

## Session title: **Assessing and influencing our dog's readiness to work.**

Presenter: Sharon Carroll

Time: Saturday (October 7) 11am-12:40pm

Location: Hall 3

**Session description:** Before we commence a training session, start the next exercise, or enter a competition space, we want to know that our dog feels ready to undertake the task ahead.

In order to be ready to give their full focus to us and the task, our dog needs to feel safe in that space, they need to have previously built the skills needed to ignore the distractions in that space, and they need to have a desire to participate with us and engage in the task. When these requirements have not been fulfilled, we will find ourselves having to compete for our dog's attention.

Having to compete for a dog's attention is not fun, and ultimately leads to frustration for both the dog and the handler. Continuing to ask for "work" from a dog that is disengaged, distracted, and/or frustrated may result in:

- Missed cues.
- Anticipated cues.
- Slow responses.
- Incorrectly performed behaviors/exercises.
- Looking away from us and the task.
- Stalling / hesitating.
- Zoomies.
- Leaving us to "visit" other people / dogs.
- Leaving us to investigate objects / pieces of equipment.
- Attempts to escape the training/competition space.
- Performing displacement behaviors (e.g. scratching, self-grooming, sniffing the ground).

Ensuring we only ask our dog to work when they feel ready requires accurate assessment not only at the start of the work, but on an ongoing basis throughout the session.

But what do we do if we assess our dog's readiness to work at some point and they indicate they are not ready? These are the times we need a systematic protocol for influencing our dog's readiness to work. The steps in this system help our dog to dissipate excess arousal, calm their emotions, and re-focus their thoughts. At this point we can then accurately reassess the best course of action in each instance.

In this session we will cover:

- Strategies that allow us to accurately assess our dog's readiness to work, both initially and on an ongoing basis throughout a session.
- Methods for assessing what caused a deterioration in focus/work during a session or whilst at a competition.
- Strategies for influencing readiness to work, both prior to starting work and at any point where we notice a deterioration in focus/work.

Working spots: To gain the most out of this session participants need to have at least a few simple skills/behaviors that are reliable in a "boring" environment (i.e. they do not have to be reliable in the camp environment). Dogs with high level competition skills are also welcome. If your dog is almost 100% reliable performing all behaviors in a "big" environment, then it is unlikely you will gain enough value from a working spot in this session but may still find the information a useful addition to your existing toolbox.

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## Pre-session notes

*(For interest only – not “required reading”)*

# **Factors that affect the accuracy and reliability of cued behaviors.**

To perform any task well, our dog needs to:

- Have built a relationship with us (i.e. believe that we are trustworthy / fair / predictable).
- Absolutely understand what is being asked (i.e. have clarity).
- Have a desire to perform the behavior (i.e. be adequately motivated).
- Not be negatively impacted by:
  - Prior learning – (i.e. poisoned cues / activities / situations / environments; existing habits of performing “incorrect” / “inappropriate” / “unwanted” behaviors).
  - The environment – (i.e. non-beneficial emotion and/or arousal associated with stimuli in the environment and related pressures).

A deficit in any one of these will negatively impact our dog’s ability to respond rapidly and accurately to our cues.

As soon as we notice a reduction in our dog’s ability to follow our cues, we need to accurately and objectively assess what is causing the issue.

Being too broad is a problem; we need to get specific. We can’t just say - our dog performs great when training in our yard at home, but “doesn’t listen to us” when we are at a training facility /competition venue / out in public. We need to look much closer at the specific changes in behavior.

If we have placed our dog in a situation that they are finding extremely challenging (i.e. it is well outside of their existing skillset), then they likely won't be able to respond to us at all. This is because they are either:

- Significantly affected by stimuli in the environment (i.e. the majority of their focus is being drawn away from us and the task. This could be due to the stimuli causing concern, or due to the stimuli being extremely "interesting").
- Finding the training unclear / confusing / frustrating / overly arousing.
- Struggling due to feelings associated with a previously “poisoned” cue / activity / situation / environment.

In these cases, we initially need to reduce the overall challenge substantially, then at that point we can make a further assessment as to what the exact cause is, and how best to proceed.

