



53/2 Moo 7 T.Sanpuleui, A.DoI Saket, Chiang Mai 50220, Tel.: **09 – 99 78 146**
www.luckydogs.info Email: lucky4paws@yahoo.com

Dog trainer or -instructor: a description

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What makes a person, who teaches dogs the SIT, DOWN, STAY, etc, a real dog-trainer? What kind of skills and knowledge a dog trainer and –instructor needs to possess? What makes a dog trainer –or instructor a good one? And what is the difference between a trainer and an instructor?

Before answering above-mentioned questions I would like to explain first what I understand under ‘training’ and ‘educating’ a dog:

With ‘**Training**’ I mean bringing a dog to a certain training- or competition level in order to be nominated for a certificate, diploma and/or a special notification on the dog’s pedigree, such as BH (companion dog test), ZTP (breed suitability test), FH (tracking sport), or SchH or IPO (defense sports). The performance of the dog needs to be precise, like when recalling the dog it should come and sit close and straight in front of the handler. Or, when walking, the dog the dog needs to heel exactly with his shoulder at it’s handler’s knee while continuously looking up at him. Therefore, the training sessions are mainly concentrated on the dog only. Often when a dog-trainer trains the dog for the owner, the involvement of the owner in the process lacks.

For the **education** of the dog, however, the involvement of the owner is of utmost importance. Here it is not so much important how precise the dog sits or heels, much more important is that the owner will have sufficient control over his dog during the daily events. For example, the dog should come when called, walk nicely on the leash with the owner in stead of pulling him around, and sit quietly when the owner is in conversation. Further, the owner should know how to prevent undesired behavior in his dog, such as jumping up, chewing growling biting or excessive barking. Therefore, when educating a dog the dog-trainer or, preferable called dog-instructor, aims the training sessions at the owner in combination with his dog, in order to teach the owner how to properly interact with his dog based on mutual trust respect, resulting in a happily obeying man’s best friend.

This, however, does not mean that a dog trained for a certificate can not to listen to its owner or that an well-educated dog can not be trained for some certificate anymore.

As a result, a dog-trainer needs to have knowledge-of dogs, while a dog-instructor, on the other hand, also need to have an basic understanding of human psychology, of presentation techniques, be able to receive criticism and criticize himself. Further, as a dog-instructor often works with more people and dogs on the field at the same time, more care need to be taken concerning the safety on the training field.

Criteria which a knowledgeable dog-trainer and a dog-instructor should fulfil:

Knowledge on breeds, breed groups, and their characteristics:

Both dog trainer and dog instructor should have sufficient knowledge of the different breeds, the groups they belong to and their characteristics. It does not only look more professional, it is also necessary in order to understand where certain behavior patterns in a certain dog come from. After all, most of the behavior of our 'modern' breeds are a direct result of the tasks and functions for what that certain breed was bred for. Next to the general characteristics, each breed has its own specific peculiarities. An example: retrievers are bred to retrieve prey (mainly birds) from land and water. In order not to damage the prey during transport they must have a soft mouth. Most are excellent retrievers but often not so good for guarding. On the other hand breeds bred for guarding (Rottweiler, Dobermann, Fila Brasileiro, etc) need to have a strong mouth. Otherwise, how can they protect their territory?

Knowledge on dog behavior (development)

Also both dog-trainer and -instructor need to have basic knowledge of dog behavior (development). To be able to understand a dog's behavior it is important to know how a dog's mind works and develops and how it communicates.

Dog behavior is influenced by its genes and hormones, and its environment, thus what it learns during its life. A trainer and instructor should have at least the basic knowledge on this, such as the knowledge on the breed characteristics.

During the dog's life it experiences several life stages in a dog, similar to that of people. So, there are baby dogs, puppies, puber- or adolescent-, adult- and elderly dogs. Baby dogs do not learn in the same way as young dogs, puberty dogs, adults or elderly dogs do. Contrary to the general believe that a dog can't be trained before the age of 6 months, a dog certainly learns from the moment it was born. Of course, a 2 weeks-old puppy will not be able to understand commands such as SIT DOWN or COME. For this it is still too young, let alone it can see and hear already properly. But it does learn through smell and touch. Another very, if not the most, important reason why not to wait educating the dog until it is 6 months or older is that the most important and crucial learning period for a dog is BEFORE the age of approximately 3 ½ months: this period is called the socialization period. For becoming well-behaved and -adjusted to all the different kinds of circumstances that a dog can come across later in its life, it should familiarize with those circumstances during the very important period. Dogs that have not had the chance to socialize with, for instance, other dogs, strangers or children during these first 3 to 4 months of their lives, may show disturbed behavior towards these subjects later in life. A trainer and instructor should know this and be able to recognize when he comes across an improper socialized dog. We have been training and socializing puppy dogs, started at the age of 8 weeks. These dog have grown up into stable and happy dogs.

A trainer and instructor should know how a dog communicates. For instance: when a trainer or instructor will not recognize the dog's signaling with its tail, ears, facial expression and body, that he is confident and strong and will not accept any challenge, bites or dog fights may follow. Or another example: punishing a dog that is already signaling sub-mission, or worse fear, results in an increased fear and decreased confidence in the dog. It certainly decreases the trust of the dog in the one who trains him, which in the worst case can lead to generalization: a mistrust of all people. By

understanding a dog's behavior the trainer and instructor can avoid much sorrow for the dog as well as for the owner.

