THE TOP 10 MISTAKES IN TRAINING
I’ve worked with hundreds upon hundreds of dog training customers over the years. And yes, I’ve even struggled with my own dogs from time to time.

Back in the day, before I knew anything about dog training, I can honestly tell you that my dog was one of the most out of control K9s I’ve seen in all of my career.

I made so many mistakes. And I regularly see countless other dog owners make the same mistakes I did.

So I decided to compile my list of the top 10 mistakes people commonly make that completely obliterate their training goals, launch them way off course, and result in a frustrated and defeated owner and a frustrated and defeated dog.

I hope that these honest observations assist you in identifying holes in your training and help you to move forward in your training program with a little more insight under your belt and a lot more confidence as you work with your dog.
MISTAKE #1

#1: Not Being Prepared

To really see solid change in your dog, you’ve got to start reading their mind. Sounds tricky, I know. But let me give you an example...

I have a dog named Kona who is here for training. Kona has a huge issue with other dogs walking by her crate. She becomes highly stressed and lashes out at the other dogs walking by, barking ferociously.

As I see it, I have two options.

I can walk the other dogs by her crate, she can react, and I can become frustrated with her, OR I can start to make note of the pattern and next time be prepared when I walk a dog past her.

If you REALLY pay attention, you can start to understand and predict your dog’s behavior. If your dog always wants to sniff the grass, be prepared for said grass sniffing so you can confront the problem head on.

Or if your dog pulls when another dog passes you on a walk, it’s easy to predict what is going to happen next time you see a dog and owner approaching. And if you’re training on the competitive level, you should be able to predict if your dog, for instance, is going to lose his mind if there is a bite sleeve on the field, or your obedience dog is going to falter if a dog passes by.

Pay attention, take note of patterns and start predicting your dog’s behavior. And most importantly, be prepared to deal with it! And if you get good at predicting behavior but you aren’t sure how to respond to it, it’s time to seek help. Get proactive for the best chance at success!
#2: Not Knowing What Motivates Their Dog

All dogs like food right?

I see this assumption made all too often, the unknowing handler walking onto the field or the unsuspecting dog owner stepping into a group class, hot dogs in tow, only to see their dog spit out the tasty morsel the moment it’s offered.

You need to know what motivates your dog… and this is contextual.

Every dog has a scale of the things that they like, the things that they love, and the things that they are so over the top crazy about, they can’t even think straight.

Get familiar with the scale if you plan to use rewards in your training. Learn your dog’s preferences are. And if you don’t know, ask them. Show them two reward options side by side and see which one they choose. Yes, it really is that simple!

And just a heads up. It’s common for a dog’s motivation for rewards to decline when they are stressed, excited or overstimulated by their environment. So practice often at home when it's quiet, and when in new and potentially stressful places, choose higher value rewards and reward more frequently.

By preparing for the contextual changes that affect your dog’s desire for their rewards, you can select the appropriate reward for your program at any given moment.
MISTAKE #3

#3: Neglecting State of Mind

Dog owners tend to spend all of their time teaching their dog WHAT to do. They teach the sit, the down or the heel and call their dog trained. But more often than not, they neglect one very important piece of the puzzle...

The dog's state of mind.

If you've got a dog that regularly gets overly excited and is hard to control, and you teach and reinforce all of your behaviors with lots of energy, fun and movement, you are contributing to your own problem. If your dog is completely amped while practicing his sits or stays, barely able to contain himself, and he's earning rewards, you are not only reinforcing your dog's behavior, you're reinforcing that energy too. And if that energy is regularly causing you problems, you may want to re-think your strategy.

If you want an enthusiastic and driven dog, train for that first. Once you have it, THEN start teaching commands.

If you want your dog to be calm and relaxed, work on some exercises to get him there, and then focus on your obedience. State of mind matters, and far too often, it’s neglected.
#4: Not Being Present

Everyone wants a focused and engaged dog in training, but most people have trouble focusing themselves.

Folks regularly get distracted by their environment, by people sparking up a conversation, or by the ping of the cell phone that resides in their pocket.

That, or they feel insecure about their environment. Maybe they have a dog with issues, and they are constantly scanning for other dogs or people that could set their dog off. Or perhaps they are apprehensive or insecure about what people in the environment think of them.

However the reason, they pay more attention to their environment than the dog at the end of their leash. And as they check out, their dog does too.

Shut off the phone, tune out the environment (as best as is safely possible), get focused, and give your dog your undivided attention.

Your dog’s focus and engagement will be a direct reflection of your own focus and engagement! So don’t check out!
MISTAKE #5

#5: Worrying About What Other People Think

Just stop already. Easier said and done, I know, but if you let the opinions of others dictate your training sessions, you’ll never see meaningful progress.

You know your dog better than some stranger walking down the street, or some bully on an Internet forum.

Take the advice you agree with, but don’t get lost in the opinions of others.

And whatever you do, don’t change your path because someone inserted an opinion where it didn’t belong. Or because you fear what other people will think of you.

While you need knowledge and help at times when training your dog (we all do!), far too often people will try to change your path, even if you didn’t ask for help or advice to begin with.