However, in situations where our dog is experiencing “challenge” but it is only marginally outside of their existing skillset, then instead of our dog completely ignoring us, they may show a deterioration in the quality of their work. They may:

- Lack precision (i.e. overshoot or undershoot when pivoting into fronts or heel position; forge, wrap, or lag when heeling; blow past us in a recall or retrieve; miss hides or false alert in nose work; break a start line in agility; bark or whine excessively throughout a performance; fidget or creep in stationary positions (“stays”), etc.)
- Respond slowly to a cue or require multiple cues to perform a behavior.
- Perform the “incorrect” behavior (e.g. we say “sit” and they spin)

Providing the behaviors we are cueing are “established” behaviors, (i.e. our dog can reliably perform these behaviors accurately in a “boring” environment), then these unwanted responses are occurring due to one of the following reasons:

1. The influence of stimuli in the environment - (i.e. a portion of our dog's focus is being drawn away from us and the task. This affects our dog's ability to accurately process and respond to our cues due to redirection of their attention (whether as a result of concern for safety or competing motivators) and potentially due to excess arousal as an aspect of the response to the stimulus.)
2. Our dog's arousal is in excess of the optimal arousal zone due to the training itself (i.e. training that is causing confusion / frustration / concern / discomfort; or the reinforcement item / strategy is causing excess (i.e. non-beneficial) escalation of arousal.)

To determine which of these is having the most significant impact, we can initially implement arousal lowering strategies. If after this, the behaviors return to being performed with their usual speed and accuracy, then the issue was purely arousal-based. In these cases, we need to become very observant, and in future sessions we can strive to implement arousal-lowering strategies BEFORE our dog escalates to non-beneficial levels. If, however, after implementing arousal-lowering strategies the behaviors are still not back to their usual speed and accuracy, then it is likely that stimuli in the environment are influencing our dog's ability to process our cues and respond appropriately. In this case, we need to move to a less challenging space or remove the specific distraction/s. Separately we then need to undertake further

desensitization work with our dog to build the skills they will need to be able to remain focused in that same space, with the same distractions, in the future.

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## **A systematic guide for responding to a lack of focus.**

Once confused, concerned, or distracted, our dogs can rapidly stop responding to our cues. This occurs either because our dog is feeling the need to prioritize their safety at that time, or there is a distraction present that is beyond their current skillset and hence they are unable to ignore it.

In order to get back on track as quickly as possible, we need to respond rapidly. We can only do this if we have developed a plan ahead of time, and we are ready to instantly initiate our pre-planned actions.

Below are some suggested plans that may be useful for specific situations.

### **Instances that involve a general loss of focus.**

When our dog's focus is only slightly split (between us and an aspect of the environment), we may notice some deterioration in the quality of our dog's work (e.g. they may require repeated cues; they may be slightly slower to respond to our cues; they may lack precision; etc.) or we may observe additional arousal-related behaviors (e.g. whining, barking, fidgeting, etc.). However, once our dog's focus is more significantly split, they will have very little "brain capacity" left to focus on us or follow our cues. For us, this can feel like we are having to "compete" for our dog's attention / focus, and/or that we are needing to constantly "nag" our dog just to get a response to a simple cue.

As soon as we notice "reduced quality of work", or we notice our dog is struggling to maintain solid focus on us, then we immediately need to find a way to simplify the task. Assuming we were asking for complex behaviors when we first notice the split focus, then we will "simplify" in the following order:

1. Can our dog still do a series of simple behaviors (sit, down, spin, hand touch, etc.)? If so, then we can keep asking for simple behaviors in rapid succession,

with an instant treat after each. If our dog cannot respond accurately, or they are needing repeated cues to perform these simple behaviors, or we are needing to "nag" them to remain focused on us, then we stop asking for these behaviors and instead move on to simplify further. In this case the next step would be Offered Durational Engagement (or any pattern that requires eye contact in order to access treats).

