

Unintended Consequences

By Craig Brestrup (1991)

Few would question the good intentions of people working in animal shelters. For the most part they are deeply devoted to the animals and deeply concerned at the careless and exploitative treatment these innocent creatures often experience in our culture.

Even so, any of us can be subject to blind spots - especially when we're dealing with long traditions and fixed certainties about the way things are. And well-meant actions can have unintended consequences. Shelters with "open doors" and "full service" are subject to at least three kinds of these counter-productive consequences.

A fundamental contradiction

First, there's a basic discrepancy between the words and the actions of a "full service" shelter. Animal welfarists commonly speak of the preciousness - the intrinsic value - of animals' lives. Yet their shelters are the place where healthy animals are daily killed, and people bring animals there knowing this. This leads to diminished credibility and effectiveness in the shelters' education programs.

Can we believe that this contradiction between affirming words and deadly deeds does not register on the public and very seriously dilute the intended communication? It amounts to a double message, and people typically respond to such messages by selecting the part most compatible with their own desires and ignoring the rest.

The "disposability" paradox

The second unintended consequence concerns animal welfare's condemnation of people who treat animals as disposable items.

Shelters with so-called full services operate on the assumption that if they did not faithfully take animals in they would subject them to "fates worse than death" at the hands of their guardians. So to prevent possible suffering, these shelters receive them even when full and "euthanize" the surplus.

But isn't it likely that by offering convenient "rescuing" of guardian-relinquished animals such shelters inadvertently reinforce the very disposability syndrome they condemn? Not only reinforce - they enable and facilitate the disposal of companion animals.

We have here another mixed message: ready receiving of animals being abandoned by their former companions while verbally rejecting the notion that such disposing of animals is a proper thing to do. What should the public believe?

Never having to say No

The final unintended consequence of traditional shelter practices is that there is less motivation to change - to search for promising alternatives.

Killing the excess preserves the balance between live animals and the numbers of available homes and shelter spaces. Very efficient - and it works too well. Shelter workers do not have to face the anxiety of saying no to a relinquisher and of helping that person find an alternative. They believe they are preventing suffering by killing and that is their priority. Moreover, the streets are cleared of strays, and the animals' guardians have a way of abandoning their animals without being stigmatized. And since those doing the disposing are animal welfarists, the people abandoning their animals don't have to feel the guilt that would be entirely appropriate at killing their pet. After all, haven't they gone to the trouble of placing their animals in the hands of animal welfare?

There's a fundamental incoherence in all this. Worst of all, it simply prolongs the problems afflicting animals. If shelters speak double messages, their educational intent becomes frustrated. If shelters are making it



easier and more guilt-free for people to dispose of their animals, then both the suffering and the killing will continue.

The killing solution to the problem of surplus animals drains away pressure for the public and animal caretakers to change their ways, and the victims can have little hope for respite from human irresponsibility.

Open doors and killing rooms were well intended and, in many times and places, unavoidable. But in our own time, they have the opposite of their intended effects. We can do better than this, and the energy and dedication of the many good people working at shelters can be applied on behalf of real animal welfare.