

Inside the Indication

**The 9 skills underneath a SAR indication —
and the structural diagnostic for when it
breaks**

Saturday 30 May 2026 · 11:00 EEST · 90 min · English · recording included

House rules

- **Mic muted** by default — raise hand in BBB for the live Q&A block
- **Camera off is fine** — your choice
- **Recording** sent to your registration email within 7 days, no extra step
- **Questions** — we collected yours on application; live block works through them

Today — five blocks, 90 minutes

1. **What a reliable indication actually is** — and why "just barking" is a trap
2. **The learning theory that decides whether it holds** — reinforcement, markers, the helper
3. **The 9 skills inside the indication** — decompose the chain
4. **Find the broken link** — the two-stage structural diagnostic
5. **Your cases, live** — Q&A on the problems you sent in

You can't change complex behaviour without structuring it.

What is a SAR dog?

A dog that is able to find and indicate any living person in a passive pose, and to demonstrate this result with high reliability across various conditions and durations of work — including self-activation on scent during an actual rescue operation.

7 criteria for a reliable SAR dog

1. **High motivation** — drive to work, not just to receive a reward
2. **Social component** — confident, positive attitude toward any person found
3. **Confident movement** — across all surfaces and environments
4. **Correct task understanding** — breath scent of a living person; passive victim pose
5. **Ability to use its nose** — solving the task through scent, not visual cues
6. **Reliable, automatic indication** — consistent at source or at maximum scent proximity
7. **Self-activation** — ability to initiate search on target scent without handler prompt

Remove any one of these and reliable operational work becomes unlikely.

SAR from a dog-training point of view

Dog is performing what it has learned — by itself or during the training

Learned = behavior was reinforced in a specific context

"Reinforcement leads to an increase in the probability of that act being repeated in the future." — Karen Pryor, Don't Shoot the Dog!

Classical conditioning

A **neutral stimulus** is repeatedly paired with something meaningful until it triggers the same response automatically — **no cognitive choice involved**.

Pavlov: bell → food → salivation. After repeated pairing: bell alone → salivation. The dog doesn't decide.

A classically conditioned response **bypasses deliberation** — once trained, it fires automatically, even under high arousal or stress. Rule of thumb: ~200 paired repetitions to condition a signal reliably.

Contrast with operant conditioning: there, the dog is an active agent choosing what to do based on consequences.

Classical conditioning — in SAR

Why it matters in the field:

- **Recall signal** conditioned to "sprint to handler" — works under high arousal without the dog weighing options
- **Harness going on** → dog activates before any command is given
- **Training ground smell** → drive switches on before the start signal

A classically conditioned recall is more reliable under stress than an operant one. The dog doesn't think — it responds.

The learning quadrant

R+ — Positive reinforcement

Add something desirable → behavior **increases**

Dog finds person → gets toy → searches more eagerly

R- — Negative reinforcement

Remove something unpleasant → behavior **increases**

Leash pressure releases when dog heels → heels more often

The learning quadrant (cont.)

P+ — Positive punishment

Add something unpleasant → behavior **decreases**

Dog touches helper → correction → touches less

P- — Negative punishment

Remove something desirable → behavior **decreases**

Dog scans mid-indication → helper stands up → scanning decreases

Labels don't train dogs

The quadrants name what happened *after*. They don't tell you what to do *before*.

- **Motivating operations** — arousal, satiation, reinforcer value right now
- **Antecedents** — cues, environment, handler position
- **Classical layer** — what's already paired with the picture
- **Chains** — the whole sequence gets reinforced, not the bit you named

Textbook R+ fails when handler proximity is the unseen punisher.

Which quadrant doesn't matter. What matters: what the dog is responding to — and whether the behaviour is going up or down.

Premack's principle

"You have to eat your vegetables first, then you can have dessert."

Everything that **precedes** a high-value activity is reinforced — whether you intend it or not:

- Dog pulls toward the training ground → **pulling** is reinforced by arriving
- Sloppy heeling through a door → **sloppiness** is reinforced by what follows
- Dog bumps the helper before barking → **the bump** is reinforced by the toy

(Premack, 1959)

Reinforcer \neq reward

A *reward* is something nice to receive. A *reinforcer* makes the behavior happen **more often**.

