

## How to Win Dogs and Influence Eagles

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I've always been a person who needs time on their own. As an only child, I spent a lot of my formative years in imaginary worlds with imaginary friends pondering the meaning of the universe and setting lofty goals that any eight year old would be proud of. At forty I still need time to myself for pondering life, but also know the importance of spending time with those people I have come to call friends. Not a word that I toss around carelessly, those humans who I have chosen to knight with this label are few and far between and share the honor with several other beings of the feathered and furred variety.

Good relationships are the foundation of a happy life. Those of us who consider our dogs friends and even family know the immense value that comes from just having them around. Coming home to bright eyes and wagging bodies can make even the toughest of days brighter. All those years of domestication give us an animal that has a longer socialization period than its forbearers and who will form strong bonds with humans with very little exposure. Dogs basically come programmed to adore us, seeing us as virtual superheroes with very little effort on our part, making us feel loved and worthy of that love no matter what. And is that not what being a friend is about?

As a trainer of exotic animals, my job is about good relationships. Without a solid base of trust or need the animals I work with would flee from me or attempt to kill me. I don't have the luxury of domestication with an eagle or a seal. I have to work every day at building and maintaining their desire to have me in their space and interact with me. Zoo trainers often refer to this as 'rapport building'. Before we do anything in the name of training behaviors, we have to establish a relationship of trust. What zoo folk call 'rapport building', scientists call 'desensitization' and 'counter conditioning'. What we call 'trust' they call a 'conditioned emotional response.' But whatever you call it, it is vital that the animal have a positive association to you. How your seal, chicken, wombat, dog or human feels about you is important.

Rapport building is very much a gradual thing being built up, just like the trust and love you have for a good friend, over time and through experience. They are not things that are given, they are things that are earned. Even when the animal is one that was born in captivity and has been around people all its life, we still go through rapport building with each and every trainer that will work with that particular animal to ensure each relationship is good. While there are a number of ways we will go about getting the animal to accept us, initially food is our number one tool. An important factor at this stage is making the availability of a favorite food dependent on us. There has to be a clear contingency – the presence of the trainer has to come to predict the opportunity for food for the animal to begin feeling different about us being around. This way we can speed up the association because the animal learns that the only time it will have access to good stuff is in the presence of a human. Approximations are also used and are important to remember. Meeting the animal with the level of interaction it feels comfortable with is imperative. The last thing we want to do is reinforce behaviors associated with

arousal and anxiety and have these as the predominant emotions that are evoked when working with the animal. We may, for instance, start by throwing half a mouse under the door to a new eagle and standing back to the side so that the animal can sense that we are there, but can't see us. Gradually we will work up to being in with the bird and asking the bird to move towards us for the food. Negative reinforcement is often the big player for us at this stage. What does the animal want? Us GONE! No worries, just sit there calmly and we will leave...

Trust occurs not only through associating ourselves with what the animal wants most in the world, but also through us taking care not to place the animal in a situation or context that may make them feel anxious. This is vitally important and a factor that, when missed, becomes very obvious over time. I've worked with seals that were so aroused by the prospect of getting a mullet or a herring that they could not stay on their station on stage. A 'station' can be anything that the animal can fit its whole body onto such as a big fake rock for a seal, or a matchbox for a budgerigar. In dog speak you can think of your dog's 'station' as his mat or bed. In the case of our seal, because reinforcement for being on the station (the behavior we want) had been delivered when the seal was exhibiting behaviors that were occurring due to high arousal or and excitement about forthcoming reinforcers (whale eye, quick short, sharp breaths, erratic body movement) these behaviors grow, as we would expect, due to the laws of learning. Unfortunately they are counterproductive in the long run to the behavior we are trying to train, which is simply to stay calmly on a station.

But there is a more evil demon lurking in the shadows. Through the process of classical conditioning, any strong emotions that regularly occur are associated with all the stimuli that are consistently present in the environment when they occur. The Conditioned Emotional Response (CER) is a very important aspect of early training to be aware of. You need your animal to be calm and confident in training sessions. Why? Well how well do you learn when you are highly aroused, excited or stressed? It's one of the main reasons I will not use positive punishment in my training. I mean think about it; the most consistent stimuli in a training session is you, the trainer. You do not want your 300kg (660 pound) seal feeling anxious every time you are around. It could literally be the death of you. And even if the animal can't harm you, anxiety is counterproductive to ease of learning. Why would any trainer want to make their job harder than it has to be? Thus being about to interpret how your animal is feeling is key.

All good trainers, whether they have a seal, dog or child in front of them understand that body language gives us a window into our animal's emotional state, which has a big part to play in the resulting behavior that we see. By ensuring that the body language you are seeing is telling you your animal is calm and confident, you set your animal up for success and you set yourself up in some situations, to live another day.

One way to really establish a feeling of confidence in your animal is to give the animal as much power over their environment as is possible. Having the power to choose how you interact with your environment is imperative for any

animal's well being. No one likes to be forced. When you work with wild animals that come into care for various reasons, you more often than not start working with an animal that has had all the control it once had in the wild stripped from it in the name of saving its life. A seal, for instance, that has come in due to a shark attack has come from the freedom of the ocean to the confines of a small pool. Hard for us to imagine how scary and confusing that must be. Every effort it makes to get away from its human caregivers is met in defeat. Whether it chooses to flee or aggress, it fails to escape. The effects of Learned Helplessness on animals and humans are well documented in the work of Martin E. P. Seligman and well worth researching.

