

The 4 Magical Keys to Help Animals Cope with Change

By Bruce Butcher

Whether we're talking about a horse, cat, dog or elephant a change in living situation can trigger the reappearance of old negative habits and behavioral regression as they strive to cope and preserve the meaningful principles by which they live. It is our hope and desire that we, and our animals, adjust well to new living situations. How does the animal view a move to a new house or barn? What do they think when Grandma comes to live with the family? What happens when their favorite child grows up and leaves for college? What helps them when there is a birth, death or divorce in the family? By addressing and/or establishing 4 internal anchors the animal settles and adjusts in the most seamless manner possible. The 4 internal anchors which allow an animal to adjust and live to their full potential are Place, Group, Duration and Job. I will describe these 4 important components of the animal perspective and make suggestions on how to convey guidance in a language that your animal easily understands and accepts. Establish these 4 simple things and you will anchor the best transition/adjustment possible for any animal in any new living situation.

Establishing Place - As an overnight guest in someone's home the host walks us through the house (Place) highlighting the location of meaningful areas. Common things we find important are sleeping location, bathroom location (desired location for elimination), kitchen location (when and where we'll eat), how to get in/out of the house and a quick highlighting of the property lines (territory). I suggest you do likewise with your animal. For example, "Henry, here is your bed/crate/stall...here is where you can pee & poop...I will feed you here, you'll eat at the same times you do now...I will let you in/out just like now, here is the door....and here is where we live (property lines), I will be in charge of what happens in our space."

Establishing the Group – A defining characteristic of an animal is the ability to adapt to change. The animal perspective values knowing who to include in the group, i.e. clear membership status of all humans and animals. If group members change, so be it, let the animal know how this *improves the group*. Group membership is established by the Leader, you, and reflects the strongest group possible. Each member improves the group in some way. Now it's time to establish a few things.

Who are the group members in this new place? Are they the same as before? Who is new? Who is staying behind? Who will feed the animal(s)? Who will decide or determine changes in group membership? Knowing the group members is vital for an animal, even when they're not a pack or herding animal. Another important fact, you can change group members. How might this sound? "Sally, this is our new place; we will all be together here. If I decide to add someone I will let you know. We all get along friendly here". Or, when group members change, "Trigger, this is our new place... our group is you & I, Sally is staying where she is (or perhaps, "Sally is going to live with new people")...we will be together now...we all get along friendly here."

When an existing member is leaving the group, be factual and describe how this *makes the existing group better*. For example, “Sally is going with different people now. You and I like to run and jump together; Sally likes to walk through the woods. We will do more of what makes us feel alive and so will Sally.” Or, “We have a group of cats. Fluffy likes to be by herself; you like to be with the others so Fluffy is going with new people where she can be the only one.”

At times the group stays intact as they re-locate. I suggest you communicate that simple fact as well. “Henry, we’re going to a new place and we’ll all be together...just like here.”

Establishing Duration – From the animal perspective changing locations is just a fact and nearly always excludes emotion. Defining the duration you expect the animal will remain in this new situation will settle and stabilize their internal anchor. Here are a few examples to clarify how one might establish the duration. In the case of moving your dog(s) to a new house, “Fido, you will be here for the rest of our time. If that changes I will let you know.” If boarding a cat while you vacation, “Fluffy, this is your place until I come back and get you. It will be light/dark, light/dark, light/dark (3 day example).” “These people will feed you. You will feel me thinking about you and that’s ok.” “See you soon.”

When sending an animal to live with new people, “Trigger, these are your new people. You will be with them now, they are your people. You will be with them until they decide different – if that happens, they will let you know. Go with your people now, listen to them and they will show you the rest. I enjoyed being with you. Live well Trigger.”

Establishing Job – An animal’s job may be defined as the relevant contribution to the group’s greater good. What does the group hold them responsible for doing? What is their responsibility? Animals can have many different jobs, from companions, entertainers, warning guards to physical replacements for our lost senses and healers of our broken hearts, or broken lives. The right job considers the breed/specie and where your specific individual has a natural tendency to excel. To use an analogy, a Cadillac can drive dirt trails through the woods just as a 4-wheel drive Jeep can cruise on the highway, but each is designed to be great in its own way. I once spoke with a Quarter Horse who wouldn’t jump fences in competition. He said, “Why jump over when I can walk around the fence.” He is great example of selective breeding. This trait we bred into him permeated his way of thinking and his confirmation. He was great at walking “forever” and was a bit puzzled by fence jumping.

Here are a few examples of how we might establish a Job, using language the animal understands. “Fido, your job is the same in this place...you let me know when there are visitors, and be friendly. I will handle the rest.” “Trigger, your new job is to learn and carry me while we move perfectly together (harmony). I will learn too. We will learn it together.” “Fluffy, I enjoy watching you run and chase and play with toys in the house. I also like when you sit on my lap. It helps me feel good inside. That is your job, thank you for helping me this way.” In the case where you acquire a new animal, “Jojo, I am just getting to know you. Show me how you help the most, your favorite things and what really makes you feel alive so we can pick a job for you.” “Trapper, many people come to visit you. It makes them think about taking care of

faraway places. Look them in the eyes and show them what a Lion does, and who a Lion is – it helps us (humans) to know.”

We’ve made it through the 4 components which anchor an animal in their life. Maintain these anchors when moving, or changing the situation in which the animal lives. If you encounter behavioral regression after a move, it indicates an imbalance in one, or more, of these 4 anchors. Take a minute to consider which one(s) need reinforced. As always we reinforce in a manner meaningful for the animal. We establish and clarify based on what they find important. Our reprimands provide direction, clear guidance and are best expressed with certainty rather than anger. If you want the most settled animal possible consider how they see the world, look through their perspective ask yourself, “what need does their behavior fulfill.” So whether you’re moving an animal or not, consider the role these 4 anchors play in establishing the best situation possible for your animal. Remember, we don’t construct our life ‘around’ their desires or preferences – that is an upside down, dysfunctional dynamic. We instead define and strengthen the anchors we know result in a well-adjusted animal. We shape ourselves and our leadership behavior to become what helps our animal the most.

Footnote: I’m commonly asked how a person communicates these ideas. My answer, simply talk out loud.