- In a calm environment most rewards function as reinforcers
- In a high-distraction environment only the highest-value item wins
- If the dog takes food out of habit but then disengages — it was a reward, not a reinforcer

Match reinforcer quality to the level of distraction in the environment.

What are markers?

A **marker** is a conditioned secondary reinforcer — bridges the gap between behavior and primary reward:

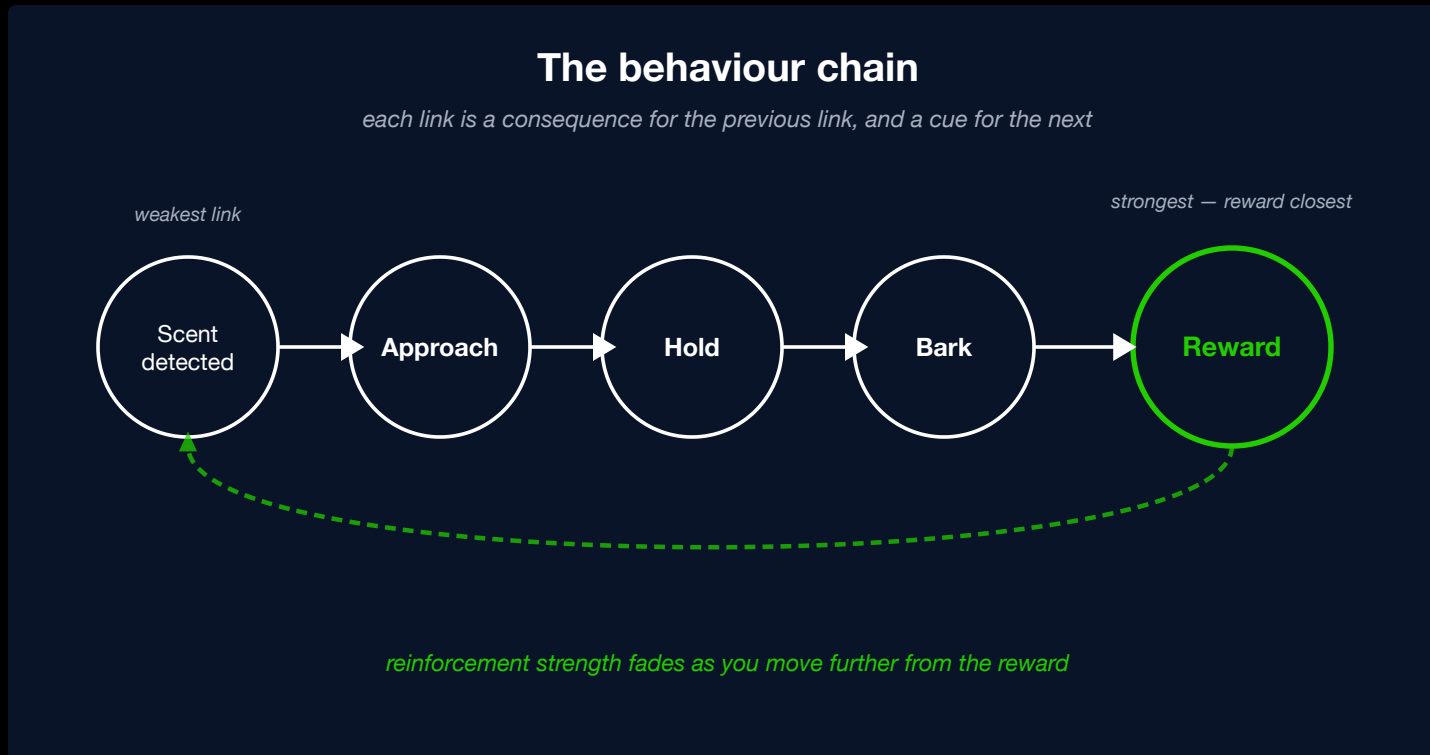
- **"Yes"** = event marker: *this exact behavior earned the reward*
- **NRM** (no-reward marker) = informs the dog this attempt won't pay — not a punishment, just information
- Must be **conditioned first**: pair marker with primary reward many times before using in training

A poorly conditioned marker is just noise. A well-conditioned marker is as powerful as the reward itself.