We can make use of this information in our training. By allowing our animals the chance, when safe, to even slightly increase the distance between it and the thing that makes it nervous, we can use negative reinforcement not only to strengthen the behavior that we want, but also greatly increase their trust in the situation and in you. You gotta love that side effect.

The amount of force and manipulation that many of us use in our training has reduced hugely over the past decade or so. But it can sometimes appear in disguise. When you use a well established behavior to prevent another undesired behavior, it could be said we are using constraint. By asking the animal to perform a behavior we know it has a high likelihood of performing, even in uncomfortable circumstances, we in essence force the animal to do what we want. Even though you can't put a lead around the neck of a seal for instance, if the animal has a strong targeting behavior; where the animal has been trained to glue its nose to your fist when presented in a specific way, you can ask for a target to prevent the animal from fleeing. Depending on the strength of the behavior, this can literally force a well trained animal to stay put when every fiber in its body is telling it to run. You do this at your peril though, because the next time you ask the animal to trust you, you may just find you are ten steps behind where you once were. While this can be a useful method for helping animals get over a fear of something, never forget that the body language the animal is giving you tells you what it is feeling and more importantly for a trainer who wants to use reinforcement as the predominant consequence in their training, what the animal wants most in the world.

Let the animal run back to the safety of its pool or fly back to its aviary and you just might find that the animal's confidence in the situation and their trust in you will grow quickly. "Hmm, don't really like that thing, but when it's around I get treats and heck! I can always get away if I need to...." This really is an interesting point, because in many ways it seems to fly in the face of operant conditioning – aren't we reinforcing running away by allowing the animal to escape the scary situation? If used poorly, a trainer will definitely see a pattern of escape developing, for sure. One of the most important aspects of using escape as a reinforcer is the trainer having control over the behavior through the establishment of a cue for the 'escape'. That way we can reinforce staying calmly by giving the animal the cue to escape. This places us and our animals in a win/win situation. The trainer must establish the cue for escape and use it as a conditioned reinforcer when they see confident behavior in the direction of the goal. I have actively reinforced the escape behavior positively with food, especially in a situation where the animal has

had a history of being forced to stay in a context that makes his eyes pop out of his head and been punished for running off. This is quite common with dogs that have been worked through more traditional methods, where the thought is sometimes “show him you’re the boss and you aren’t worried about it, so neither should he!” With animals that have a strong station behavior, placing the station at a greater distance away from the scary thing and cuing them to go there as a negative reinforcer for calm behavior will formalize the behavior of escape. Stationing is a great basic behavior for every dog and like all targeting behaviors, hugely useful in a variety of setting.

All too often, both in the dog world and the exotics world, trainers forget that what is the most valuable reinforcer at any moment changes and the animal – through their body language, especially what they are orientated to – will tell you what it is they want. Watch your animals and where possible, give them what they ‘ask’ for when they give you desired behavior. This surely is the Mecca of reinforcement training. I remember working with a bull elephant once who was being crate trained for an upcoming move. Everything in the name of positive reinforcement had been done, carrots, apples, banana muffins– you name it, but still the elephant was obviously very nervous of the crate. He would walk in only so far, reach that long grey trunk the rest of the distance so most of his huge body could remain close to the door for a speedy back out get away once he had grabbed as much good stuff as possible. Once out he would eat and come back for another go. Hmm.

We were getting nowhere until we decided the thing he wanted most in the world was not carrot or apple, but escape. How to give him that? Wasn’t he getting it already? Sure, but the behavior we saw just prior to him backing out and escaping was full of anxiety – wide eyes, flapping ears, quick, jerky movements. This was the set of behaviors that were being reinforced. He already knew a cue for the behavior of backing up (a handy one to have on elephants) so the next time he came in we cued him to back up when he only had one foot in the crate. His eyes became wide, but this time with not with fear but surprise! In under two weeks, using a combination of negative (escape) and positive reinforcement, we had him calmly waiting in the crate for his next banana muffin. In fact, we had trouble getting him out of the crate for a while! Often you quickly see the animal will begin to not respond to the cue to escape and choose to stay in the situation that had them so scared not that long ago. I reinforce that choice grandly! It is telling me that the animal is becoming more comfortable and understanding that it has a choice in the matter.

An important aspect of giving the animal choice in this way is always being careful to keep the animal below threshold, as with our elephant. This places them in a place where they can more readily make the choice you want (to stay with you) and prevents any negative emotion and behavior (such as aggression) becoming associated with the situation. Remember, you get what you reinforce. If you are in a situation where you are working with a dog that’s a little nervous of something, say a trash can, you need to watch the body language and cue him to escape when he is still showing signs he is ok. If you wait for him to be whale eyed and lip licking before you cue him to move away, these behaviors (and the emotions that prompted them – think

elephant!) will grow through the law of reinforcement. Yikes! Just what we don't want. Not to mention what it does to your relationship!

None of us should be surprised by the confidence an animal gains from not being forced into a situation that makes them feel threatened. As always, when we think of situations where we have felt nervous, for whatever reason, we know how grateful we were when some kind soul understood and respected our need. Whether that need was 'silly' as in getting the heck away from an innocent creepy crawly or more sensible in a serious situation, people who show us empathy and care are always people we feel we can trust. It's the same it seems, whether you are a man or a mouse.