

DECK: Human Performance/Feedback

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CARD: Coaching for constructive feedback

DISCUSSION:

As a culture we tend to focus on the negative, solving problems and achieving perfection. This is thinking that permeates many aspects of our lives - and has its roots in the industrial age. The K9 SAR world is no exclusion. Most of us have been trained to "fix" things and look for what is wrong instead of focusing on what is right. The SAR K9 environment of the past has tended towards the dogmatic - with a few "experts" being stuck on doing things one way: "It's my way or the highway." In that kind of environment handlers are continuously in a "testing" mode, not "training" mode. Add on to that the fact that giving constructive feedback and providing effective coaching is an art and skill that many have not mastered and you have a perfect recipe for dysfunction: handlers that dread "trainings," an environment that is perceived as intimidating environment and a sense that "anything less than perfection will be held against me and perhaps even result in my ouster from a team". Feedback in that kind of environment is focused on the negative and what went wrong. It is often provided indirectly - handlers may hear second hand what their perceived challenges and problems are. There is little trust, fear of failure is pervasive, creative thinking is non-existent, co-creation of solutions and attempts to try new ways are squelched and mistakes are perceived as potential "K9 SAR career stalling."

What would be possible for K9 SAR teams if they stopped focusing on what is wrong and infused more effective coaching and feedback skills into trainings? In that environment "trainings are for trainings" not for testing. Everybody is a peer. Everybody is valued for the different knowledge and experiences they bring to the table. Mistakes are embraced as opportunities to "fail forward." Everybody is united around a common purpose. There is trust and a deep belief that everyone wants success for everyone else: "We got your six o' clock!" Trainings are fun and full of learning. Feedback is plentiful, positive, specific, focused on behaviors and generally direct, and "in the moment," There is a lot of listening and asking of questions. Experimentation and exploration is the new constant. Handlers feel safe and respected. They want and seek out feedback.

The latter describes a coaching environment where peer coaches and handlers are using coaching skills and give and receive constructive feedback by focusing on what handlers/K9s are doing right, what can be done differently, asking for permission to give feedback, being respectful, being open minded, focusing on specific behaviors and giving feedback in the moment. In this kind of environment there is very little "telling: and a lot of questions, listening, trying things out and a relentless focus on learning and "failing forward."

POWERFUL QUESTIONS

- Is this a safe environment to give and get feedback? If not, what changes do I have control over? How comfortable am I having this conversation?
- How well have I mastered the art and skill of giving constructive feedback? What skills do I need to grow?
- Would you be interested in some observations I have? (asking for permission - and yes, there are times that someone will choose NOT to get feedback - perhaps too stressful at the moment)
- How do you give/receive feedback? What is your preferred way to receive feedback?
- How did you think you did on timing of the "show me" cue? (Example of asking

- How do you give/receive feedback? What is your preferred way to receive feedback?
- How did you think you did on timing of the "show me" cue? (Example of asking question and having handler "own" the answer rather than "telling.")
- Did you observe your dog getting distracted? How did you respond? What might some other ways of responding to that situation be?
- How do you think you did with setting your K9 up for a focused start of the runaway?
- What did you learn? Are there any things you will change next time you do this drill?
- What would be possible for you and your K9 partner if you overcame this challenge? What are the possibilities?
- What would be a different way to look at this?
- Are you OK with making mistakes? What is the worst thing that could happen if you and your K9 partner are less than perfect? What is the opportunity in failure?

TIPS

- Giving Constructive Feedback
 - Ask for handler observations first: What went well? What did s/he observe? What may need some practice? Anything s/he is planning to do differently going forward? Listen openly and carefully. Remind him/her that you are there to make sure they succeed.
 - Ask for permission to share observations. "Would you like me to share some observations?" "Are you interested in....?"
 - Start with positive observations and what went well?
 - Focus on the behavior not person: "I observed," "I noticed." Does the person have control and ability to change behavior?
 - Stay curious, avoid making judgments? Ask questions, explore together. Stay focused on the notion that there are many ways to get to the same outcome.
 - Coach on the value of maintaining balance between *mastery* as a K9 team (focus on process and the how - lifelong learning) and focusing on short-term *results*.
 - Discuss the "perfection trap" and fear of failure. Focus on the concept of "failing forward" and learning from mistakes.
 - Close the feedback loop: ask the handler what was useful about the feedback and what s/he learnt? What will s/he do differently? What could you have done differently to be more effective in conveying feedback?
- Receiving Constructive Feedback
 - Ask for specific and descriptive observations of behavior.
 - Ask clarifying questions to understand the feedback.
 - Listen openly and curiously. Avoid jumping to negative conclusions and assumptions, reacting and becoming defensive. Give the person giving the feedback the benefit of the doubt - assume they are interested in your success.
 - Reflect and use feedback as information to improve performance.
 - Thank the person giving the feedback and sharing their perspective.
- Examples:
 - I noticed you were looking at your dog and gave your "show me" cue the moment he grasped your tug. Great timing!
 - I wonder what would happen if the volume of your cue was dialed down a bit? Would you be willing to try and see what happens?
 - It was great to see how you focused and directed your dog at the start of the runaway - directing your dog with your arm and making sure the dog was observing the runaway subject and had intense focus when you gave the "find" cue?
 - Good job of providing high levels of reinforcement.
 - I really liked how you stayed back, stayed patient and let your dog work it out.
 - It was great to see how prepared you were - toy ready to go!

- Great job saying the "Find" cue only once. Nice! Repeating it over and over does not make your K9 understand it any better - but may dilute the cue - probably just begins to sound like "blabla" and may result in your K9 losing focus and ignoring the sounds you are making.
- Perfect timing. You "paid" her right when she offered her "final trained response."
- I am tickled that you only changed one variable in this training session and backed off your criteria when you noticed there was some stress.
- It was great seeing that you increased the rate of reinforcement when a sudden distraction came along.
- I love the fact that you skipped a step and realized that she was ready for a bigger challenge.
- That was a great decision to move her away as other dog teams approached. Good situational awareness.

MISTAKES

- Focus on negative. Jumping to assumptions.
- Becoming judgmental and making general, vague comments.
- Not listening.
- Fear of failure.
- Impatience and just focusing on results.
- Telling rather than asking.
- Thinking you have all the answers.
- Being dogmatic and inflexible. "It is my way or no way."
- Assuming the worst.