

## “If You Can’t Say Anything Nice ...”

I just Googled something I used to hear from my parents: “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” I was amazed to find nearly 500,000 entries, so it seems that adage is alive and well. Certainly it is good to be positive with other people, but there are instances when it is not always possible or desirable to keep silent about negative things. There are times when we need to say things to each other—and to our clients—that are not completely “nice.” Canine professionals very often find themselves in a teaching role with their clients. As such, we sometimes need to correct clients’ misperceptions or misunderstandings of their dogs. Other times, we need to find ways to pry them away from their devotion to dominance-oriented trainers or celebrities. There are yet other times when we have to show clients that their current methods or behaviors are unproductive and possibly causing pain or unnecessary stress for their dogs.

Those of us who are dedicated to the use of non-aversive dog training methods often find ourselves facing clients who are wedded to the use of outdated and painful devices such as prong and shock collars or methods such as pinching ears and rolling dogs onto their backs, and before we know it, the fuse has been lit! Because we are passionate about what we do and deeply concerned about the dogs whose lives are entrusted to us, we sometimes feel compelled to correct that maddening state of affairs immediately. While passion and concern are good things overall, they can also get us into trouble. If we spout off too quickly about how “wrong” the client is for using said devices and methods, we might be indelicate about it and offend the client. While you might respond by thinking, “Fine! I don’t want to work with anyone who is using such methods and they need to know right now where I stand on this,” the upshot of quickly-spoken criticisms or ultimatums often is the loss of that client. Again, you might think that this is fine because it would not have worked out anyway with that client, but here is where I wish (respectfully) to differ with that line of reasoning.

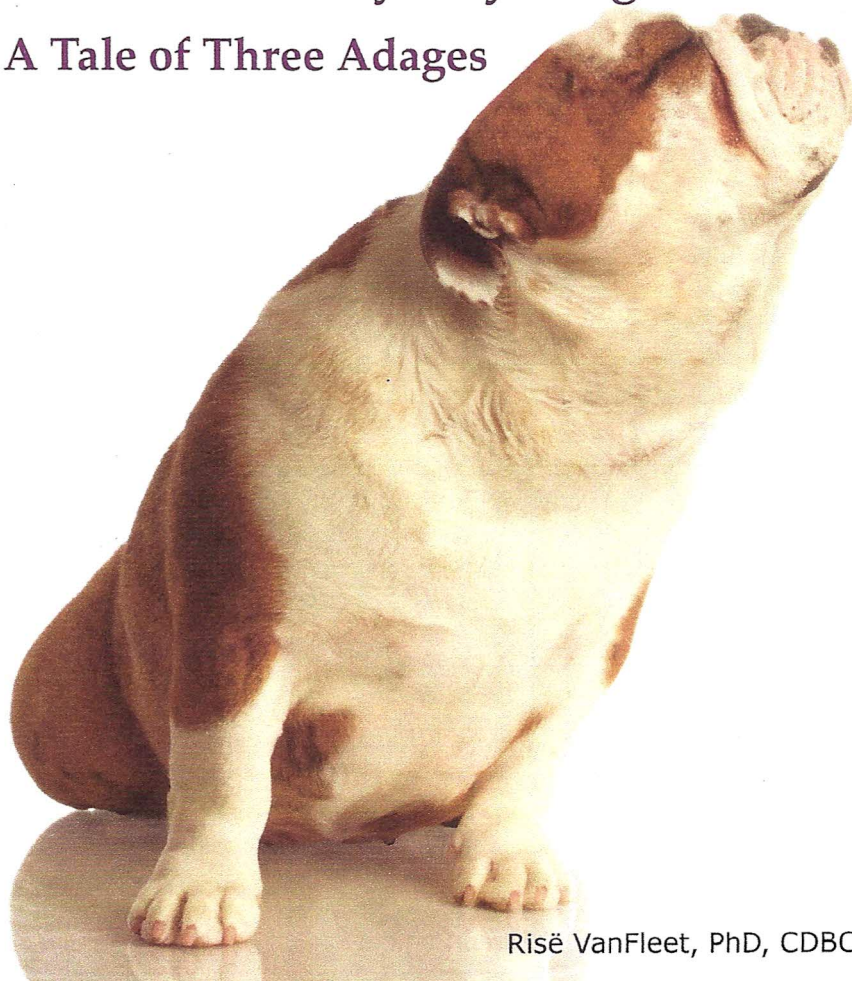
I have faced this same situation many times in my play therapy work with maltreated children. If the protective service system decides that these children will be returned to their parents (usually after the parents have met certain criteria established by the court), I often end up working with those parents to try to create change in that family for the betterment of the children and the parents. While

