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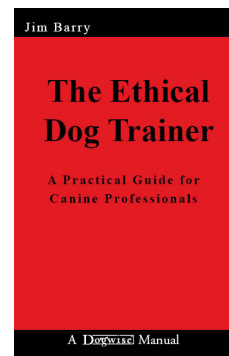
The Ethical Dog Trainer.

A Practical Guide for Canine Professionals

Chapter 1 – What Does Ethics Have to Do with Dog Training?

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What is ethics, anyway?

There are several ways to define ethics and ethical behavior, so it's useful at the outset to look at some common definitions. In keeping with the practical intent of this book, we won't be going too deeply into theory, but having a consistent set of terms and a clear understanding of some basic concepts will be useful, just as understanding and using the terminology of learning theory can be very helpful in training dogs.

The term ethics comes to us ultimately from the Greek word *ethos*, which means the character or nature of something. In the original sense, ethics simply means being true to our nature. The *American Heritage Dictionary* has several definitions:

1. A set of principles of right conduct.
2. A theory or system of moral values.
3. [The] study of moral philosophy.
4. The rules of standards of . . . a person or the members of a profession.

Some people use the terms ethics and morals interchangeably; others think of ethics as related to external standards and of morals as the dictates of individual conscience. Actually, the word "morals" is derived from the Latin *mores*, which means customs or traditions, so the original meanings were the opposite of the current practice.

To avoid unnecessary confusion, we are going to use both ethics and morals to refer to either external or internal principles of conduct. We'll also use ethics to mean the branch of philosophy that studies issues of right and wrong.

Do I really need this stuff to be a successful trainer?

Why bother getting bogged down in definitions? The short answer is to be a better trainer. Being an ethical trainer and a successful trainer—at least as we commonly define success—are not exactly the same, but there is a relationship. Trainers who act in accordance with their highest standards feel

more comfortable with themselves than those who cut corners. This enables them to focus their energies on developing their knowledge and skills rather than trying to work around ethical problems. They also come across to their clients as reliable people who deliver what they promise. By conveying an image of integrity, they may find that their clients are more inclined to recommend them to others. Trainers who are forthright, compassionate, and supportive are, in the long run, more likely to achieve a positive reputation than those who exaggerate their abilities or care more about themselves than their clients. Customers can tell.

So there's no guarantee that ethical behavior will lead to fame, fortune, and a bigger bottom line. But there are both personal and professional benefits to being the best that we can be, in every sense.

Creating a vision

One way to link our business goals to our ethics is through a vision statement. According to the online consulting firm 1000ventures.com, a vision statement is "a short, succinct, and inspiring statement of what the organization intends to become and to achieve at some point in the future...the image that a business must have of its goals before it sets out to reach them." Here are some examples of vision statements:

- We bring good things to life. (General Electric)
- We save people money so they can live better. (Wal-Mart)
- To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. (Nike)

These statements, of course, double as advertising slogans, and we may not agree with all of the activities that these and other companies undertake. However, a well-crafted vision statement can serve as a guidepost for all business activities, integrating core beliefs, fundamental values, and highest principles into a set of specific goals that provides a

way to achieve personal satisfaction—and, hopefully, business success.

Beliefs, values, and principles

How do we create a positive vision and become both successful and ethical dog trainers? This book will outline some steps to take when, in pursuit of certain goals, dog trainers are confronted with temptations to act unethically or with dilemmas that require them to make uncomfortable choices. Before going into those steps in detail, however, it's useful to start with a look at ourselves.

When we act ethically, we conduct ourselves in accordance with what we hold to be true (beliefs), what we esteem (values), and guidelines for how we should act (principles). For example, if we believe that animals have inherent dignity and rights, we would value compassion toward them and might follow a principle of minimizing harm in our work with dogs. If we believe that people have a right to freedom of choice, we would value honesty in our relationships and might follow a principle of providing complete information on all options available for resolving a family dog's behavior problems.

What do I know to be true?

At the beginning of our journey toward becoming highly ethical trainers, then, it's useful to ask ourselves what our core beliefs are. People often talk about their "belief systems." Usually, they are mixing up beliefs, values, and interests, so it's helpful to begin by looking at what we hold to be true, and how we come to have that set of beliefs.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines belief as, "Mental acceptance of and conviction in the truth, actuality, or validity of something." The historical roots of the word imply a religious faith, but that is only one of the ways in which people come to a conclusion about what is true. There are factual beliefs based on direct observation (i.e. "Many retired racing Greyhounds have trouble learning to sit,") scientific conclusions based on research studies (like, "When a dog is under stress, it's heart beats faster and blood flows toward the muscles in preparation for fight or flight,") or conclusions widely held within a group or culture (such as, "Pit bulls are more dangerous than other breeds.")

Beliefs have varying degrees of reliability, and many, including some of those above, may actually be untrue. But our beliefs do, in a very real sense,

provide the foundation for our behavior. So as a first step, it's valuable to enumerate our beliefs about dogs, about the people with whom we work, and about the nature of our business.

Here are just a few of the many questions about beliefs that you may want to ponder:

- **About dogs:** What are dogs for? Are they to be regarded as independent creatures with the same rights as humans? May they be being used to promote human goals? Or do they fall somewhere in between, with rights that are limited in some ways in comparison to humans; and if so, what are those limits?
- **About people:** What is my relationship to my clients? Am I a service provider, an educator, a counselor? Do I work for them, or are we equal collaborators? Are all of the people with whom I work to be valued equally, or are some to be regarded more highly than others? Are there things that clients might do that would cause me to want to stop working with them?
- **About business:** What am I in business for? Is the purpose of dog training to help families to be more content with their dogs? To achieve awards? To provide a living for myself and my family? What makes a successful business? Is it the "bottom line," the achievement of a particular set of performance goals, esteem within my community?

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