Behaviour chains

How behaviour chains work

Each link in the chain is **both a consequence for the previous behavior and a cue for the next:**



- Train and test **each link independently** before chaining

Detection →

Localisation →

Indication

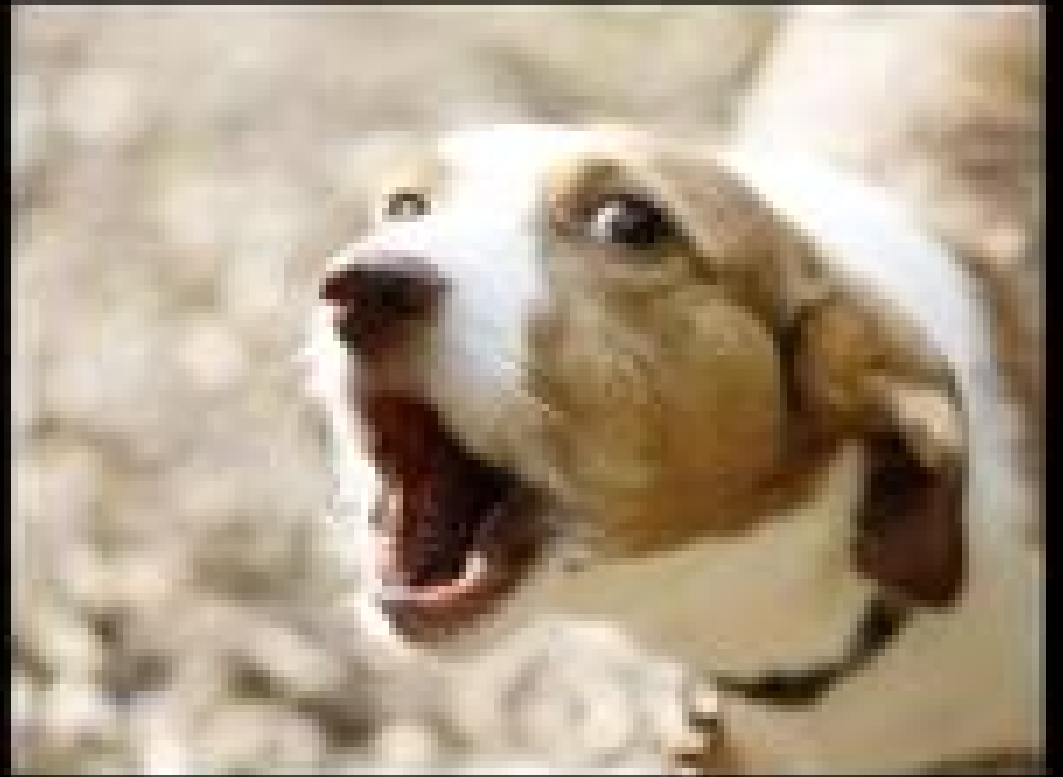
Detection



Localisation



Indication alert



What a correct indication requires — non-negotiables

- No touching the found person
- No leaving the person
- No scanning around the person

The moment the dog walks away from the find, the rescue operation fails — regardless of how well it searched.

Indication — the dog skills inside

The bark indication looks like "just barking" — but it contains multiple trained components:

- **Barking on cue** — must start on command, not spontaneously
- **Continuous action** — sustaining the bark until released, not a single bark
- **Impulse control at the source** — staying in place while excited, right next to the helper

Build the bark separately

Don't add barking to search too early — dogs started too soon bark prematurely in difficult terrain (steep climbs, crawl-throughs, dense rubble).