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I could certainly entertain very negative thoughts and attitudes toward the parents, this approach is not likely to benefit anyone. If the parents are there with me, I have an opportunity. They are sitting in my office for any number of reasons, but whatever their motivation, I have an opportunity to help change things. If I tell them how horrible it is that they maltreated their child (even if that is true), it is likely that they will go somewhere else or skip therapy entirely and I will lose that opportunity. I have confidence that I have the skills to help them move to a better place, so I don’t want that to happen. (There ARE times when I won’t work with some parents because they have not done the required preliminary work, but most of the time when I face this situation, the parents are at least minimally motivated to work to get their children back, and it becomes my task to help increase that motivation.) I might add that even with less serious family situations, I sometimes learn that parents are spanking their children or using inappropriate punishments, and the same line of reasoning applies—I need to keep them coming back if I am going to help change the situation. This does not mean that I ignore the problem—we talk about it and then focus on how to prevent its recurrence. *[continued on next page]*

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### A Tale of Three Adages



Risë VanFleet, PhD, CDBC

So, back to the dogs ... We know that our positive, scientifically-backed methods are best. We want to help our clients’ dogs, and if we alienate the clients, their dogs may end up in the hands of other trainers who are still using aversive methods. So what’s a nonaversive canine professional to do? The answer brings us to a second adage ...

**“It’s Not What You Say ...”**

The commonly heard phrase, “It’s not what you say but how you say it” (179,000,000 Google hits), gets us out of our conundrum with our difficult clients. The reality is that we have to say something, and part of it is probably going to be negative. If they are using aversive devices or methods, we need to teach them that their way is not productive and, more likely, quite damaging for their dog and their relationship with the dog. The operative word is “teach,” however, not “scold.” If we are too blunt, abrupt, and critical in what we say, it is likely to lead to client shame and embarrassment (by far, the most likely internal reaction) and ultimately to their seeking a different trainer. But there are ways we can be honest and straightforward yet tactful, offering them hope and encouragement for a better outcome and a better relationship with their dog, and by so doing increase the chances they will continue to work with us. Our use of tact and care with the owner is directly related to our potential to help the dog out of a bad situation.

This is actually a complex subject involving our own personalities, expectations, and communication skills in interaction with the client’s personality, reactivity, and openness, not to mention the dog’s unique characteristics and behavioral contributions to the situation. Human communication is difficult, but I find it untenable when trainers say, “That’s just the way I am. Clients can take it or leave it.” Ultimately, that’s a self-defeating attitude that robs us of our ability to help. Granted, people are a huge challenge sometimes, but embracing dogs means helping their people.

In the space allotted here, I will share a couple ways to communicate your thoughts and feelings about negative client decisions or behaviors that are much more likely to “get through” and help clients listen to and follow what you say.

**How to Share Negative Feedback so Clients Can Hear It**

Even though they may not act it, clients often feel vulnerable when they bring their dogs to us for help. They already feel inadequate or inept. If we are too critical, it might further bruise their egos, push their vulnerabilities over the edge, and make them defensive. When people are defensive, they cannot hear our message! To counteract this possibility, we must be careful how we phrase our concerns in order to keep defensiveness at bay.

Sometimes we can do this simply by stating what we have observed without any judgment, such as, “I noticed that you’re using a choke chain.” Pause right there, and you might hear from them why they are doing that. (This information is actually very important as it gives us clues about their motivations and how we might help them change.) Sometimes we can share more of our observations, but in a manner that is non-confrontational, such as, “I noticed when you tugged the leash, Noodles backed away from you and flattened back her ears and tucked her tail. Did you see that?” Again, a pause after that might reveal some key client thoughts and beliefs.

Another approach involves “floating” an idea by the client: “I’m wondering if Noodles might be a bit frightened when you tug that way? It seems that collar might hurt her and cause her NOT to follow as you’d like.” Finally, if we need to be quite direct, it can still be done in an ego-saving manner: “I’m concerned that you are making your dog more fearful rather than more obedient. I know you don’t mean to do that, and I think I can show you some alternatives that won’t cause fear.” When trying to share such tricky communications, humor can be exceptionally useful, but it should never be sarcastic or at the client’s expense. Positive, friendly humor builds your relationship with the client: “It seems the tugging approach is uncomfortable for Noodles, and I’m getting a little worried that your left arm is soon going to be longer than your right! Let’s try something else to see if it might work...”

This same manner of “softening” the communication while still being straightforward is important in classes as well. Clients learn from the feedback you give others, and your communication sets the tone for the entire class. Humans learn best when they are relaxed (just like dogs), and you can help set that tone by being careful when you deliver any negative feedback or comments.

**The Real Secret of Tactfulness**

If the verbal communication suggestions thus far seem difficult to incorporate, another major way to overcome clients’ aversive practices is something you already know how to do. Furthermore, this is probably the ultimate secret to being tactful, sensitive, diplomatic, and humane with those humans!

Let’s go back and think about dogs for a minute. When you work with a dog with a bad behavior, such as jumping up, what do you do? I can think of several options, but the one I’m after is to ask or teach the dog to perform an alternative behavior that is incompatible with the unwanted behavior. For one of my own dogs who was a galactic champion jumper-upper when greeting people, helping her learn a nearly bullet-proof “sit” did the trick. We don’t even have to ask her for it anymore—she automatically sits when greeting people. Tactfulness with people often involves this very same principle.

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