Another aspect a trainer and instructor should have knowledge of is the different processes through which a dog learns. Dogs learn through experiences in their lives. These learning processes start from the moment they were born. We can recognize three different ways of learning processes:

- a. A dog learns through Trial and Error. The dog does something, for example, trying to open the food-bucket. When this behavior has success next time the dog will try it again and, thus, the behavior increases. However, when the food-bucket is closed well and the dog's attempt fails (error) then the behavior decreases and finally it will disappear, or it will not develop in the first place.
- b. Imitation. Dogs imitate each other. You can observe that clearly when you put your puppy with an adult dog (preferable a well-behaved one). As a matter of fact, shepherds take great advantage of this way of learning. Once the puppy is big enough to follow the herd, he will take it with him during his trips. Mainly by watching and imitating the adult dogs at work the pup will learn many tricks of the herding job.
- c. Reinforcement and punishment. Reinforce (that is strengthen or support) a behavior you want in your dog you can establish with the help of something that is according to the dog. There are two ways to reinforce a certain behavior, that is 1. By giving the dog a pleasant stimulant (such as food, petting, a friendly voice, a game), resulting in an increase of that behavior, or 2. By taking away an unpleasant stimulant (e.g. when you stop approaching a scared dog). In this case, the behavior you want, the dog stop being scared and backing off, will increase.

Punishment, on the other hand, takes care that a certain action will decrease in frequency. Also, here, there are two ways to punish. That is, 1. By giving a correction, or 2. By withholding an expected reward.

Both reinforcement and punishment should be applied with care. For example: too hard of a punishment results in a scared or aggressive dog, that will not be able to learn in an optimum way. On the other hand, a too soft punishment can be received as a reward by the dog in stead of being it a punishment, with an increase in behavior in stead of what was meant, a decrease.

The training method a trainer or instructor uses for training influences greatly the dog's performance. Therefore, both need to have knowledge on the different methods of training a dog. Corrections will often lead towards avoiding behavior, meaning that the dog will try to avoid the correction. This can result in the behavior you desire, but more often it results in scared dogs or rebellion (as soon as the dog is of leash it will not obey anymore). On the other hand, positive training methods usually results in an increase of the behavior you desire, as all dogs (and human) like to receive reward. At LuckyDogs we work according a positive training method, and well the clicker-training method, as we like to work with happy and confident dogs.

Of course, both dog trainer and -instructor should be able to recognize the basic symptoms of disease in a dog and know how to apply first aid. Dogs with cough, mucus in the nose and/or eyes, fever, diarrhea are sick dogs and, therefore, can better postpone their training sessions until they recovered. Dogs that limb are ALWAYS in pain, whether they show it or not. Young dogs

(small breeds up to 1 year of age and big breeds till 1 ½ to 2 years of age) being allowed to jump are at high risk for bone- and joint injuries. In other words, it is highly important a trainer/instructor knows the basics about the dog's anatomy, physiology, pathology and first aid.

Knowledge on people:

As I have mentioned before a dog instructor differs from a dog trainer as he works with the owner rather than with the dog. Therefore, a dog instructor needs to have, next to the knowledge on dogs, also knowledge on some human psychology. For example, it is necessary to know why an owner brings his dog for training or education. Maybe the owner wants to own a well-behaved and –adjusted dog that he can control. Or he is interested in a dog that performs well in the show ring or sports, in order to get that much desired nomination on the pedigree.

Then, also people have different ways of learning. Some prefer to look and listen while others like to try themselves, too. It is up to the instructor to recognize each individual's desire and work with that.

An instructor need to have some knowledge on how to present himself. How does he come across? Does he keep the owner's interest? And the instructor need to know how to ask the right question, in order to find out whether the owner understands what he is telling or showing.

Also, an instructor needs to know how to set up a course-, a lesson- and an exercise plan, in order to be able to present an organized and professionals lesson program to owner and dog.

An instructor, but also a trainer, should know himself and dare to auto-criticize, listen to criticism of others and admits his own mistakes. Only in this way he can understand his own strong and weak points and, then, exploit the strong points and work on the weak point ones.

Last but not least, besides a proper know-how of dogs and people a trainer/-instructor ALWAYS needs to keep safety matters, in order to prevent unpleasant circumstances. Therefore, the trainer/-instructor should check regularly the training material, the dog's health, but also the health of the owner. For example, during training it is better to wear good fitting shoes in stead of flip-flops or high heels, as those easily can cause twisted ankles. High-heels can even severely hurt a dog's paw.

Conclusion:

Well, we can conclude that both dog trainer and –instructor are not just born from one day to the other. It should be a person who understands his responsibilities towards the dog and its owner and is always willing to study and update his knowledge. And, above all, it should be a person who has love and compassion for the work he does and the animals (and people) he is working with.

This article is created by Ms. Nienke Parma,
Certified Dog Instructor, Certified Dog Psychologist and Certified Manager of a Small Animal Boarding Kennel.

For more information, please, contact LuckyDogs in Chiang Mai, at **09 99 78 146**.

We also provide boarding facilities and behavior modification counseling for dogs and cats.