Phase 1 (first 7–9 months): build search drive and passive indication only

Phase 2 (parallel, then integrated): bark trained as a standalone skill:

- Dog barks **20+ times on cue**
- In varied environments, varied distractions
- With or without handler present

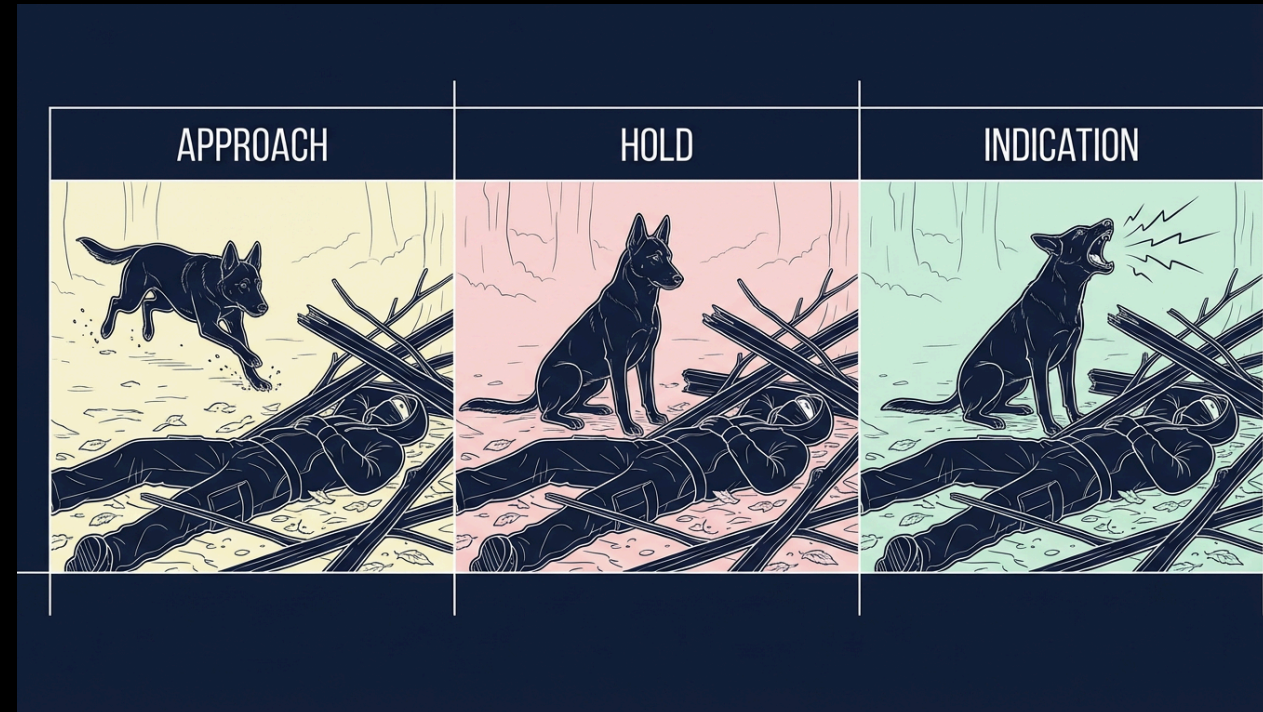
Then integrate using a ball dropper or treat dispenser at the find location, as one of possibilities.

Inside localisation
→ **indication**

Approach →

Hold →

Indication



**How many dog skills are hidden
in this chain?**

Let's figure it out

- **Approach** — the dog approaches the helper
- **Hold** — is staying in place
- **Indication** — performs indication behaviour

Each of these contains multiple sub-skills...

Approach and hold — the skills inside

- **Stop from movement** — dog must stop and not crash into the helper (impulse control)
- **Sit or down** — more stable poses than standing; maintained under excitement
- **Distance control** — correct positioning requires "keep the distance" and reverse luring

And more dog skills in indication

- Social interaction with the helper — responding to commands and hand signals
- **Luring** — dog responds correctly to food/toy lure
- **Reverse luring** — maintaining distance, not grabbing reward without permission
- **"Keep the distance"** — cue used to set required distance from the helper

And more dog skills in indication (cont.)

