



Fur or Fangs: Reading Between the Lines of Human Interaction

ELIZABETH SANGLIER

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One of the happier aspects of returning to an office as an Ombuds for the Transportation Security Administration has been working in the same building as the Washington-Dulles International Airport explosives detection K9s. In particular, I have developed an affinity for Linda, a 4-year-old German Shorthair whose excitement for tennis balls is a joy to witness. When Linda's handler, Walter, leaves her in her crate, she starts to whine softly when she can no longer see him. If I hear her, I'll go to the room she's in and talk to her.

We're at a point now that when she sees me, she flops down onto the ground and rolls over for belly rubs, even before I say anything. We have a little conversation.

"Your dad will be back soon. Are you working hard today?" I ask. She wiggles her whole body in acknowledgement. I radiate my happiness to see her, and she returns it in kind. She presses herself against the crate and tempts me with her velvet ears and soulful eyes. I joke with her handler that I want to rent her as a therapy dog in between my own work calls. She cleanses my mental palate in a way that only

animals can.

Because of Linda, I have been thinking a lot about the pets in my life, and the lessons they taught me about communication, which I have come to practice in my Ombuds work. I remember my dogs whose tails would start thumping against the couch as I approached for a forehead smooch, and my cats whose purring would kickstart just from me saying "I love you." Animals respond to our energy. They read our faces and know when we are coming to them with love, or anxiety, or frustration over something pulled out of the trash can.

Our pets talk to us without words, but with pure openness and truth. When we show them kindness, they trust us implicitly, and they do not disguise or dilute their reactions.

As intelligent animals ourselves, human emotions are more apparent than we believe, and we still communicate our intentions on a primal, physical level. It's an obvious concept that has kept us safe throughout the ages as we evaluated the unknown for dangers, sniffing each other out and making direct eye contact as potential friends or foes. Over time, those methods of evaluating each other in-person have been altered by technology, and I have heard employees lament the fact that their bosses scroll through their phones in meetings or video calls, conveying disinterest and disconnection. People still notice where your gaze is directed, and what mood you wear on your face. As artificial intelligence rapidly expands and changes the way we write, read, and speak, we no longer seem to be mindful or respectful of how our five senses are still at play in our daily exchanges.

I compare my interactions with Linda to those of some employees I facilitated in the past, whose interdepartmental conflicts had created an environment where they no longer made eye contact or said "good morning" to each other in the hallway. Their icy tension in the room was palpable and made the hair on my forearms stand up in anticipation of a fight. How could they ever have enjoyed a pleasant day at work with that energy looming, unresolved and ominous?

Through my Ombuds career, I have heard many visitors refer to their coworkers or managers as *threatening*, and I linger over that word. It evokes real danger, an almost life-or-death battle for underlying values and existence, unfolding not on the serengeti but in the workplace.



It makes me wonder how we communicate such antagonism in our emails and text messages, or performance reviews, or staff meetings? How often do we consciously treat each other with patience, grace, and the best of assumptions? Our work in the Ombuds world frequently revolves around the concept of civility. Visitors come to us out of real desperation that they feel disrespected or underappreciated, even when what they are experiencing may not meet the legal definition of harassment. The tone someone used becomes an affront to the employee's psyche, and while they struggle to articulate this nebulous emotion, it is clearly present and pervasive. They feel rendered small, intimidated, and vulnerable. They use words like "attacked" and "wounded." These employees visibly wilt when talking about a heavy-handed supervisor, or a coworker who is condescending. They shrink or expand in relation to the demeanor that others bring to the table.

I ask them curious questions about their work relationships, and find that what they are ultimately feeling is fear, sadness, anger, or disgust.

When conducting facilitated dialogues between people, I have now learned to prioritize the energy of the interaction over what is being said. I observe the language of bodies, and the contradictions that arise when someone is saying one thing but conveying another. I listen intently for how words are packaged, dripping with disdain or delivered with empathy. On more than one occasion, I have called it out: "what's the energy in this room right now?" I have seen employees clench their fists or cross their arms defiantly as they are talking, and supervisors whose faces crumple as they unleash a torrent of tears, finally confessing how hurt and exhausted they are. I watch for eye rolls, sighing, wincing, and the jiggling of feet or tapping of fingers. I notice these small animal gestures that tell so much about the dynamic.

In guided conversations, I try to get people to understand that honesty without kindness is cruelty, and the energy around how we offer feedback—literally, where our heart, mind, and spirit are when we approach someone to have an important dialogue—has an immediate and lasting impact on how the other person will respond to us. And how they will remember us: with metaphorical fur, or with fangs. It isn't just about being nice for the sake of keeping peace in the office. It is about recognizing that beneath the exterior of our professional roles, we're still animals who respond to authenticity, intention, presence, and genuine care. The choice we make in each interaction, whether we approach with Linda's joyful wiggle or a defensive, dismissive snarl, shapes not just that moment, but the entire relationship that follows.