

The importance, significance and characteristics of animal management

Dennis Fetko

Because animals have become such an integral part of modern society, competent, effective animal management is a critical aspect of contemporary culture. From companionship to personal and property protection to guide and physical service to psychological and emotional therapy to medical and learning research to food production to search and rescue to military and law enforcement, animals are a major, vital component of modern life. That formidable power is at work whether or not animals are properly managed. When they are, their awesome power is channelled for mutual human and animal benefit. When they are **not**, their great power runs amuck, potentially resulting in great harm. But society has proven that, responsibly or irresponsibly, animals **will** be with us. And that is where animal control officers (ACOs) come in — or, at least, are expected to come in.

Animal management is a job of great contradictions. The public demands your presence and performance but, because you are usually there to enforce a law, cite an owner or capture an animal, they rarely welcome seeing you or dealing with you. Animal control and management is most obvious by its **absence** — loose dogs threatening or injuring children, stray cats destroying private property and killing songbirds and wildlife, motor vehicles swerving to avoid loose animals, the danger of diseases spread to people, pets and stock and similar concerns. When the public refers to ACOs at all, it is most often with the plaintive cry: "Where **is** that animal officer anyway?!" But when you **are** there, you are seldom welcome.

High staff turn-over 'burn-out' rates attest to the numerous complex, conflicting, demanding, and emotional aspects of the animal management profession. It's badly misunderstood and dramatically undervalued. Misunderstood because, unless you've actually been out there doing it, you cannot know just how demanding a job it is. Undervalued because, since it deals with something which affects everyone at every level of society very strongly, you cannot properly evaluate it without thoroughly understanding it. And few who do not do it understand it well. It is a strange profession wherein nearly everyone highly values your results but no one likes your methods or duties. Your results are safer citizens, reduced neighbourhood tensions, enhanced animal lives, and a smoother running economy and society. Your methods include capturing and killing animals and penalising citizens. Everyone likes your results; no one likes you.

Competent animal management requires the combined skills of several professions. You must be an 'animal person' or you wouldn't choose the field in the first place, and if you're not, the public will know it and won't listen to you. Learning enough about animals to serve public and professional demands is difficult and time-consuming. Since you quickly learn that most pets are turned loose, thrown out of the house or yard, or dumped in the wild or at shelters because of behaviour problems, you also seek to develop training and problem solving skills. The better you can advise people on how to control their pet or solve their problems, the fewer you must confront or impound. You often have people ask training questions of you just because they see the uniform. But proper animal training and handling is another professional field altogether, and developing such skills demands a great investment of time, convenience and dedication.

You must also have good mechanical aptitude because you will handle various types of collars, halters and harnesses, mechanical and chemical capture and immobilisation equipment, and vehicles. And without organisational management skills, you can't effectively run or operate within a department structure that deals with public and political entities.

You must also be an effective 'people person', sensitive to the cultures, attitudes and needs of the public. If you are not, you invite discord and will not perform effectively. Citizens must welcome and respect your input, or you cannot do your job. Responding to a call where one neighbour thinks an animal is mere livestock and the next thinks it's a treasured member of the family brings you into a circumstance of dramatically conflicting but equally strong attitudes and opinions. And if you do not relate well to others within and over your department, your career won't last long.

Doing any one of these animal or human related jobs well is commendable. ACOs must do them **all** well — **plus** speak in public and educate. You probably came to the job with a drivers license, a strong feeling for animals, a willingness to deal with their owners, and fluency in English — something that, as a Yank, I lack.

How many of all the other things required to properly perform your duties did your department adequately train you for? Oh, they surely bring in so many experts to teach you human psychology, cultural and religious influences on animal ownership and treatment, animal behaviour, managerial skills, and public speaking that you're upset by all the time you must spend in on-going training! **Yes**, my tongue is firmly buried in my cheek...

And all the while you work under the realisation that your job performance is constantly evaluated by one who likely doesn't even know all the skills your job requires — and can't do them as well as you! Anyone who still thinks of a mere 'dogcatcher' should be dragged into the nineteenth century.

ACOs are in a 'no win' situation. If you don't do your job vigorously, you're criticised for slacking off. If you do it energetically, you're criticised for causing so many owners grief, and jailing and killing all those poor pets! Talk about job stress! Do it or don't do it — either way, you lose! And **both** are seen critically on your performance evaluations!

