



Crisis Leadership: What a Dog Trainer Knows About People That Managers Often Forget

Clicker Training for Managers and the Power of Perfect Timing

By Christian Rook

Clicker-Training for Managers 101

As part of my work, I also conduct leadership trainings. Over the years, I have developed an unusual but **highly effective tool** that I occasionally use in these sessions: **clicker training** — a method many may recognize from animal training, especially with dogs.

Originally, this technique goes back to B. F. Skinner and the behavioral psychology school of thought known as *operant conditioning*. What works with dogs, dolphins, or horses can, under certain conditions, also work remarkably well with humans.

In clicker training, language is replaced by a clicker, which serves purely as a **precise and immediate feedback** instrument. In animal training, the click marks the exact moment the desired behavior occurs. This instant reinforcement enables the animal to learn faster and **more reliably** than through delayed, imprecise rewards. It's not the intelligence or motivation of the animal that determines success — it's the timing.

How does it work?

In my seminars, I regularly demonstrate this live: two participants, one task — but speaking is not allowed. One person is given the clicker (representing the leader), the other must solve a complex and often absurd task (as an employee would) guided solely by clicks, without knowing the objective. The rest of the group is informed about the task and watches the process unfold.

Here is a typical example of such a task, which is developed beforehand together with the leader and the observing participants while the “employee” waits outside:



“Open the window, place a coffee cup on the windowsill, walk twice across the room, climb onto the table, and open a book to page 42.”

The absurdity of the task is deliberate — it illustrates just how far non-verbal leadership techniques can go. And it is always fascinating to see how well it works. Without a single verbal hint, purely through precise and immediate feedback, participants almost always manage to complete the task within minutes. The relief, the aha moment, the amazement of the audience, and the smile on the faces of those involved are striking. No words, no PowerPoint, no “vision statement” — just timing, attention, and consistent reinforcement.

Why am I telling you this?

Because in my role as an interim manager in various executive and board positions, I repeatedly encounter managers who **fail exactly here**: in **timing, clarity, and consistency of daily leadership**.

Managers often know exactly what they want. Strategies are clear.

What's missing is **precise, immediate feedback** in the everyday flow of work.

Employees act, but often receive little or no feedback — or it **comes too late**, in the next monthly or quarterly review. And when it does come, it is often **vague** or **generalized**, directed at the person rather than at the observable behavior:

“That wasn't good.”

“We need to do better.”

“I'm not satisfied.”

For employees, this feels meaningless and unhelpful.

What fascinates me about **clicker training** is its transferability to humans. Not because I believe leadership is animal training — but because the **mechanism works**. Humans, especially under stress, are **extremely sensitive to feedback**. They learn to orient themselves based on what is given directly, clearly, and at the right moment. In my seminars, the clicker symbolically represents what leadership should provide every day: orientation. Clear. Immediate. Accurate. And above all: focused on behavior — never on the person.



Of course, I am well aware of the criticism of behaviorism. It is often said to be **mechanical**, reductionist, ignoring the inner world, the personality, and the intrinsic motivation of people, and susceptible to **manipulation**. And that is true.

However, I do **not** use clicker training as a **leadership method**, but as a **powerful learning tool** for managers — designed to create an emotional aha-effect.

The question is not whether we should “condition” people, but whether we as leaders **can learn to make our feedback so precise**, respectful, and effective that it truly provides orientation and consciously influences behavior.

Thomas Hochgeschurtz put it perfectly:

“It is the essential task of leaders to influence the behavior of employees in a socially acceptable way.”

In my assignments, I often encounter the same pattern: A company is in crisis. Sales are struggling. Production is improvising. Employees withdraw or seek safety in routines. What is usually missing in these situations? **Genuine leadership**.

No small talk tours through the production floor, no superficial “Hey, how's it going?” in the hallway, but leadership that dares to give both positive and critical feedback — at the right moment.

Critical Feedback?

Many managers shy away from giving critical feedback, especially in tough times. **They fear it will demotivate** or burden employees even more, thinking, “They already have enough pressure.”

The truth is: **Employees expect leadership**.

They want to know what they are doing well — but they **also want to know what they should improve**. And they want to hear it **at the right moment**. Not someday. Now. Not vague or general, but specific, focused on observable behavior.

Communication Tokens

This is where I apply the concept of **Communication Tokens**.

The term is inspired by the research of **John Gottman**, a U.S. psychologist renowned for his studies on relationship patterns, showing how small, targeted communication impulses have a lasting impact on trust and relationship quality.

Every encounter with an employee in daily work is a **token** — an **opportunity to communicate meaningfully**. Either I waste this moment by walking past, busy and self-absorbed, or I use it — to give orientation, to reinforce **positive behavior**, or to address an issue. Leaders who become aware of these tokens actively change the culture — step by step, encounter by encounter.

Of course, this is not good news for highly introverted managers for whom such spontaneous encounters in hallways, on the shopfloor, in the lab, or the cafeteria feel uncomfortable and difficult.

But breaking through that discomfort is worth it.

An Example from my Practise

In one of my mandates, I witnessed how regular, honest, and timely feedback on the shopfloor created a climate of trust within just a few weeks.

Employees began to proactively suggest ideas again.

They spoke more openly about problems.

Mistakes were no longer hidden.

I always test this informally during factory tours with external guests.

How do employees behave?

Do they lower their heads and hide behind the machines — or do they confidently approach the delegation?

In this particular case, the shift happened rapidly. The atmosphere became so open that visitors spontaneously commented, “I wouldn’t have believed this was possible in a company like this.”

And: it wasn’t a big change project or fancy “transformation program” that made the difference — it was the small tokens, the consistent feedback, the genuine interest in people. Even critical feedback, when given in a timely, behavior-focused, and respectful way, did not hurt — it helped.

Leadership is not a tool you use when it suits you. Leadership is an attitude.

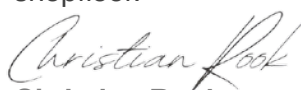
Leadership is timing.

Leadership is work.

The simple truth is: If a dog can learn complex tasks without words, just through clicks — how much easier should it be for humans, who can also rely on words?

And yet, many organizations still fail at exactly this point.

If we as leaders learn to give feedback at the right time, in the right tone, and to always separate behavior from personality, we lay the first foundation for stabilizing an organization — and for effective communication with all stakeholders, not only employees but also customers, owners, banks, and partners. Because trust is built where orientation exists — not on PowerPoint slides, but on the shopfloor.



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