Analyzing a Dog’s Emotional State

Introduction

As a future animal control officer, you will be expected to know how to analyze a dog’s emotional state. In order to do this correctly, there are three things you must understand; the fight or flight response, how to identify a dog’s emotional state, and how you as an A.C.O. must respond to each state. By knowing these steps, you can keep both the dog and yourself out of harm’s way.

Understanding the Fight or Flight Response

The fight or flight response has to do with the personal space of the dog and how close you may get without it triggering any violent responses. Their space has been classified into three different categories:

- Social
- Public
- Personal

With each time you get closer, the more violent the dog will react. If you know how to judge a dog’s reaction based on its physical appearance, you can hopefully enter the dog’s space without being attacked or causing the dog to run.
Identifying a Dog’s Four Emotional States

The main way to judge a dog’s emotional state is to classify it by the dog’s physical appearance.

There are four different emotional states of dogs:

- Alert
- Aggressive
- Submissive
- Fear Biter

A dog that is alert has the least amount of physical indicators out of the four emotional states. A dog that is alert shows the following signs:

- Ears and tail pointed upward
- Focused on you
- Barking

If the dog is barking, the tone of the bark is an indicator of whether the dog is alert or aggressive.

Like an alert dog, aggressive dogs bark but they also have other signs that indicate that they are more likely to attack. An aggressive dog shows the following:

- Barking and growling
- Lips drawn back into a snarl with teeth showing
Hair raised along the shoulders, spine, and rump
Slowly waving its tail (flagging)
Will not look directly at you
Ears flat against head
Tail tucked between legs

For a dog that show the signs of aggression, make sure to use the utmost caution to avoid an attack.

The opposite emotional state of aggressive is submissive behavior. This dog will act fearful rather than combative. The indicators of a submissive dog include:

Crouching
Tail tucked between legs
Ears down when approached
Whining or whimpering
May roll over on to back
May urinate after being picked up

Unfortunately, some dogs have a behavior pattern potentially more dangerous than obvious aggression or complete submission.
As an animal control officer, you would know that an aggressive dog will attack and a submissive dog will not attack and you may proceed accordingly. The dangerous dogs are the so called fear biters. A fear biter will:

- Have ears and tucked back
- Crouch or lean away from approaching officer
- May have raised hair on back
- May snarl

The officer that mistakes this behavior for submission and reaches in for a dog is in for a nasty surprise.

Calming the Dog

Once you have determined which emotional state the dog is in, you must calm the dog so that you can proceed to put a leash on it. Considering humans are much taller than dogs, it is understandable that a dog may be nervous when you first approach it. By squatting you can make this difference in height less obvious. Begin to talk to the dog in a low, soothing voice while squatting or getting on one knee. Make sure that you are sideways rather than directly facing the dog and then softly pat your thigh. This will cause the dog to relax and come to you. If the dog does not come to you, this action still presents you with the opportunity to shuffle closer, reach out, and touch it under the chin, not on the head or shoulder. Next you can stroke the dog and proceed to put it on a leash.