Animal management training must be extensive and ongoing because it is **critical** to your job performance and to society, and because you must deal with constantly changing and evolving attitudes and circumstances. You cannot safely capture a powerful, loose predator, tell people the best age to get a puppy or kitten, the best source from which to get it and why, the short and long-term influences of various training collars, and the significance of socialisation periods if you don't know all those things and can explain them convincingly. Then there's species specific knowledge — why they should avoid getting puppy littermates but littermate kittens are fine, or why the gesture that means play to a dog means punishment to a cat. Your time is spent telling citizens to avoid contact with loose dogs and not let them loose in the first place, trying to catch those loose dogs, fighting for your budget, learning about new equipment and techniques, and convincing **everyone** that your department needs and deserves support!

I've heard this simple-minded comment a thousand times: "All you gotta do is catch some dogs! And they run right up to you! If they didn't, they wouldn't threaten people! Put a rope on it, toss it in the truck, and drive away. How much training does **that** take? What's the big deal?"

Such comments aren't just misdemeanour ignorant, they're felony stupid. No one in a position of authority should be so uninformed. We who work with other species **can't** be that dense or we'd never make it through the day. So totally misunderstanding and misjudging some of the animals with whom we must deal is not conducive to living long enough to retire. How disconcerting when such foolish attitudes are held by your superiors.

What's the big deal? A dog can express physical power four times its body weight; a 60-pound dog can express the power of a 200-pound man. Since most acts are responses to perceived stimuli, senses play a large role in actions. Normal dog hearing is 28 times better than ours, a dog's eyes are 10 times more sensitive to movement than ours are, dogs have a 30° wider peripheral range of vision than we, and their sense of smell is so acute it cannot be measured. Dogs can hear your hair grow and smell you change your mind. Their neuronal impulses operate many times faster than ours. Their bite pressure enables them to crack huge bones or chew through fences. What's the big deal? "I'm a little busy at the moment, Commissioner, so **you** go catch that whole adult male Rottweiler! Oh, that's not **your** job, it's mine? Fine. How much training did you provide me to do it so efficiently that neither I, the public, nor the dog are injured, and the citizens welcome seeing me again?!"

Dogs learn to react in different ways to different stimuli. Let a Mastiff puppy be harshly treated during the fear imprint period by someone you resemble or who wears similar clothing or the same after shave. You now encounter that adult dog running loose. "What's the big deal?" You now threaten a predator, perhaps defending its litter on its own territory, who's prepared to fight or kill, and believes it must, has your strength, has valid reason to chase you away, is reacting to things you cannot detect, and can remove parts from your body. **Sure** it may run right up to you — and that's the last thing you **want** it to do! You risk serious, even fatal injury because the citizens you serve do not control their dogs, and you get criticised when you do the job and rejected when you request training funds!

Few understand the job's difficulty, range, and importance. When the unenlightened include your superiors, job stress can be unbearable, resulting in terminated careers, family turmoil and financial distress.

Departmental results are high staff turn-over due to severe psychological and emotional frustration, increased costs to repeatedly train replacements, and poor job efficiency due to the departure of experienced officers and the lack of enthusiastic performance by veterans. Many fine officers are lost to psychological burn-out because those who understand the job **least** are in control of the department, budget, and training. What other department is controlled by those who know it **least**?

Although animal management appeals to people with a strong attraction to animals, human interactions are a major part of the job. Will you communicate effectively with pet owners? Will citizens listen to and act upon your input? Will you be well received and respected in schools, kennel clubs and public presentations? Can you get your budgetary needs across effectively? Does the public you serve see you as an ally, helping their families and pets, or an enemy, citing them and traumatising poor animals? From their point of view, are you protecting them and their loved ones or simply jailing their pets?

Cultural differences in animal attitudes can be overwhelming because they cover vastly different extremes and every step in between. To some people, pets are revered family members to be coddled and spoiled. To others they are merely functional — a furry alarm or toothy deterrent. To others they are livestock — the next BBQ entree. To be effective, ACOs must deal with everyone on each person's level.

This demand is unique to ACOs. Police officers don't care how you **feel** about the speed limit; they must just enforce it. They don't expect you to even **have** an emotional reaction to its existence. But just let an ACO ignore how a citizen **feels** about his animal or a leash law! Because different cultures don't have strong emotional, traditional or functional ties to speed limits, few individuals oppose or reject them. They may not comply with them, but they don't categorically reject the concept and rationale of their existence. And no one openly supports depriving a child of food and water, so social service workers rarely must convince someone to provide them to a child against the parents' wishes.

