

Happy Tails: A look inside K9 Turbo Training's positive employee culture

You can't teach an old dog new tricks, so the saying goes. But at K9 Turbo Training, any dog can learn and grow – and gets the opportunity to do so – using positive reinforcement and force-free methods.

Katelin Thomas and Kate Wilson, two of the organization's founders, believe (and have the science to back them) that using positive psychology is the most effective and healthy way to train a dog to develop positive behaviors. This thinking doesn't just stop with Fido, though. Katelin and Kate are also committed to extending this mindset to their employees, thus creating a [culture](#) in which people can feel secure and have the space to flourish.

"We're not interested in getting there the fastest, cheapest way possible," says Katelin. "We're interested in doing it in a way that causes the least amount of harm and improves the world and changes the world in huge ways."

At K9 Turbo Training, it's not just the dogs who are treated with kindness, individuality, and respect - it's the people, too. And this model doesn't just make for happy customers and wagging tails. It also makes good business sense.

A need for change

When Katelin began training with her dog, [Turbo](#), she was told to instill fear in him by showing authority. Immediately, Katelin knew this could not be the route for her and her dog, and began looking into positive reinforcement training.

Katelin and Kate came together with their own strengths and backgrounds within the dog training industry, and a mutual desire to make positive, force-free training more accessible. When they first began K9 Turbo Training, the industry was a disconnected space. It remains an unregulated industry, and most trainers work individually. What the two founders saw was an industry that struggled to make resources and information easily accessible to trainers and clients alike. Not only that, but because of the nature of the job, most trainers suffer from compassion fatigue and a severe lack of work-life balance.

"Doing things independently did not seem to be the most efficient, and it's increasing the divide within the community," says Katelin.

And so with the beginnings of K9 Turbo, Katelin and Kate set out to fill the need for accessible education and resources, in addition to training, within the dog community. They reached out to a wide network of positive reinforcement trainers in the region to build a sense of community and to be able to share resources, thus helping the industry to have more consistent language and communication. Eventually, more of these trainers saw the benefit of K9 Turbo's ethos,

which helped to build the organization into the strong staff of dedicated trainers and employees it has today.

Positively impacting employees

The life of a trainer can be tough. Katelin and Kate knew that when they started hiring more staff to work with them, they wanted to foster an environment where people could thrive and have a sustainable career.

“You have to care for the people if you want the people to be able to do right by the dogs and their clients,” says Katelin.

Dog trainers (particularly those who use force-free methods) are often intrinsically empathetic people; they are in the business because they want to help humans and their canine companions have a healthy and harmonious relationship. This commitment to their clients means being on call whenever an emergency occurs, and unfortunately, these scenarios often happen on the weekends or during the holidays, when dogs are out and about or experiencing over-stimulating situations.

It’s challenging for a trainer to have vacation time, or times when they can disconnect from work, because they are always available to their clients to help them through emotional events. This constant availability means that many trainers are spread thin; not just emotionally, but also financially. Solo trainers are typically paid per hour they train, but are not compensated for the many other crucial tasks they perform, such as taking calls, preparing for cases, research and continuous education, follow-up communication, travel time, and more.

To address the compassion fatigue and burnout that trainers face, the founders of K9 Turbo decided to put systems in place to support employees and allow them more work-life balance, thus improving their own sense of effectiveness and quality of life within the field.

In order to avoid the weekend or late-night emergency calls, K9 Turbo has a system in place where clients do not communicate with their trainers via their cell phones, as is typically done. Rather, they have a setup where people can schedule office hours with their trainer, or speak to a customer service representative. This method ensures that clients are still getting prompt, quality care, while also allowing trainers to have healthy boundaries with their work and enjoy real, uninterrupted quality time in their outside lives.

Another aspect of K9 Turbo’s positive work environment is their benefits package. K9 Turbo provides health insurance and PTO to their employees; a rarity in their industry, and one that allows people to have a stronger sense of security. Here is a more extensive list of their benefits:

- Health insurance
- Vision and dental insurance

- Paid time off
- Continuous paid education and professional development
- Free and discounted services for friends and family
- Community discounts

The K9 Turbo team sent out an email message to their clients in 2021 when they raised their prices, and explained that this was in large part due to their implementation of offering employee-sponsored health insurance. Trusting their community of clients with this transparent communication was successful, and was met with many positive, appreciative responses.

“People were overwhelmingly supportive,” says Katelin.

Creating culture with intention

The science is there: positive reinforcement is an effective interactive tool to work with dogs. It also works for people, too. As the K9 Turbo team understands it, a dog and their guardian are a team, and so you’re not just training a dog, but also the human, and how the two interact with each other. So, if half of dog training is also human training, then it goes hand in hand that treating people with positive behavior can create a healthy and productive culture.

Katelin came to the business with a degree and background in psychology, and so from the onset, she knew she wanted to work with employees through a lens of celebrating their strengths rather than focusing on their limitations.

“Every person in the room is equally as important and has important things to contribute regardless of what their position is or how long they’ve been with us.”

Katelin and Kate believe that by creating a positive, safe, and collaborative environment, their staff can trust the organization, and therefore show up as the best version of themselves to work.

There’s a saying in the trainer industry, that many are in the business because they like dogs more than people.

“We are not those people,” says Katelin. “We love people as much as we love dogs, and we’re here because we want to work with you and support you.”

A large part of creating this culture is improving the quality of life of each individual, and minimizing the most difficult aspects of being a trainer. This is done by offering the previously mentioned benefits, supporting a healthy work-life balance, and listening to employees’ needs.

For example, they were hearing that a lot of trainers were feeling burnt out by all of the paperwork and administrative tasks they were responsible for, in addition to attending to their

clients and conducting training sessions. To help shoulder some of that load, the team created an administrative position, and hired someone to help the trainers in this area of the work.

There are also systems in place so that trainers can take vacations, and have another trainer fill in as a point-of-contact for their clients.

Other details, such as regular staff meetings and educational sessions, as well as keeping the staff room stocked with healthy, on-the-go snacks for trainers who are often on the move, are expressions of care. Katelin and Kate care about each of their employees, and want them to feel supported as both a member of a team, while also being seen as an individual. And while the founders acknowledge that culture is something that they are always looking to improve upon, it's an element of the business that is handled with careful intentionality.

"We have a culture that respects and supports the employees as much as the clients and the dogs that we see," says Katelin, reiterating that positive reinforcement is a key part of their company culture. "How can I ask my trainers to do that with dogs if I'm not doing that with them?"

In conclusion

Be it dogs or humans, we're all best when we're treated with respect and care.

"We know how animals learn," says Katelin. "There's a lot of research out there about motivation and the effects of punishing behavior. And it's our responsibility if we know better, to do better."

Just like dogs feel safer, and therefore can learn and develop more successfully, when treated positively, so do humans. The K9 Turbo team has seen firsthand the benefits of fostering a positive, supportive culture for their employees, and strive to continue this effort long into the organization's future. And not only is it beneficial to staff, but clients also appreciate knowing that the people who are helping them along the often emotional journey of dog training are being supported as well.

The career of a dog trainer can be challenging, but it can also be filled with love, joy, and fulfillment (not to mention some well-earned canine kisses). The K9 Turbo team aims to minimize the challenges of their trainers, so they can feel supported and empowered in their work, and therefore help even more dogs and their humans have healthy, lasting relationships.

Article by [Annie Gough](#)