Stay strong, trust your gut, and align yourself with those whose style you agree with and who work to build you up instead of tear you down. And as best as you can, ignore the rest.

The only opinion that matters is that of the dog at the end of your leash.
#6: Letting Fear Take the Wheel

Fear comes in all forms.

Fear of failure is a big one. Fear of looking like an idiot (see #5), fear of your dog’s reaction (especially true for reactive or aggressive dogs), fear of rejection, or fear of screwing your dog up are a few that I see often.

But here's the thing. Fear should never dictate your training sessions.

The fact of the matter is, we are all going to make mistakes. We are all going to hit roadblocks and we will all stumble at times. But those mistakes are our true learning opportunities, so instead of fearing them, we need to embrace them as progress and move on.

I hate to be harsh, but a little tough love is coming your way. Fear will obliterate even the best training program and can stop your progress dead in its tracks. It’s hard to overcome - I get it. But you have to find a way, for your sake, and for your dog’s.
#7: Not Being Coachable

In any training program, whether you are a seasoned competitor, or a new dog owner with your first puppy, you need to align yourself with experts who can help you reach your goal.

For you to make meaningful progress, you must BE COACHABLE.

This doesn’t mean you have to take everything the expert says as gospel. You don’t. But you should always be respectful.

When working with others, think hard on the lessons you are learning, and if you disagree, ask questions to understand rather than writing off the advice altogether.

This pesky thing called ego tends to get in our way when we are being coached, but we can’t let it!

Focus on being effective...not being right. And, when you are corrected, embrace the feedback, instead of getting defensive and frustrated.
#8: Killing Work Ethic

Dog owners and handlers are regularly creating an environment that unintentionally demolishes work ethic by giving their dogs ready access to the things they expect them to work for later.

Perhaps they spoil their dog with tasty treats just for looking cute, leaving their dog thinking "Why work for things I can get for free?"

Or maybe they reinforce their dog’s picky eating habits by adding tasty toppings to their meal to encourage them to eat, thereby rewarding the dog for “turning his nose up”.

Perhaps they lavish their dog with love, attention, toys and rewards for no reason and then, expect them to later work hard for the things they regularly get for free.

These things, along with many others, regularly obliterate work ethic, decrease the value of the dog's rewards, and leave dog owners grasping for attention and focus.

Ask yourself, “Am I creating an environment that supports a good work ethic?” and “Is there something I’m doing that is counterproductive?”
MISTAKE #9

#9: Being Selfish

We love our dogs for a number of reasons. It’s hard to resist that exuberant greeting, the relentless tail wags, and the unconditional love we get from our dogs day in and day out.

But I’m here to tell you, far too often we take without giving, and we neglect our dog’s inherent needs because... well... we’re selfish!

We love the exciting greeting we get when we come home from work. So it’s easy to ignore that we are perpetuating separation anxiety.

We love our dog’s happy face when we give them a tasty treat, so we neglect the fact that they may be carrying a few extra pounds or their work ethic is suffering.

Or for competitive dog sports folks, we love to do the fun stuff... the bitework and the flashy stuff, so we neglect control because it simply isn’t as entertaining and takes too much time and work.

We need to look objectively at what is best for our dogs, and we need to do our best to provide it.

If our dog needs our time, energy, commitment and effort, we need to give it instead of focusing on the exercises that are self gratifying and perhaps counterproductive. And if our dog needs boundaries, we need to draw them, regardless of our desire to spoil them in return for “unconditional” love.
#10: Not Having A Plan

Here’s the deal. You don’t have to have a training plan to be successful. For years, I didn’t operate with one. But having everything mapped out before you begin can be huge for keeping you on track.

Without a solid plan or a good understanding of the end goal, I’ve often seen training sessions fall apart. The tactical moves are stored in the handlers head and are a cookie cutter representation of a training program they’ve followed for years.

Or perhaps the training is planned and instituted at the spur of the moment, the handler walking on the field and figuring out what they want to practice at the last second.

Without a plan and a good understanding of that plan, training sessions become inefficient. Handlers work on things that aren't really needed to reach the end goal, wasting precious time and effort.

Or perhaps they jump the gun, working on things that they aren’t really ready for yet.

Oftentimes, they struggle verbalizing their plan for each session with their trainer or director, because they don’t have a clear understanding of it themselves. And perhaps they end their session feeling frustrated when it inevitably lacked direction.

Make a training plan. Stay on course. And when you wander off your plan, use it to find your way back.
CONCLUSION

For training to be successful, it has to be a partnership. A team effort.
So make sure you're operating in a way that is supporting your dog and your goals.
Although this list is not exhaustive, it’s a sure start to identifying and correcting some serious common holes in training.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS:**

- The most effective trainers pay close attention to BOTH ends of the leash
- Make a plan and reference it often
- Pay attention to your own behavior, to make sure it's in line with your training goals.
- Pay attention to your dog's behavior so you can be better prepared to manage it.
- Don't worry about what other people think. The only opinion that matters is that of the dog at the end of your leash.