But ACOs face this challenge daily. They're constantly dealing with how people **feel, think about** and **value** animals that are major parts of their lives. There are so many vastly different animal attitudes that getting general public compliance is extremely difficult. San Diego County covers 2400 square miles — 6200 square kilometres — and contains many different cultures; San Diego city is 320 square miles — 820 square kilometres. Within that area are many samples of all ranges — those who spoil their pets' faces off, those who raise them to be dinner and everyone in between. In certain areas it's been months since an officer was called to capture a loose dog. There are no loose dogs. They're caught and eaten by residents. So officers deal with both extremes and several shades of grey in between every day. What an incredible emotional price they pay!

Since some things are universal, the same is likely true here. Not an easy way to spend your career when you chose the field in the first place because you felt strongly about animals.

Job stress is magnified many times over when your superior isn't even aware of the things with which you must deal. To your boss, **of course** his Labrador is good, and trained, and well fed, and medically cared for — and everyone who has a dog feels the same way and does the same things and gives the same care..... God! You sometimes want to shake them and shout: "**Hey!** Are you **in** there?!" Have you ever **seen** what I put up with every day?!" No, they haven't. And they reject or disbelieve it when you try to expose them to your experiences.

To most Muslims, dogs are vermin. In Saudi Arabia wolves are shot on sight, their bodies hung from bridges so all can see the hunter's prowess. Dogs are not pets. They're ignored, neglected or killed. If a dog's body brushes up against a person's leg, they'll often change clothes and launder or discard the 'soiled' item. But then there are Saluki! Saluki are highly prized hunters! They're different! They're not dogs, they're **Saluki!** They live in a crate out back and are not pets, but they are prized functional hunters. But all other canines are vermin.

In Brazil dogs are so highly regarded that it's difficult to convince them to de-sex them because they don't want to put their dogs through the danger and trauma of surgery if their lives aren't in danger. In Europe dogs are allowed in public and in restaurants. In the southern US certain field breeds are so highly prized they're revered and can do no wrong.

What does all that have to do with your department or ACOs here? When an ACO responds to a call, one neighbour may be Muslim, another Brazilian, a third Swiss. Three totally different but equally powerful attitudes about the same animal and event. **And the ACO must deal effectively with all of them — and the animal — simultaneously.** No other job demands such a focused application of so many diverse skills, instantly, on the spot, perhaps in the face of lethal danger. Others face danger regularly, of course. But they at least can focus totally on the specific job at hand, not conduct their vital function while dealing with everyone's feelings, treating both victim and offender with polite courtesy, and handling another species safely and humanely.

Imagine this — before being appointed to a position of authority over departments, the candidate must spend two weeks in the field in each department he or she will oversee. What a concept! Directors with years of experience often **still** don't know what field officers go through! And then they evaluate **your** job performance — in a job about which they know little or nothing! "Officer Johnson should show more respect for members of the public". **Sure** he should — after seeing 10 abuse cases this week. Or finding 40 chained dogs crowded into a small shack. Or taking an emaciated dog off a chain for the fifth time in the same yard.

An executive sees a volunteer at your shelter — so he cuts your budget. "You don't need the money. Much of your labour is done by unpaid volunteers". What other department **relies** upon volunteers? **Your** animals and kennels can be cared for by volunteers — but **what?! Allow volunteers to man the jails?! Repair the roads?! Collect the trash?! Deliver the mail?! Run my office?! How absurd!** But, of course, **your** animal facilities should take full advantage of untrained volunteers. In fact, encourage more to join. And the more that do, the more I cut your budget... And how does your superior hold **you** in high professional regard when so much of the work in your shelter is done by volunteers, not formally trained staff?

You, who joined this field because you have a strong feeling for animals, must investigate abuse and neglect cases. And the collectors with 42 dogs in a trailer or 200 cats in an apartment. **Of course** you'll be affected by such things. It's only natural to be bothered by such unconscionable treatment of living things. But you had better treat all those people with respect while you perform your job to your utmost! After all, animals don't vote or pay taxes! How do you perform well and remain courteous when your heart is torn out every month? And then the perpetrator **argues** with you! And, if the perp is connected or influential, **your boss** argues with you! Aaahhhh, such a fun job..... But they **all** understand so well, don't they?

