

Building Bridges.

Being a professional animal trainer is somewhat of an odd profession and never ceases to raise an eyebrow when mentioned at social gatherings. Starting with a boxer over 10 years ago I have now had the opportunity to work with many different animals from chickens to seals. The world of exotic animal training can be both vastly different and very similar to training a pet dog. Some things never change. Whether you have a dog, seal or bird in front of you, training is all about identifying the reinforcer – what the animal will work to gain - and using it to strengthen desired behaviour. Training is training. However, unlike our beautiful dogs, the animals I work with don't particularly like humans - at least at first.

The best part about dogs, I'm sure you will agree, is their ability to ignore all of our less than perfect parts and want to hang around with us any way. All those years of domestication give us an animal that has a longer socialisation period than it's forebearers and who will form bonds with humans with very little exposure. Many people (I am not one of them) would even go so far as to say they have an innate desire to please humans. I myself live with boxers, so have never seen this.

When you work with an eagle or a seal or any other species that doesn't have a long history with humans, you don't have this luxury. Thankfully, learning is a powerful thing and if you play your cards right you can at least become as important to the animal as a dead rat or a big mullet.

So, for trainers of exotic animals one of the most commonly thrown around phrases is 'rapport building'. Before we do anything in the name of training behaviours, we have to establish a relationship of trust. What zoo folk call 'rapport building', scientists call 'habituation' and 'desensitisation'. 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. It is also important that you feel comfortable enough around whatever animal you are training. At the beginning of the year I started working with a 120kg Californian Sea Lion named Michi. Now I had never even worked with a 20kg seal before this, so you can imagine what my learning curve looked like – actually there was nothing curvy about it – it was a straight vertical line. After ten years of training lots of different animals everything I knew and all the skills I had developed were lost when I had Michi by my side because I was way outside my comfort level. Nowadays things are cool, we have grown to know each other's ways and for the most part work really well together, but the experience is fresh in my mind and a great reminder to the importance of the role classical conditioning plays in good training. How your seal, your chicken or your dog feels about you is important.

Changing an animal's association about you is a very interesting process to go through as a trainer. Often times - in the very initial stages at least, you have to let go of all you know and love about operant conditioning and focus your mind on classical conditioning. While trainers need to have a good understanding of how to change

behaviour by controlling consequences we also need to understand that how an animal behaves on an innate level is driven largely by its emotional associations about that situation. Unlike our domestic species that need minimal exposure to humans to feel a high level of comfort in our presence, exotic animals need a huge amount of systematic desensitisation to just begin to cope with being around us. Without this the animal would be so fearful that no matter how good you are at delivering reinforcers, operant learning would be impossible.

With exotics we build the relationship over time by associating ourselves with what the animals like most in the world – which seems to be more often than not something that we find disgusting like cut up rat or raw squid. Depending on the animal's history it may already be pretty used to being around people, but we go through rapport building with every trainer that works with the animals to ensure the relationship is good. There are a number of ways we will go about getting the animal to accept us. Food is our number one tool. An important factor at this stage is making the availability of the food dependant on you. This way we can speed up the association because the animal learns that the only time it will have access to food is in the presence of a human. Approximations are also used, meeting the animal with what it feels comfortable with. We may for instance start by throw half a mouse under the door of a new bird of prey and standing back to the side so that the animal can sense that we are there. Gradually we will work up to being n with the bird and asking the bird to move towards us for the food. At every step there is a clear window of opportunity – ten seconds say – after which the food will be removed if it has not been consumed.

Often at this stage trainers will be offering food in this way several times a day. This ensures the animal has many chances to eat during the day and builds on the association of human = food. At every step, the trainer will be watching the animal closely for signs of confidence or fear. This process can not be sped up by using force and the speed and success of the conditioning program will ultimately depend on the patience and sensitivity of the trainer. Sometimes the trainer will use also negative reinforcement to initially condition an operant behaviour during this time. Being aware that all the animal wants in the world is for you to nick off is a great bit of information because it means that we can initially reinforce behaviour by leaving the animal's environment. In this way, an animal that is still not confident enough to eat in our presence can be reinforced for sitting still as opposed to moving away from us when we enter an aviary or an enclosure. thus reinforcing sitting calmly in our presence. This really helps build the animals confidence in themselves and the trainer.

One of the most common questions we get asked is how long it takes to train our animals. More often than not the training of a behaviour for a show or for husbandry purposes is completed in a very short period of time – I have trained behaviours on parrots and seals in a single session, but without the often lengthy process of desensitisation, training anything would be impossible.

So what has all this have to do with dogs? While we spend a lot of time thinking about operant learning, underlying every behaviour is an emotion. Whether dog, chicken, seal or mouse, how our animals feel about their training is going to play a big part in how their learning proceeds and ultimately the behaviour we end up with. While it may not be as obvious as it is when working with exotics, the process is also a very present and real part of training dogs. Unfortunately for our dogs, sometimes their innate need to belong allows us to ignore this aspect of training. And don't fool yourself that just because you use positive reinforcement to train your animal it's all rosy. Positive reinforcement has to be used well to get the good emotions flowing. Aspects like success rate (the higher the better), motivation level (not too low not too high) and length of session (keep it short) are all important to be aware of as a trainer.

The domestic dog is a very forgiving animal when it comes to training. They forgive us poor timing, low rates of reinforcement, murky criteria, poor concentration (how often have you started a conversation with another person in the middle of a training session while your dog – your training partner – waited patiently?) and at times terribly unclear communication. Most other animals are not as forgiving. Treat a chicken like this and it will go and dig up worms. Working hard for the trust and cooperation of animals like Michi has reminded me not to take this for granted with my dogs, but to continue to work on it every day as hard as I work on it with him. Next time you train spend some time really focusing your attention on your dog's attitude while you are training that all important retrieve, agility obstacle or scent item. They will love you for it.

©Peta Clarke 2005