- **Ignoring external stimuli** — focus on helper despite distractions
- **Continuous action** — sustaining the bark until released
- **"Yes" / NRM markers** — communicating which behavior earns reward

The 9 skills inside an indication

1 Social skills with the helper

2 Luring & reverse luring

3 "Keep the distance"

4 Ignoring external stimuli

5 Sit — held under arousal

6 Down — held under arousal

7 Bark on command, sustained

8 Markers — "yes" / NRM

9 Continuous action — to release

An indication isn't taught. Nine skills are — and the indication is what they look like together.

Find the broken link

**Take the chain into parts —
correct the defective element —
assemble the chain**

Find the broken link — the diagnostic

STAGE 1 · structure

Decompose the chain. Which of the **9 skills** is the broken link?

This is the work most handlers skip.

STAGE 2 · cause

Run the named link through **don't know · no motivation · not healthy**
→ pick the response.

Stage 1 before Stage 2. Always. Cause attribution on the whole dog is guessing.

The mistake-as-chain-link trap

Mistake → **Correction** → **Reward**

↑ _____ repeated _____ ↓

The dog learns the **mistake is required** to reach the reinforcer.

You can't change complex behaviour without structuring it.

What the trap looks like

A green helper corrects the dog every time it steps in too close — then rewards the instant the dog steps back.

- Rep after rep, **stepping in** → **getting corrected** → **stepping back** → **toy**
- After ~10 reps the dog has learned the *whole sequence*, not the lesson
- The behaviour is now operationally wrong **and durable**
- Skip Stage 1, correct without structure, and this is what you build

| *The correction stops being aversive — it becomes a predictor of reward.*

Generalisation is a separate broken link

From the dog's perspective, a **behavior learned in one context is a different behavior in a new one** — the context is part of what was learned.

- Indicates perfectly at the **training forest** → fails at unfamiliar rubble
- Flawless **off-leash** → blank **on-leash**
- Solid with the **regular helper** → confused by a stranger lying still

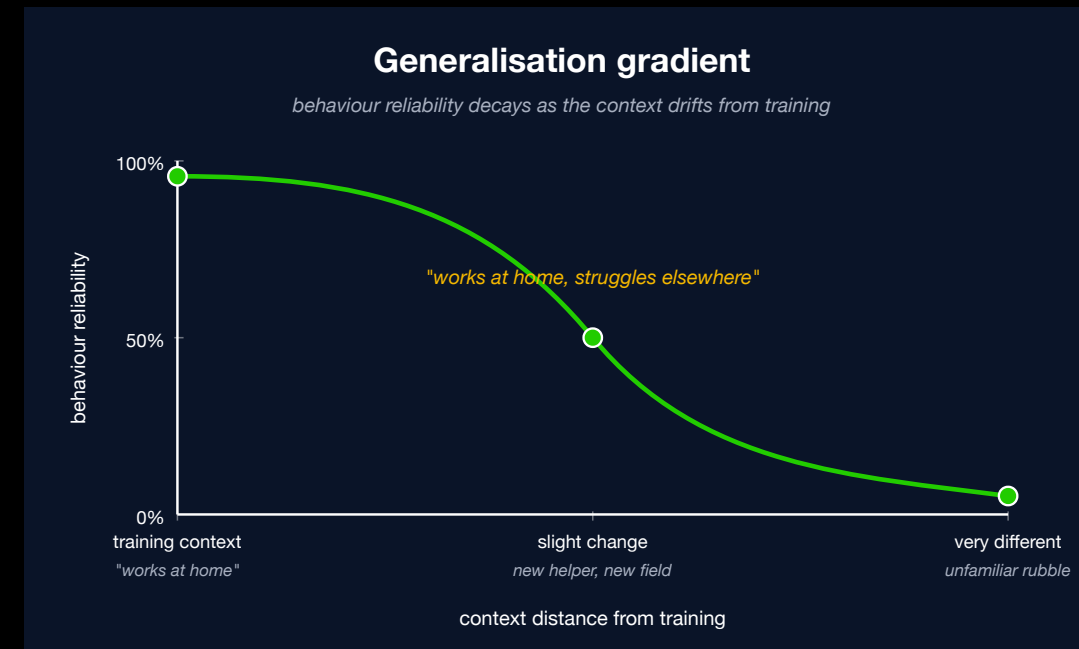
A dog that indicates at the training forest but fails at unfamiliar rubble hasn't learned "indicate" — it has learned "indicate at the training forest".

