

The Four Boxes

Before we go into detail with the specific training, you need to understand how exactly a training method works.

You might object by saying that there are many training methods – why is this single one the only one that works? Isn't that a bit arrogant?

The explanation is that I am going to explain to you, briefly, the fundamental principles *all* training methods must build on if they are to be effective. Within this general template, there are almost unlimited possibilities that all can be successful, under different conditions, and for different purposes. Your chance of success depends completely on your understanding this.

What we want as outcome of our training (of *any* exercise) is really this: on a given clue, we want a specific reaction from the dog. I will call this clue a "**command**" in order to specify that it is truly an arbitrarily chosen sense impression we find convenient to use for the purpose of triggering the desired response from the dog.

For start, the dog will, of course, have no idea what the command means. Contrary to common belief, dogs cannot learn English (or any other human language). But they can learn to perform certain actions on a consistently taught clue! And that clue can possibly be an English word the dog can recognize.

Here is how dogs do this: After the clue is given, "someone" gives a little help by translating the meaning of the clue to something *the dog* can understand. And when the dog then "performs", it is allowed to enjoy some kind of a reward.

The "translation" of what the command is supposed to mean must have the nature of some kind of impact that will make the dog produce the action we want. The technical name for it is "**incitement**".

Think of it this way: Assume you want to teach a Chinese child some English. You want the child to sit down on a chair. You speak no Chinese. But when you say "sit down", you use your hands and your body to make the child understand that it is supposed to put the bum to the chair. Sign language will do quite well for this!

When you, at every meal, say "sit down" and then immediately after that use your hands to indicate what you want, it won't take long for the child to figure out that, when you say "sit down", it should take a seat on the chair.

Now, it is probably a no-brainer to figure out that if something *nice* happens to this child when it sits on the chair, then this learning will go very fast, and the child will soon take a seat when you say "sit down", not waiting for your hand-signal translation.... Also: if something unpleasant follows, you will get all kinds of avoidance reactions instead!

Dogs are no different. They take clues when you translate those clues by providing some indication as to what you want and you add to that some pleasant experience from doing it. It takes very little repetition to get such a message to sink in.

The result will be that you will no longer need to help with the incitement – your translation. The English word will be understood and followed by the appropriate action!

As long as you retain the reward.

Remember this: as long as you keep the reward in place, the performance will be maintained. This is your parallel: You got a new job, and your boss was very helpful teaching you what you were supposed to do. You became good at it! Then, one day he said, "You have now learned your job so well that I really do not need to help you anymore, so, from tomorrow, I will no longer pay you!"

Would you continue to work after that?

OK – same thing for the dog. You have to constantly keep in mind **"what is in it for the dog?"** In the moment you slip on this, the dog's performance will start to deteriorate.

Training dogs is *not* comparable to programming computers. You can buy a piece of software and install it in a computer and then basically get the computer to do the same thing over and over and over and over and over and over again. You can't do that with a living being, human or dog. If there is nothing in it for you, you will quit. If there is nothing in it for the dog, the dog will quit. Please accept this.

We can boil this down into a simple model for how you put your training method together. I call it “The 4 Boxes” – because there are four ingredients to your training method – and they have to occur in a specific sequence all the time, just like the pictures in a comic strip: each picture represents an event – and the events represented by the pictures are supposed to follow in the exact sequence in order to make sense. Cut the comic strip apart and rearrange the sequence of the events, and you get garbage....

Dog training is the same.

(To be continued)