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Using treats as a bribe – or as reward

Many professional dog trainers do not accept that their students train with treats. Sometimes the reasons are just emotional and not founded in any rational reference to the training results you can achieve with treats. Other times, they refer to the unpleasant effect of the dog learning to only perform when the handler has a treat...

Although this result is common, it is not related to using treats. It is related to using treats as a *bribe* – instead of using them as *reward*.

The components of all effective training methods

Despite the apparent disagreement among trainers, there really is only one possible way of training a dog to perform an action on a command given by a human. This fundamental principle lies behind all effective training, whether the trainer is aware of it or not. In my publications, I call it "The 4 Boxes", because it truly is a sequence of 4 events that follow in close sequence of each other, pretty much like four situations composing a comic strip.

These components are:

- 1) The **command**, as chosen by the handler.
- 2) Some kind of Dog Language translation of what the command is meant to mean (the technical term for this is "**incitement**").
- 3) The dog's **performance**.
- 4) A **reward**, which the dog will find attractive and enjoy.

The efficiency of the training is subject to several factors, but, for this discussion, *these* are important:

- The command must be easily recognizable for the dog.
- The reward must be highly desirable for the dog.

The natural law that makes the training effective and result in the dog performing on the command, instead of awaiting the incitement, is the principle of conditional reflex, as discovered by Pavlov more than 100 years ago. He won the Nobel Prize in 1904 for his research. If his name doesn't ring a bell for you, then he was the one who got dogs to salivate by the ring of a bell as command (pun intended).

The principles of conditional reflexes is extremely powerful, and it will, in effect, make the dog "jump the gun" and *take action on the earliest possible clue* it can recognize that will result in the performance!

In other words, if you build your training sequence with first one command, then another, different command, then the incitement, and now the performance and the reward, then the dog will learn to see the first command as its clue for the performance – and it will ignore the second command altogether!

In human terms, this is called “being smart” and “being a quick learner”. For a carnivore that in the past was dependent on hunting success for survival, this ability is vital....

The incompetent way: bribing

Understanding this, you can now also understand how the use of a treat can become more than “just a reward” in the training process... If the treat also becomes that *first command*, you have the undesired result!

How does this happen? Simply by the handler fiddling too much with those treats or showing them to the dog at the beginning of the training sequence, so the dog gets exposed to the smell of the treat *before* the handler gives any command to perform. You may call it “motivating the dog”. I call it *bribing*.

The result is that the dog will take the smell of the treat as its command. When that happens, there is no reason to wonder why the dog doesn’t perform when the handler uses some unimportant English verbiage – because that verbiage has never been taught to be the command!

Example: The handler pulls out a treat, and shows it to the dog. He then says “Sit!” and helps the dog sit down (=perform). He then gives the dog the treat as reward.

This is the standard recipe for a bribe, and it will not lead to the dog performing on “Sit!”, but on the smell of the treat!

Using treats right – as rewards

The main thing to keep in mind about “The 4 Boxes” here is that the first sense impression that must make the dog aware of anything now happening must be the chosen command.

I often explain this to students in my classes the following way: “YOU are not permitted to do anything whatsoever, in terms of training this dog, until you have spoken the command, at time the dog has no clue what to expect, and is paying attention to you.”

When this is the case, the dog will not be exposed to the treat. Even if the treat is in the handler’s hand, the dog will not pay *attention* to it – and that is what counts! Training is about influencing the dog’s *mind*. It is not a matter of going through some robotic, mechanical actions that do not relate to how the dog uses its brain.

Now, as soon as the handler has spoken the command, and the dog has indeed perceived that command, it no longer matters when exactly the dog will direct its

attention to the treat. Pavlov's law of conditional reflexes will ensure that the dog will, eventually, not pay any attention to that but go straight to performing, so it can obtain its reward. This means that the handler could even use the treat not also as incitement!

Example: The handler gives the command "Sit!" at a time when the dog is paying attention to her. She then puts the treat up in front of the dog's nose and moves it slowly back and up over the dog's head. When the dog lifts its nose up and back in order to follow the movement of the treat (which is what any hungry dog will do), it simply becomes more comfortable for the dog to sit down than to stand – and you got your performance! As soon as the dog's bum in on the ground, it gets the treat now also as reward.

The result of this will be that, when the dog hears the command "Sit!", it will put the bum on the ground, whether or not there is a treat around. The dog will *expect* the treat, and perform on that basis, without first checking if the treat is there or not.

In fact, carnivores are genetically programmed to be very trainable when food is the reward... When used right, treats can be some of the most efficient training tolls you can get. It is a shame to abstain from using them where they can be effective, just because somebody uses them a bribe also.

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