that the dog can contain himself at the door when visitors come. To master an activity, at least some of the

practice has to happen in the location of the performance. It's not just dogs who don't generalize from the performance ring to their own house. We do the same thing when we don't think to “proof” our dogs at home instead of only at a dog show. If generalizing from one context to another is so hard for us humans, then we can't be surprised that it's hard for our dogs as well.

As if that weren't enough, there's a fourth reason why dogs who “know” what you want might not do it, and that's a lack of agreement between you and your dog about the definition of your signal. My first Border Collie, Drift, drove me crazy for a couple of weeks when I was teaching him his directional commands around sheep. “Come By” means go clockwise, and “Go Away” means go counterclockwise, and for weeks he had performed it perfectly. Each time I'd give the signal he'd pivot and dash in the correct direction. Good boy, Drift. I was quite proud of both of us. But suddenly, it all fell apart. I'd say “Come By” and he'd run “Go Away.” I'd say “Go Away” and he'd run “Come By.” I don't know who became more frustrated, me or Drift, but training sessions got less and less fun for both of us, until I finally figured out what was going on.

Without realizing it, I had inadvertently trained Drift that both “Come By” and “Go Away” actually meant “Change Direction,” because I had never used the same signal twice in a row. “Come By” was always followed by “Go Away,” and Drift learned that each time he heard either one of those phrases, he'd be “right” if he changed direction. Good grief. You can imagine how long it took to fix that particular disaster of miscommunication; poor Drift and I struggled for months to find a way to understand one another. And all because, without realizing it, I had never given the same signal twice in a row.

Sometimes it seems so clear to us that we know what's inside our dog's brains, but that's a fool's game at best. We don't know what's in the brain of another human half the time, much less in the mind of an individual of another species. We don't even know if one person's concept of red is the same any anyone else's. Sure, the color red has a quantifiable wavelength, but that doesn't tell us how the person standing next to us perceives it. Research on differences between men and woman has found that we don't even track time similarly. “Just a minute”

turns out to mean about 50 seconds to men and closer to 70 seconds to woman. But we both “know” how long a minute is, right?

Granted, understanding dogs may be a lot easier than understanding a member of the opposite sex (no wonder we call dogs our best friends!) but in either case, the word “know” often doesn't lead to understanding. So think about that when you're tempted to get angry at your dog for not doing something she “knows” how to do. I know you know that she knows, but now you know that knowing doesn't get you much.

Know what I mean?

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