

////// The Behavior Department

Burning Out on Behavior

While shelter work can provide trainers great personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose, it can also be a huge source of stress

BY JEAN DONALDSON



Teaching pups to sit and stay is only one of the scores of duties that shelter trainers face daily. Many find themselves overtaxed and exhausted by the demanding nature of shelter work. SEAN WARREN/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

At a conference this past summer, I joined a lunch table where a small group of dog behavior and training staffers from two shelters was comparing notes. One woman—the final decision-maker on animal intake at her shelter—described the strained relationship her organization had with local rescues. The shelter had a high-bar policy on dog behavior, but a low bar for adopters: Dogs underwent exhaustive behavior evaluations, with a fail rate of nearly

50 percent, and those who failed were bumped from adoptions and euthanized at any hint of a problem. Adopters, on the other hand, only had to pony up the adoption fee. Rescue groups, both breed-specific and general, clashed constantly with shelter staff over intake and placement of dogs.

Earlier that week, a high-profile rescue group had given her terrific grief over her decision to decline three puppies who had not met adoptability criteria. She was frustrated: She felt she had gone to the

mat for these dogs, having tested each of them twice on successive days, hoping they might pass the assessment. But the rescue worker had yelled at her (“Maybe if you bothered to screen and educate your adopters ...”), and threatened to write a letter to the shelter’s president. The commotion caused her to fall behind on other important tasks, such as updating counseling literature for adopters, and resulted in unpaid overtime.

Though she personally believed the puppies’ behavior might be modifiable,

she noted that she feels lucky to work at a shelter where adoptability criteria are formally spelled out; the organization's policies save her and colleagues from having to make difficult daily judgment calls. She also mentioned that the tested dogs—who happened to be of the breed she specializes in—were likely to suffer from massive orthopedic problems later in life, and ought not to have made it past their initial health check in the first place.

As she told her story, a young woman from the other shelter sat listening quietly. At the end, she asked, "How do you keep sane?"

"We don't," the first trainer replied, to a chorus of knowing laughter.



Jean Donaldson is the primary instructor at the **San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers**, which she founded. She is the award-winning author of *The Culture Clash*, the soon-to-be-released *Oh Behave! Dogs from Pavlov to Premack to Pinker*, *MINE! A Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs*, the instructional DVD *Perfect Paws in Five Lessons*, and *FIGHT! A Guide to Dog-Dog Aggression*. Her own dogs and others she has trained have numerous titles and wins in various dog sports. She is currently studying evolutionary biology, and lives in the Bay area with Buffy, a chow she adopted from SF/SPCA in 2002.

We found out that the girl—perhaps 25 years old and seemingly unfamiliar with any internal politics swirling at her own shelter—is her organization's sole trainer, entrusted with an overwhelming amount of responsibility. She designs and teaches volunteer classes on dog handling and adoptability training, makes behavior follow-up calls, counsels adopters about their animals' behavior, evaluates dogs, makes co-housing decisions, runs doggy playgroups, designs and implements behavior modification plans for some of the dogs, and runs obedience classes for the public on Saturdays and Sundays.

"Wow, you must be tired," was the only response we could utter. It was obviously true: She said she was developing her dog training on the side and, as soon as she could, would quit the shelter.

Given that so many dogs are surrendered for behavior reasons, it seems that more shelters would have established behavior departments decades ago. But having dog trainers on staff and behavior and training departments within animal shelters is still a relatively new trend.

Shelters' need for behavioral guidance has made behaviorists the newest MVPs at many organizations; their expertise in behavior, training and counseling is indispensable.

But are these Most Valuable Players being worked into the ground? Far too many I've come across say they feel used up and burned out. They feel squeezed for time, squeezed for budget, squeezed on all sides politically, spread too thin, and supported too little by management.

Even outside of the shelter environment, dog training meets many of the criteria for professions with high burnout rates. The stakes can be high: Trainers often face life-and-death issues for the dogs they're helping, and critical quality-of-life issues as well. They deal with low pay, constant compromise on their cases, a lack of regulation and licensing and lack of formal training in key fields: counseling, pedagogy, curriculum design, and adult education.

So why do it?

