

Wag More, Bark Less

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I confess, this title was not made up by me. My wife saw a bumper sticker with this sentiment and shared it with me. I think the basic wisdom in the phrase is great and wish there was a way to get some managers to understand the simple logic here. Why is it that some bosses feel compelled to bark when wagging is a much more expedient way to bring out the best in people?

The barking dog is simply doing its job. The dog only knows that to defend his territory, he needs to sound off at anything that might encroach. The frequency of barking is an interesting aspect. Why does the dog bark at intervals less than about 10 seconds? Is it because he has a short memory and can't remember that he just barked? Is it because the potential invaders of his territory need to be reminded every few seconds that he is still around? Is it because he simply enjoys keeping the neighbors up all night? Is he showing off his prowess or having some kind of dog-world conversation with the mutt down the street? I think all of these things could be factors in the frequency of barking, but I suspect the primary reason is a show of persistence. The message we get from the barking dog is "I am here, I am formidable, I am not going anywhere, so keep your distance."

In the workplace, if a manager sends a signal, "I am here, I am formidable, I am not going anywhere, so keep your distance," the workforce is going to get the message and comply. Unfortunately, group performance and morale is going to be awful, but the decibel level will at least keep everyone awake.

When a dog wags its tail, that is a genuine sign of happiness and affection. You can observe the rate of wagging and determine the extent of the dog's glee. Sometimes the wag is slow, which indicates everything is okay, and life is good. When you come home at night and the dog is all excited to see you, most likely the wag is more of a blur, and it seems to come from way up in the spine area. The wag indicates, "I love you, I am glad you are here, you are a good person to me, and will you take me for a walk?"

Dogs are incredibly loyal, even beyond human reason. For example, I am reminded of the picture of a Labrador Retriever lying next to the coffin of his master who was killed in Afghanistan. The dog refused to leave the area.

Even when a dog is not treated well, it does not become critical or judgmental. The wag is not withheld because the dog had a bad day. The dog looks for the good and appreciates it. The dog is ever hopeful, ever optimistic, ever grateful. The wag is still there unless the dog is seriously sick. It is amazing.

A manager who wags more and barks less gets more cooperation. Life is better for people working for this manager, and they simply perform better. Showing appreciation through good reinforcement is the more enlightened way to manage, yet we still see many managers barking as their main communication with people. Look for the good in people, and appreciate it. Try to modify your bark to wag ratio and see if you get better results over time.

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