Just how important are ACOs? They are the most crucial element in a dog owner's relations with animal agencies. Far more citizens will license their dogs, handle them correctly or maintain them humanely because of their dealings with an ACO than because John Jones runs the department. And, since behaviour usually runs in general patterns, having people willingly comply with animal regulations contributes to them complying with other official edicts. When my local ACO treats me, my family, and my pets properly and with genuine feeling and respect, I am less likely to give **any** officer trouble. If my ACO can get me to listen to him or her tell me about proper pet handling, I'm more likely to listen to a traffic cop tell me how to safely transport my family. ACOs have the ability to very powerfully influence their communities. Are they trained well enough to enable them to do so?

You may have many different sources from which to choose those who will conduct training for your officers. Because it's desirable to develop interdepartmental cooperation and save funds, many agencies bring in police or military dog trainers to train ACOs. Many of these trainers are outstanding in the performance of their duties. But even having reached a high level of performance, they may be questionable ACO instructors. They may possess few **people** training skills, and treating professional ACOs as though they were dog students isn't conducive to cooperative compliance or strict attention. Another major point — police and military trainers deal with healthy, specialised dogs of select breeds specially bred for specific characteristics. They handle them at optimal age, away from the dog's home territory, use equipment and methods only they select, and deal only with others of like mind. They control every aspect of the dog's life from diet to exercise, play, socialisation and housing.

None of this applies to an ACO! ACOs must deal successfully with **any** dog **any** member of the public has, with **every** conceivable background and social influence, at **every** age, usually on or near the dog's home territory and pack, and usually with an upset owner present.

The trainer has days to establish an effective relationship with the dog and evaluate it's personality and temperament. The ACO must react immediately to whatever situation the dog, the owner, or the dog/owner/neighbour creates on the spot. So, despite the trainer's good job results, be careful when you're told that this is the **only** way or the **best** way to handle or train dogs or people. Despite much experience with dogs and training, few trainers appreciate what ACOs go through on the job. They reject the very types of dogs you **must** deal with daily. If available, by all means take advantage of the input such trainers have to offer. But remember that they come from a totally different reality than the one within which you must constantly, safely and successfully operate. Having experience in both gives valuable insight.

Since professional trainers also deal mostly or only with others who feel and think as they do, they develop absolutes in attitude, methods and values. But ACOs couldn't be in a more different situation. Except for other ACOs, it's unlikely you'll deal with many who share your animal attitudes and values. Official trainers **want** their dogs, and they want them with them at all times — at work, in the vehicle and at home. But ACOs daily deal with families wherein one or more members couldn't care less if the dog ever came home. Take it for walks or to the vet or groomer? **Hah!** They barely **feed** the thing! And if both adults are truly into animals, **how dare you** tell them how to raise, handle or treat their beloved furry kids! Just **try** telling a military or police trainer how to handle and live with their dog! But ACOs confront **exactly** that vehement attitude among citizens every day.

Another unique aspect of animal work is the recent appearance of certain animal rights groups. Whether or not you take this movement seriously, courses in Animal Rights Law are now taught at Harvard and other universities. No other municipal field is forced to deal with similar extremists. Dogs have the **right** to be free unleashed — to breed freely — to go where they choose — to be unrestrained or disciplined — to seek their own concept of their own fulfilment. Animals have the **right** to be totally free — they oppose animal ownership in the first place, pets or livestock. They don't care how well you run your shelter or keep the animals in your charge, they object to you **having** them at all. They're not impressed by how many goblins your working police dog caught or how many lives it saved when they believe you have no right to have it or train it in the first place. Until police officers must deal with avid speeders rights groups, social workers deal with drinkers rights groups, supervisors deal with slouchers rights groups and narcotics agents deal with junkies rights fanatics, even such active field officers as they won't know what an ACO goes through on the job.

As with most human endeavours, some of the animal rights folks began with a valid point — animal training is unnecessarily harsh. It is sometimes brutal. When people who care about animals learn there are gentler ways to achieve results, it is difficult to criticise them for complaining about abuse. But, carried to undisciplined extremes, any idea or behaviour becomes absurd. They say — "Don't house animals well; you shouldn't be housing them at all". Don't train them gently and effectively; you've no right to train them at all. Don't hunt them, hurt them, eat them, wear them, restrict them, or influence them in any way. You've no right to impose your will upon other species. What a great animal management work environment! Only when you can imagine a letter carrier being morally chastised for trespassing on private property — a hospital orderly reprimanded for restraining a thrashing patient — a prison guard punished for searching visitors — can you begin to imagine what daily ACO life is like.