2. Can our dog successfully participate in focused Offered Durational Engagement (or any pattern that requires our dog to offer eye contact in order to access a treat)? If so, we keep working on that with minimal duration between treats. ODE requires less "thinking" than simple behaviors, and the rate of reinforcement is higher. Ensure there are regular breaks between sets of ODE – maybe 20 to 30 seconds of ODE, then a treat toss, and then repeat the ODE. If our dog cannot successfully participate in ODE (e.g. they are constantly looking around or getting stuck looking at other stimuli in the area, and we are needing to use interrupters to remind them to focus on us), then we stop asking for ODE (eye contact), and instead move on to simplify further. In this case the next step would be treat tosses (or any pattern that does not require eye contact to initiate the next rep).
3. Can our dog actively participate in treat tosses (or treat drops at our feet – or any pre-trained pattern that does not require eye contact to initiate the next rep)? If so, then we just keep cueing the toss and drop a treat on one side of our feet, then as soon as they have eaten the treat, we cue a toss and drop a treat on the other side of our feet and keep repeating this pattern. Treat tosses / drops require less "thinking" than ODE. ODE requires our dog to perform a behavior (look at us), in order to be rewarded, whereas treat tosses still involve listening for the toss cue, but the reward occurs as an aspect of the behavior (picking up the treat). If our dog can't actively participate in treat tosses (e.g. they are not interested in picking up the food or they need us to keep reminding them to get the food), then we stop asking for treat tosses, and instead move on to simplify further. In this case the next step would be "rapid feeding".
4. Can our dog take food if "rapid fed"? If so, then we just stand and feed our dog one treat after another without asking for any specific behavior. This approach helps to relieve pressure on our dog as they are not being asked to perform a specific behavior, it reminds them that remaining with us will result in a good outcome, and it helps to lower arousal (which will speed up their recovery time, so they can go back to "thinking" work again as soon as the stimulus has left the area or our dog has reduced their feelings about the stimulus / situation). If our dog can't even accept food if rapid fed, then we need to move them to a space

where they feel comfortable (maybe back to the vehicle / crate; maybe out of the area entirely), until they have calmed and are able to think clearly again.

It is always best to be prepared to simplify at any time we see a deterioration in the quality of our dog's work. This is not only to relieve pressure and reduce discomfort for sensitive dogs, but also to avoid the ongoing practice of "incorrect" or poor-quality work, and to avoid developing the habit of needing to be "nagged" to remain focused or to continue working.

### **Instances where the session has been going well, but our dog suddenly fixates on a stimulus.**

At times when our dog has been working in a high-quality way, with engagement and solid focus, but suddenly notices a stimulus (i.e. stops working to look, listen, air scent, etc.), we may choose to:

- Allow our dog to focus on the stimulus or leave us and investigate. This may be an appropriate response for a puppy, or at times when our dog was already on "free-time" (i.e. we had given our dog a break, or we had allowed "dead time" to occur between exercises). When in the middle of active work though with a mature dog, we will likely choose to not have our dog access reinforcement via disconnecting from "work". The reason being that if not interrupted (and an alternative behavior reinforced), disconnecting will become a habit and will be performed whenever something interesting appears in the training / competition area.
- Use a positive interrupter to ask our dog to refocus on us and/or the task. Once our dog re-engages, we then need to decide:
  - Was this a momentary distraction that has now left the area, in which case we may be able to immediately return to work.
  - Is this a distraction that has remained in the environment but only caused a brief disruption in our dog's focus, in which case we may be able to immediately return to work.
  - Is this a distraction that is continuing to cause ongoing split focus for our dog (i.e. our dog's work has not returned to the quality, focus, accuracy, and precision, that was present before the stimulus appeared), in this case we may decide to cue a break from work, or we may attempt to simplify the task, or we may attempt to undertake a series of games that

are easy and will engage our dog's interest, or we may decide to move to an easier location.

**Instances in which our dog is showing signs that they are extremely uncomfortable.**

When our dog is looking uncomfortable / fearful / concerned we need to determine the exact cause, this will allow us to take the appropriate steps to reduce the pressure / discomfort.

- If the behavior occurred as a result of training pressure connected with us or the task itself, then we need to instantly relieve that pressure. This can initially be achieved by simply cueing a treat toss away from us and the task, and then simplifying the task or cueing a different familiar task.
- If the behavior occurred as a result of a specific stimulus being present in the environment, then we need to increase the distance between our dog and the stimulus to a level where our dog returns to full function. This may involve leaving the area entirely if we cannot find a suitable distance. Then separately we need to take a note of what the stimulus was and make a plan to work on desensitization to avoid this issue occurring again in the future.

**Instances where the whole session has deteriorated.**

In situations where our dog has become uncomfortable, confused, or distracted, and we are struggling to find a way to reconnect with our dog, or we have become emotional for some reason (e.g. we started the session already distracted or emotional, or we are struggling with our dog's behavior / responses), the best course of action is to stop the session immediately. We can either do a treat scatter and then end the session entirely, or we can cue our dog to go to a station and then wait until their arousal is lowered and they have returned to a "thinking" place, or until we can gather our thoughts, settle ourselves, and plan an effective way forward.

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In this session we will start with a brief discussion about this topic, then we will work with teams to assess and influence each dog's readiness to work in the camp environment.