USE THE 3 DS FOR TRAINING SUCCESS

Every task we teach our dogs will have several different levels of complexity from very simple, to very difficult. One of the most common mistakes made by dog owners is to try and climb those levels too quickly.

The 3 Ds of dog training are known as Distraction, Distance and Duration. They come into play in every context and all training exercises. Many people wonder how super-effective dog trainers get such amazing results. The truth is they follow a set of rules that you can follow just as easily. And one of them is the golden rule of 3 Ds. The golden rule of three Ds is to only increase ONE of the three Ds at any one time.

Remember that dogs need a lot of help to understand that a cue such as come or sit, given in one situation has the same meaning in another. As soon as you change the factors influencing the task, factors we call the 3 Ds, you affect your dog’s chances of success.

**Distractions**

Distractions are part of life especially for dogs. Let’s face it a dog can be distracted by just about anything from the high value food reward to the wind blowing leaves. Distractions are part of dog training no matter what, so we might as well begin to work with them and take them into account.

Sometimes distractions are environmental sounds or sights. Other times we are doing distracting things, placing hands in treat pouches or pockets, walking too far away during stay training, or perhaps the dog is too close (distance) to the door or visitor for a sit and wait. Being aware of distractions and doing your best to set the dog up for success by lowering them will help your training immensely. In fact I would say the number one reason why dogs are unsuccessful in training is some form of distraction.

When you add distraction, it’s important to temporarily lower your criteria in order to help your dog. You can do this by going back to a higher level of reward/reinforcement (giving treats more often).

Always start with the lowest amount of distraction and build on it as your dog does better with the training. Start in one room in your house and when your dog performs reliably there practice in every other room of the house. Practice
in the car, in the back yard, in the driveway, out on walks, and then in lots of other locations.
For example, if you are working on down stays, get the dog rock solid in the house and the back yard before attempting the down stays at the barbecue at your neighbor’s house.

It’s very important to remember that when you move your training outside, you have changed EVERYTHING to your dog. Sights, sounds, temperature, all the lovely doggy smells of outside, textures under his feet, etc…. Don’t be surprised if you have to start again at step one; lure and reward. Build up duration as you did in the beginning. Move to new areas as your dog is ready.

Distance

Distance can help or hinder your dogs training. In the case of the reactive dog you want as much distance as needed when you begin to desensitize and counter condition the dog to what makes it reactive. Many clients make attempts at reducing their dog’s reactivity only to find it is too difficult as they are too close to the distracting stimuli and usually for too long.

Conversely you want a short distance from your dog when building duration for a stay or beginning to build a recall so you can keep up a high rate of reinforcement. Don’t walk away too far away from your dog when training your dog to stay or asking your dog to come. Build up distance slowly.

When teaching distance control, you need to go back to the least distracting environment. Begin by stepping backward one step at a time. Distance is sometimes built in inches, not feet. Put duration of the stay on the back burner for now and concentrate on distance, returning to the dog to reinforce right away. A very common mistake is to add too much distance in a distracting environment and then expect the dog to hold the position for a long duration of time. Remember to raise your criteria when your dog is ready. Keep your expectations in check. If your dog blew it, figure out why so that you can help him be more successful. It is up to you, as his trainer, to make it work for him.
**Duration**

Duration is also a very big factor for many dogs to either hold stays or deal with frustration and reactivity. You should always consider duration in training. Duration is a time interval. It can be how often you reward your dog, how long he holds the stay before he is rewarded or released, how long the door stays open before you release him to exit, and even how long he is staring at a distraction before you try to get his attention.

When working on stays of any kind, start with a duration that is easy so the dogs understands the training, then build as necessary. Here’s an example of adjusting the frequency of the reward for a stay. After the first several treats (varies from dog to dog) begin to slow down the speed of reinforcement. Reward every 2 seconds and then 3 seconds and then 5 and 9 and so on. As you continue to slow the rate of reinforcement, begin to straighten out your position. This can be a sticky point, so gradually straighten up (stand up), then lean over to deliver the treat (for small dogs) and straighten up again. If your dog keeps popping up, you may have increased the time between treats too quickly for him to understand, or there may be other factors such as distractions in the environment.

**Adding and Subtracting the 3 D’s**

These three D’s are the mathematics of dog training. Only increase one of these at a time to really maximize your dog’s training. In general, when you increase one, you decrease one or more of the others. If you have been noticing your dog breaking stays, not coming when called, reacting at some dogs and not others or perhaps door dashing during sit and wait at doors, you may want to reconsider one or all of these 3 D’s in your training protocol. The 3 Ds will help you to be a better trainer and will turn your dog into a winner.

**Training Tips:** The lower the distractions the easier it is to increase duration and distance.

The further away you are from a distraction, the easier it is for your dog to be successful. Timing also matters. The longer your dog interacts with the distraction before you cue him, the less success you may have. Cue your dog before he gets too close to a difficult distraction or before he has a chance to get really invested in it.