

How Clever is Your Dog?

By Sandra Kruczek

This is the story of a horse called “Clever Hans”. It took place in the early 1900’s. Hans was owned by a retired mathematics instructor named Wilhelm von Osten. He lived in Berlin and was in his sixties at the time of this scenario.

Von Osten claimed that Hans could do multiple mathematic calculations, could spell and differentiate and identify colors among other amazing feats. Hans would paw the ground with his foot any number of times in order to answer the questions presented by von Osten. He could also shake his head as if to say yes or no.

Of course this behavior was fascinating to the world and no less so to Carl Stumpf, who was the director of the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin. He gathered together a group of experts consisting of zoologists, circus animal trainers, psychologists and veterinarians in order to watch von Osten and Hans perform. They wanted to be sure that von Osten wasn’t giving Hans any cues so that it would appear that the horse was thinking on his own. Von Osten denied giving any signals to Hans.

Ultimately, Oskar Pfungst, a colleague of Stumpf performed an exhaustive study of the pair. It turned out that Hans was a master at reading body language. Blindfolded, so he couldn’t see his owner he couldn’t answer the questions. Pfungst calculated that von Osten moved his head less than 1/5th of a millimeter or released tension in his body when Hans reached the number or answer that was correct. Von Osten was not even aware that he was doing this. This would later be termed the “Clever Hans Effect”.

Hans was not quite so exceptional after all. His ancestors and those of our dogs have survived for generations by discerning tiny variations in the body language of predators and prey. These subtle and unintentional gestures reflected the predator’s (or person’s) **intentions**.

Domestic dogs observe us this same way. They know our intentions by remembering the consequences of our behavior. In my house, if I stand near or touch the drawer in the kitchen that contains the nail trimmers, my dog Stuart will get up from wherever he is and go into another room. I wouldn’t think of holding the clippers and then call him to come to me. This would put him in real conflict. It would also “poison” or damage the “come here” cue.

In the same way if we’ve ever called a dog to us and then punished him for some past (unrelated) behavior such as chewing our shoes when we were gone at work, he would learn that when our posture or tone of voice is presented this way that it’s not safe to come near us. He’s not being stubborn or guilty; he’s using his inborn survival skills like Clever Hans.

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