This humane attitude can also cause you trouble with average citizens, not just with fanatics. You want people to handle their dogs more humanely but you also value training, so you refer people to trainers in your area. How humane are the training methods and equipment the trainers to whom you refer use? If people perceive them to be unnecessarily harsh, it will affect their attitude towards you and your department from now on because you referred to them.

Despite animal feelings motivating this choice of career field in the first place, ACOs regularly face horrible abuse cases. Such things are hard enough to deal with in and of themselves — it's worse when the perpetrator has no remorse and doesn't understand why you're upset. For example, not only do some people use dogs as a food source, some believe that the more a dog suffers in the act of dying, the tastier the meat will be. So their killing methods are

horrible. I won't go into them here, but no other profession makes devoted personnel undergo such trauma. Yes, physicians deal with child abuse, but rarely every week and rarely done by people who not only see nothing wrong with it but see it as their cultural duty and heritage.

To top it all off, after dealing with such a situation, the ACO must be **courteous!** That's more than is ever asked of the ER doctor treating an abused child. At least he isn't expected to treat the abuser politely!

Dogs are natural mimics. They copy the behaviour of others, especially those within their packs. So you cannot teach a dog nothing. Everything you do in its presence teaches it something. So ACOs must deal with the result of all the previous handling that an animal received. Every owner, trainer, handler, visitor, postman, groomer, veterinarian, kennel worker, vet tech, and ACO that has encountered that dog has left an impression and taught it something. Was it good or bad? Positive or negative? Friendly or threatening? If the uniformed postman kicked at or threw something at the dog, now the uniformed ACO is trying to safely **catch** it?!

Some trainers use very physical methods. If the dog was jerked, pinned on its back or shook by the scruff of its neck, in addition to anything else it learned, it also learned that **physical force succeeds**. Now the ACO must deal with a large, powerful dog that has no reason to like or welcome him, sees a uniformed trespasser violating its space, has no reason to be gentle or friendly, has the power to do great harm, and has learned that physical force succeeds. I am a very demanding trainer. Few are as firm as I. But I don't confuse firm with harsh. I am very demanding but physically gentle. I will absolutely win — I just won't beat up the animal to do so. If the dog or cat or elephant or wolf with which I'm working tries to hurt me, I'll do whatever I can to defend myself and prevent injury. But I won't retaliate in vengeance. Once the animal realises that it is never in danger from me, compliance, progress and success are stunning. If someone doesn't know the difference between a boss and a bully and they've handled that dog before, the danger to the ACO is increased substantially. How common are physically gentle training methods in your area? What methods do the trainers to whom you refer the public use? If the dogs you deal with have had no training at all, that may not be in your favour. But it may be worse if they have!

ACOs also hear that someone objects to desexing or leashing their animal because such things are 'unnatural'. When I hear this, I ask — Do you feed your dog? Bathe it? Brush it? Provide its shots? **All these are unnatural!** There is no rational response to that. Domestication changes the very nature of 'natural'. Feeding wild canines is abnormal — feeding your dog is natural. Desexing and releasing a wolf back into the wild is perverse. Having a dog in your home that is endocrinologically prepared to kill prey and fight bears is equally weird. You will punish virtually everything those hormones make your dog do — mark its indoor territory, fight with other dogs, bite interfering humans during season, challenge for dominance, and others. Does a dog need hormones to protect himself, you, or your home? If he did, all females would let you enter and beat them unchallenged. If you think that's true, I had a 65 kilo female at home I'd like you to meet — **lefty!**

ACOs and the animal management field deserve full study, understanding and support. It is an exceedingly diverse, demanding field. Only when thoroughly understood and fully supported can it achieve the awesome potential it promises. But, even after all this, there is still a major part of your job that goes unnoticed and unappreciated. When you go and get that dog in kennel No 42 and he's delighted to see you and go with you, or that small dog in No 20 that's so happy to see you he licks your face while you carry him — to the killing room..... No, friends, some things will never be taught to observers.

ACOs are devoted professionals doing a complex, broad, difficult job. Help them. Train them. Support them. And back them. They, your citizens, and the animals in your communities deserve it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Fetko

Dennis has worked in a broad range of Animal Management related professional roles. Of particular significance for this conference is his experience in AMO training, dispute resolution, animal behaviour, animal training and legal processes in Animal Management. But there is more to Animal Management than all that. At a time when Animal Management in Australia is moving further and further into assuming its new, corporate style of community service delivery, a whole range of new skills are on the agenda. These include business management, team leadership, stress management, communication skilling and so on. It is an environment that provides great scope for the training ability that Dennis has developed and shared over the 30 years past.

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