Dog trainers overwhelmingly cite their deep love of dogs and strong interest in dog behavior as their reasons for getting into the field. However, most end up self-employed, struggling with the usual start-up-business costs and stresses.

Confronted with those realities, some trainers decide they might better serve dogs in the shelter world. They hope to make a difference for homeless dogs, and the lure of a set organizational infrastructure and regular salary and benefits is attractive. Many don't fully anticipate the new stressors they may experience.

So what's the better deal—the ups and downs of small business ownership, or work within the shelter system?

Every trainer I pose this question to has the same answer: "It depends." And a lot of what it depends on seems to be the following.

Empowerment

Is the trainer able to play a part in organizational policy-making, or must she enact policies she doesn't fully agree with? The latter can be tolerable for some trainers, provided they're not stuck in the "dead messenger" position, where they have to enforce policies that neither clients nor other staff at the shelter understand or agree with. This can lead to clashes with other departments, as well as internal squabbling over training methods. When a trainer does make a decision, her morale may be compromised if she's not supported by higher-ups.

Institutional Buy-In

Is the behavior and training department adequately staffed? Is there time for projects that will have long-term impact, or is there only time to put out fires? For most shelter behavior staff, a sense of making a real difference for dogs is the bottom line for their enjoyment of their work and their morale. Over and over, I hear complaints of institutional cultures that pay lip service to this goal without developing real policies and programs that support it.

Organizational Culture

How are the working relationships in the organization? Is there true camaraderie? Does the workplace feel healthy? It's natural for colleagues to become friends over time, and a good working environment is one in which employees feel valued and trusted. Are people enjoying their jobs? If everyone in the shelter believes that work "isn't supposed to be fun" and is operating accordingly, it may be an environment ripe for burnout problems.

So how can you tell if you're a burnout candidate or just experiencing normal amounts of work stress? Everyone feels overloaded, unengaged, and underappreciated sometimes. But you may be burning out if you regularly experience the following symptoms:

- Feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, failure, emotional exhaustion, or a sense of being "bullied"
- A sense of detachment, apathy, and cynicism about work
- A sense of feeling trapped, coerced, isolated, or just overcome with daily frustrations big and small
- The feeling that most daily tasks are pointless, boring, or unpleasant
- Depression, anxiety, lack of energy or interest in other pursuits in your time off
- A sense of needing to "recover" from work
- The feeling that you're regularly required to do things contrary to your personal ethics or value system

A burnout resource from the National Institute of Mental Health states that "service professionals who spend their work lives attending to the needs of others, especially if their work puts them in frequent contact with the dark or tragic side of human experience, are also at risk." Like professions such as social work and nursing, work in animal shelters often matches that description. It can be difficult dealing with the multitude of issues facing stray animals—one of the least valued populations in our society—when you happen to value them very highly and got into the field to serve their needs.

Sadly, a great deal of mental health literature on professional burnout con-

cludes that the best solution is to do something else: Change jobs or change professions altogether. But a transfer to another department or a different supervisor is not usually an option for a trainer in a shelter, and jobs in the industry are still relatively scarce, even for those willing to relocate. This can compound the sense of being trapped.

If your options are limited, and you have burnout symptoms, I recommend the following:

Get into a community. Network with other like-minded individuals for mutual support. This might include talking to people at your shelter, finding other local dog trainers, or going online to meet trainers at shelters around the country.

Make your case. Identify the big-ticket stressors in your job and how they might be alleviated; then explain them to your supervisor. If these issues are making your job too difficult, tell her so. If you get a hostile or dismissive reaction to a respectfully and well-made case, you can either appeal to a higher power, stick it out, or in the worst-case scenario, quit.

Get professional help. Mental health is crucial to well-being and severe work stress is a hazard to it. Beware of what's called "proprietary suffering," where your personal identity gets caught up in the idea of being a martyr to the cause. If you don't thrive doing this kind of work, don't do it.

Finally, remember you are in a welfare profession, which is especially demanding. Christiane Northrup, an OB-GYN and women's health advocate, often says the following at her seminars and workshops: Everything you need to know about "helping" is in the pocket on the seat cushion in front of you: "Put the oxygen mask on yourself before attempting to assist others."

It's crucial advice for anyone in a compassion-centered field, and only by following it can trainers continue to help shelters and the homeless animals they serve. AS



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