(Reid, Excel-erated Learning, Ch. 8)

How to train generalisation

Dogs don't transfer skills across contexts for free — you **deliberately vary** the environment:

- Change **one variable at a time** — too many and the dog can't isolate what changed
- If the dog fails in a new context, the gap is too large — step back
- **Generalisation gradient:** the more



Do not know —

No motivation —

Not healthy

Run this on the broken link — not on the whole dog.

Diagnosing the failure — learning vs. performance

Key distinction — *learning vs. performance*: a dog may know a behavior perfectly but not perform it. These are separate problems requiring different solutions.

Never punish what might be pain. Never retrain what might be motivation. Never correct what might be missing.

(Reid, Excel-erated Learning, Ch. 1 & 7)

Diagnosing the failure

Cause	Signs	Response
Does not know	Fails in new contexts, inconsistent	Retrain from simpler context; check generalisation
No motivation	Knows it elsewhere, disengaged here	Check reinforcer value, deprivation state, competing drives
Not healthy	Sudden regression, reluctance to move	Vet check before any retraining

The helper

The most neglected variable

The helper shapes the dog's behavior, drives, expectations, and response to reinforcement — session after session.

In bite work nobody questions the need for an educated decoy. In SAR, helper education is almost entirely neglected.

An untrained helper doesn't just fail to help — they actively train the wrong behavior.

The most neglected variable — common mistakes

- Rewarding from the body core instead of toward the dog
- Wrong timing of reward
- Not knowing what a true reinforcer is
- No plan, no criteria, no goals per exercise
- Green helper paired with a green dog

Two types of helpers

Technical helper — knows learning theory, can read the dog, adapts when things go wrong, can reward and correct independently

Green helper / actor — less experienced; lies still, waits for cue, delivers reward.

Valuable for:

- Operational dogs that need a realistic "no dog odor" victim
- Freeing technical helpers for dogs that need nuanced work

Never pair a green helper with a green dog.

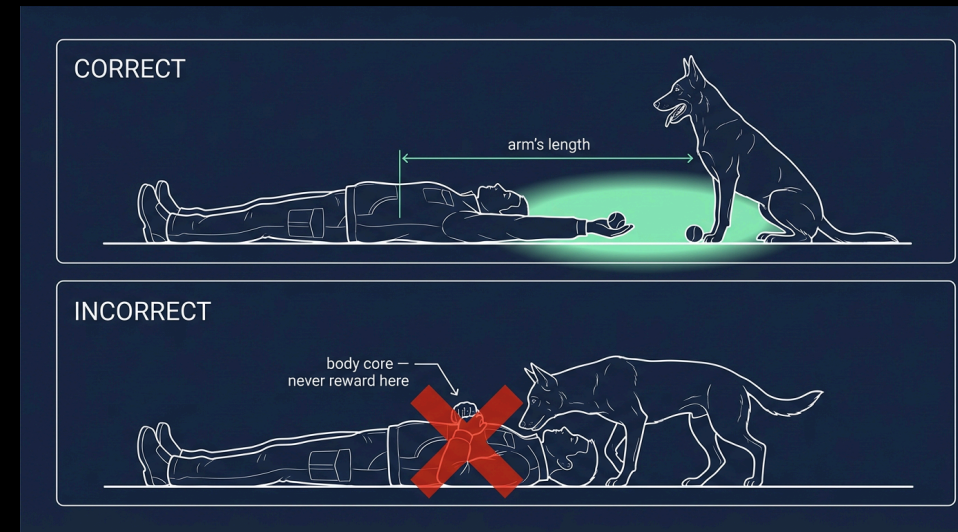
Like putting a beginning rider on an untrained horse — problems are built in from the start.

