

It's About Relationships

Steve Martin

President, Natural Encounters, Inc.

Presented: IAATE Annual Conference

Atlanta, GA 2005

Introduction

As trainers of free-flight birds we must have an exceptional working knowledge of positive reinforcement training strategies to be successful. It is the tool we use to encourage our animals to perform their most spectacular behaviors. We know we cannot “force” our birds to fly from a distant tree to our arm; we need to arrange the environment so that the bird wants to perform the behavior. We also know we must have the best relationship possible with our birds if we are to expect them to learn from us and return to us when we set them free.

Trust Account

The best relationships are the ones built on a solid foundation of trust. Most often, this trust is built slowly, over weeks or even months for some birds. Each time we interact with our birds in a positive way we make a deposit into our “relationship” bank to build that trust. As our account grows, our birds become more and more confident in us and more willing to learn from us. Each positive reinforcement is a deposit that feeds our account and strengthens our relationship portfolio.

Conversely, each time we do something the bird dislikes we make a withdrawal from our trust account. Unfortunately, it is too easy to make withdrawals. Picking up a hawk as it bates at the end of its leash is quicker and easier than getting a tidbit of food so you can reinforce the behavior of stepping on the hand. Quickly sliding a parrot back into its cage as you block its escape with your body may be easier than training the bird to go in on its own. The negativity associated with these types of training leads to large withdrawals from the trust account. Make too many withdrawals and you will find yourself in the relationship poorhouse. When this happens many people end up blaming the bird instead of accepting the responsibility for spending all the trust and bankrupting the account. Deposits are often more work than withdrawals, but they are investments in the future that produce sound and very rewarding results.

Most bird trainers have become champions of positive reinforcement and in doing so have evolved away from the use of force and aggression, the more traditional animal training tools that have been in use for thousands of years. Fortunately, negative reinforcement and punishment are slowly, often reluctantly, giving way to positive reinforcement in most animal training communities. The increased use of positive reinforcement has created opportunities that are beyond many people's imagination while at the same time creating better working environments for animals.

The scientific community has demonstrated with hundreds of species from cockroaches to whales that the use of aversives, such as in negative reinforcement and punishment training strategies, produce certain detrimental side effects. These side effects include: aggression, escape/avoidance, generalized fear of the environment, and apathy or generalized reduction in behavior. These side effects are not something that might happen once in a while. They are there, sitting on your shoulder anytime you train with aversives. They are waiting to jump into the mix and eat up the trust you have worked so hard to build.

Fighting the urge to use negative reinforcement and punishment is not always easy. Most people grow up in an environment where negative reinforcement and punishment were the tools that influenced their behavior. This cultural influence was, and still is, evident in a myriad of sources in everyone's lives. Parents, teachers, siblings, schoolmates, etc. all use a multitude of negative reinforcers (the threat of punishment) to force people to comply with wishes, rules and demands. They also punish people when they do not follow these rules or do not live up to certain expectations. Fear of punishment is a powerful motivator, but plagued with the detrimental side effects I

I mentioned above.

The best motivator is, and has always been, positive reinforcement. But, it takes more than positive reinforcement bird training to create world-class shows. Many bird trainers work hard to learn the latest bird training techniques, the most current advances in theater design, and the newest routines that are entertaining and educating their audiences. They spend time and money on training books, workshops, and touring other facilities, not to mention the time spent on the IAATE website discussing bird training, but still the show just doesn't reach its potential. What might be missing is a healthy account in their coworker relationship bank.

The Human Connection

Behavior is behavior. The human animal is influenced by the same behavioral rules that apply to other animals. If you use negative reinforcement and punishment to motivate your coworkers you will likely see the detrimental side effects that I mentioned above. Think of these side effects with your staff in mind: aggression (verbal aggression, backstabbing, etc.), escape/avoidance (won't want to be around you), fear (scared that you might punish them again), and apathy or reduction in behavior (less motivated to work). The best you can do is use positive reinforcement to shape desirable behavior. For humans, the best reinforcer is not more money, shorter workdays, longer vacations, etc. It is recognition. As the saying goes, "If you really want to help someone succeed, catch them doing something right." A little recognition, especially when handed out in public or in front of peers, is an incredibly powerful training tool for humans.

Imagine training a person like you would a bird, only using recognition as the reinforcer. You first visualize the final behavior, break it down into approximations, and then train each step one at a time. With this strategy there is no limit to what you can teach your staff. Colleagues can become more efficient workers, more polite, more enthusiastic, etc. Bosses, can become more lenient, more supportive, more giving, etc. Just focus on the behavior you want to see and approximate the person's behavior in that direction. Use tiny steps, just like with birds, and use recognition as the reinforcer. You will be amazed at the results.

The most trusting relationships with animals, as well as humans, are built on clear, honest communication. We are very careful to help our birds understand exactly what we want them to do in order for them to earn reinforcement. However, we rarely practice this level of communication with our staff. Some people need to work on their communication skills, some need to work on their honesty, and most need to work on both. It is difficult sometimes to be completely honest. I have told my staff that if they are honest, and their intentions are right, they cannot fail in their communications. I believe this to be true. I know others will not always like what I have to say. But, if I say what I believe, and do it in the kindest way I can, and my intentions are to help rather than to hurt, then I have done my part. It is then up to the other person how they choose to take my communication. I believe the best we can ask is for people to be honest with us.

You are the only one responsible for your position in life. No one, not your boss, your spouse, your teachers, your colleagues or your dog is responsible for making you happy. If you rely on other people to make you happy, you are destined to fail. Sure, other people can do or say things you don't like. But you have the power to decide how those things make you feel. If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change the way you look at it. Find something good in it, or forget about it and go on with your day. Why would you give someone else the power to control your happiness? One reason could be the reinforcement you get from your friends when you complain about a situation, or another person. The "poor yous" and comforting hugs serve to reinforce the behavior of complaining and increase the likelihood that you will do it more. The big problem here is the complaining doesn't solve the problem. Clear, honest communication solves problems, but it is a bit more difficult than complaining.

Conclusion

To be successful in this business we have to know how to use positive reinforcement to shape and encourage

the behavior of our animals. We have to learn to be sensitive to birds' body language to help us understand the animal's state of mind so we can avoid doing things it might dislike. We have to understand each animal as an individual and respect its personal quirks and traits. We have to know how to arrange the environment so we always set our animals up to succeed. We have to know how to nurture our animals for optimal growth and development. And, we have to protect our animals from harm. These are just a few of the many things we do for our animals on a daily basis. Think of what an amazing workplace it would be if we did these things with our colleagues as well. The trust account we have in our relationship bank is just as important for our coworkers as it is for the birds in our care. Let's go make a deposit today.