

Shadowing Is More Than Following Along

By Christi Johnston, CPDT, CAIVA™

When I trained new employees in my pet care businesses, shadowing was always part of the process. At first glance, it seems simple enough. Let someone follow along, watch how the work is done, ask a few questions, and eventually begin doing it on their own.

But over time, I realized something important. The things that felt obvious to me after years of doing the work were not always obvious to someone seeing them for the first time. That is where shadowing can either become a valuable part of training or turn into little more than observation.

A new employee may be standing right beside you. They may see exactly what you do. They may even be able to repeat the same steps later. But do they understand why you do it that way? That question matters more than it may seem. That difference often determines whether an employee can eventually work confidently on their own or still needs a manager or business owner to answer every small question.

Watching Is Not the Same as Understanding

Pet care businesses rely heavily on judgment. Whether you run a boarding facility, daycare, training business, pet sitting company, grooming business, or another type of pet care operation, your employees are going to encounter situations that do not look exactly like the ones they saw during training. That is why simply showing someone what to do is not always enough.

One example from my pet sitting business was something as simple as locking a client's door. I trained sitters to lock the door using the physical key rather than turning the lock and pulling the door shut behind them. Someone could easily watch that process and remember the step. But the important part was explaining why. Using the key helped prevent someone from accidentally locking the client's key inside the home. It was a small detail, but small details often carry the biggest consequences.

Without the explanation, an employee may remember the routine when everything is going normally. But if the situation changes, they may not understand what the procedure was designed to prevent in the first place.

Teach the Why, Not Just the What

The same idea applied in my training facility. We separated groups of dogs based on factors such as age, size, and temperament. A new employee could easily watch us place one group of dogs together and another group somewhere else. If training stopped there, they might walk away thinking they simply needed to remember which dogs belonged in which group.

But that was not the real lesson. They needed to understand why those decisions were being made. A young, high-energy dog may not be the right match for an older dog that prefers a quieter environment. Size can matter, but temperament and play style matter too.

The goal was not to teach someone a formula they could memorize. It was to help them understand how we approached those decisions in our business. That distinction matters because tomorrow's group of dogs will not look exactly like today's group. When employees understand the reasoning behind your standards, they are better prepared to make thoughtful decisions when circumstances change.

Your Training Should Fit Your Business

The examples I use here are just that, examples. There is no single shadowing process that will fit every pet care business.

A boarding facility may need employees to understand feeding routines, medication procedures, kennel protocols, group management, and when changes in behavior need to be reported. A daycare may place more emphasis on group play, body language, introductions, supervision, and knowing when a dog needs a break. A pet sitter may need to understand home access, client communication, visit standards, medications, and when a situation should be brought to a manager or business owner. A trainer may have an entirely different set of handling standards and expectations. Your business may have additional requirements based on your facility, your services, your team, your clients, and the animals in your care.

The important part is not copying someone else's training process. It is being intentional about what your own employees need to understand before you expect them to work independently.

Move From Watching to Doing

Shadowing should not stay passive forever. At some point, the employee needs to begin doing more of the work themselves. That might mean leading part of a routine, handling a client interaction, completing a feeding process, setting up a dog group, preparing medications, or walking through how they would respond to an unexpected situation.

This is where you begin to see whether the learning transferred. Watching can create familiarity. Doing shows understanding. It also gives the trainer an opportunity to see where the employee may still need explanation, practice, or feedback before they are expected to handle the task on their own.

A Checklist Helps, But It Does Not Prove Readiness

I am a big believer in checklists. They are a useful organizational tool during training. They help make sure important topics are covered, give the trainer a structure to follow, and provide a clear record of what has already been introduced.

But a checked box does not automatically mean someone is ready. Marking that an employee shadowed a medication routine, dog introduction, client handoff, or opening procedure tells you they were there for it. It does not tell you whether they understood why it was done that way. It

does not tell you whether they can recognize when the situation changes. And it does not tell you whether they can complete the task safely, consistently, and according to your standards without someone beside them.

That is why I see the checklist as a support tool, not the final measure of readiness. Use it to organize the training and document what has been covered. Then look at how the employee actually performs the work.

Readiness Is Not a Number

In my own pet care company, we usually included around six shadow visits, give or take, with the visits varied so the employee was exposed to different tasks, pets, routines, and situations rather than seeing the same type of visit each time. But I never saw six as a magic number.

One person may understand the work quickly. Another may need more practice. An employee may feel confident with routine visits but need additional training around medications, behavior concerns, client communication, or unexpected situations. The number of shadow visits can help create structure, but it should not be the only thing deciding whether someone is ready.

Readiness is better measured by what the employee can demonstrate. Can they explain the process? Can they complete the task correctly? Can they identify when something is outside the norm? Do they understand what they are expected to handle on their own and what should be brought to a manager or business owner? Those questions tell you much more than the number of boxes checked on a training sheet.

Why the “Why” Matters After Training Ends

Taking the extra time to explain the reasoning behind your procedures may feel slower during training. In the long run, it can make things easier. When employees understand why your business does something a certain way, they are more likely to follow your standards instead of creating their own version of the process. That can create a more consistent experience for clients, even when different team members are providing the service.

It can also help employees use better judgment when they encounter a situation that was not covered exactly during training. And over time, it may mean fewer routine questions and less day-to-day supervision for the business owner or manager.

That does not mean you want employees to stop asking questions. Quite the opposite. Good training should help employees understand which questions they can confidently answer themselves and which situations truly need to be escalated to a manager or business owner.

If employees only know what you do, they can copy a routine. When they understand why you do it, they are better equipped to carry your standards forward when you are not standing beside them.

Shadowing Should Transfer More Than Tasks

Shadowing can be one of the most useful parts of training in a pet care business. It gives employees a chance to see the work in real situations, ask questions, observe experienced team members, and begin understanding what is expected of them.

But its value depends on what happens during that time. If shadowing becomes nothing more than following someone around and checking off a list, important lessons can easily be missed. The real opportunity is to use that time to explain the thinking behind the work.

Good shadowing is not just about transferring tasks. It is about transferring the standards, judgment, and reasoning that shape how your business operates. And when that happens, you are not simply training someone to repeat what you do. You are helping them understand how to carry your business standards forward on their own. That is what begins to make delegation truly useful to the business owner.

About the Author

Christi Johnston, CPDT, CAIVA™, is the founder of [SeaBreeze Digital Studio](#), where she creates practical resources and systems for business owners, including specialized resources for pet businesses. With more than 25 years of entrepreneurial experience, her background includes owning and operating pet care and dog training businesses, where employee training, client communication, procedures, and day-to-day operations were a major part of her work. Explore her [Pet Business Resources](#) for practical guidance and tools designed to help pet business owners train, delegate, and run their businesses with less day-to-day dependence on them.