Helper activity levels

Level	What the helper does
High	Actively shapes behavior; corrects when needed; rewards
Medium	Evaluates behavior; corrects errors or supports desired behavior when needed
Low	Behaves passively; intervenes only when necessary; marks and rewards completed indication
None	Completely passive; "comes to life" only after handler releases the indication

Reward placement is everything

- **Toward the dog** — where you want them to hold position
- **Arm's length minimum** — between the dog's paws if possible
- **Never from your body core** — dogs creep in, check pockets
- **Never on the opposite side of the bark** — breaks the alert



Reward placement — why it matters

Reward placement creates **expectancy**. Expectancy creates **positioning**. This is how you build correct alert distance.

Whistle signal protocol: handler/observer blows whistle → helper delivers reward

- Removes timing errors when the helper can't see the dog (deep rubble, underground)
- Decouples the helper's movement from the reward event — dog stays focused on the find
- Allows the handler to mark the behavior from a distance

Helper — don'ts

- Accept touching, scanning, or violation of personal space
- Reward close to your body
- Cheer during a poor alert
- Punish without pre-agreed criteria
- Reward right after a correction — reset and let the dog earn it

Your cases, live

Q&A on the problems you sent in. We name the broken link first, then the cause.

Your cases — Keep the distance

Distance never built as an independent cue. Proximity at the source is the dog's reward.

- Mali, 8 mo — at speed, bumps helper, nano face-lick, self-corrects
- Dutch shep, 2 y — doesn't keep distance at the source
- Mali, 4.5 y — too close when barking, area search
- Groenendael, 2 y, beginner — barks well, too close
- Dutch shepherds, 5 y — rough approach under drive; no-touch rule
- Dutch shep, 4 y — fast, brakes close, distracted
- Mali, 6 y — area too close; rubble late + hectic

Your cases — Continuous action

Hold built dependent on handler arrival. Out of range — no criterion to hold to.

- Golden retriever HRD, operational — TFR (down + stare) breaks on long out-of-sight approach; stands, looks for handler, doesn't hold to the marker
- Giant Schnauzer, 6 y — leaves the victim once fully covered (buried)
- English Springer, 4 y, certified HRD — indication clean but inconspicuous; tends to roll into the next search if not held

Your cases — Ignore external stimuli

Scans, turns to handler, distracts on approach, slow to commit.

- Mali-mix, 4 y — confident to source, then scans/pauses/distracts before the bark
- Mali, 1 y — delayed indication; turns to scan for handler during it
- Springer, 3 y, operational — OOS first find: 30 s eyeing observers before bark (2/30 searches)
- Mali, 4 y — spontaneous barks pre-find; distracts when handler approaches at the find

Your cases — Social / arousal regulation

Arousal too high or avoidance kicks in. "Confidence" gets used as a label, not a diagnosis.

- Working-line GSD, 2 y — over-arousal on bark (victim fears a nip), then less social, shy to approach; switched to bringsel
- GSD-mix, 5 y — sometimes unmotivated to indicate; "lacks confidence" framing

Your cases — Reward channel / the "out"

Reinforcer control breaks. The wrong thing becomes the reward.

- Mali, 5 y, KNPV (helper/decoy) — after find seeks a stick or steals others' rewards; "greatest reward is in conflict"

Raise your hand in BBB. We name the broken link first, then the cause.

Key takeaways

- **Dogs learn by reinforcement** — what comes just before the reward joins the chain
- **The helper is the most underestimated variable** — train them as deliberately as the dog
- **Indication is a chain of trained skills** — nine, each load-bearing for the indication
- **Generalisation isn't free** — vary one variable at a time until it's robust
- **When it breaks, structure first** — find the broken link, *then* ask the cause

A SAR dog isn't taught indication.

It's taught nine skills — and indication is what they look like together.

Thank you

Screenshot the three cards — **the 9 skills, find the broken link, the mistake-as-chain-link trap** — and tag **workingdog.fi**.

Recording lands in your inbox within 7 days.