

## LITTLE TIME EXPENDITURE, BIG TIME SUCCESS

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### **Introduction**

Contrary to popular belief, animal training does not have to be a painfully slow process to be effective. “I don’t have time to train” is a sentence uttered around the world and in a variety of languages from keepers working in innumerable zoological institutions. It is, bar none, the single most common excuse for stalling a training program. It needn’t be.

The fact is that well-planned, well-executed training projects have a strong potential to yield impressive results. Most novice trainers (and many seasoned trainers as well) are surprised at how quickly and effectively training can progress even with minimal time commitment. Would it be ideal to have more staff and more time in a typical day? Absolutely! Unfortunately, for most institutions, that isn’t the reality. The point I stress here is that it can be done with a limited staff and with limited time. It’s true that the amount of input determines the result, but it is often more about quality than quantity.

A trainer with a high level of skill will likely obtain desired results quicker than a trainer with a low level of skill during the same time frame. Likewise, a training project that is well thought out will yield quicker, stronger results than a project that is not. In general, several short training sessions throughout a day tend to work best. That doesn’t suggest, however, that learning doesn’t occur if an animal is only trained once per day or sporadically. Fortunately, there are a variety of time saving strategies at zookeepers’ fingertips. These techniques can easily be implemented into training programs to streamline the process and make the most of a tight time budget.

### **Planning for Success**

Making the most of training sessions requires some forethought. Not only is it important to know exactly what the end behavior will look like, it is imperative to know the natural and individual history of the animal to avoid wasting time during the session. Knowing details such as the time of day that the animal is most active and the individual’s favorite reinforcers can make an enormous difference in the pace at which you are able to move.

Of course, before beginning a training project, a training plan should be developed. This process helps the trainer to think through the intended course of action, to envision every tiny approximation along the way. This step in the training process often seems daunting to many keepers/trainers. In reality, this one step has the potential to cut the training time substantially in several simple ways.

Breaking the planning process down even further, an additional strategy for saving time during each training session is to come up with a plan for that specific session. Know exactly what you hope to accomplish for that particular five to ten minute block of time. If the highest priority is to progress with a blood collection behavior, don’t be afraid to dive right in where you left off. It is okay, and often a good idea, to ask for one or two behaviors that the animal already knows well to build some training momentum. Be careful, however, not to spend an exorbitant amount of time doing this. Too frequently, trainers will expend most of their session time, available reinforcers and the animal’s attention span on behaviors that are already established. Do not be afraid the animal is going to forget the behavior if you don’t ask for it every session (or even every month). They won’t.

### **Defining Roles**

A thorough training plan will clearly define the roles of the trainers involved, i.e. the primary trainer and the secondary trainer (if needed). During the initial learning of a behavior, it is most effective to have only one or two trainers working the behavior. This provides the clearest communication to the animal by limiting the opportunity

for several trainers to be working the animal in different ways, using different cues and having different criteria. This also makes the communication between trainers easier to manage. Communication boards such as dry-erase boards and precise record keeping play an important role in this effort. The more consistent the training is, the better the chances for success, even on a limited time budget. It is important to remember, however, that the roles of the keepers not officially training the animals should be clarified as well. Any interaction with an animal is, in fact, training. So be clear on how others are to interact with the animal also. Once the behavior is on maintenance level, it can be passed off to additional trainers to be maintained. Passing off of behaviors is another way of saving time as it will free up the primary trainers to begin new projects.

### **Knowing the Animal**

When setting behavioral goals for animals, it is equally important to set the animals up to succeed in achieving the goals. It is the responsibility of the trainer to create the right environment, the right motivation and to provide clear communication to the animal, among other things. This speaks to knowing the animal. Taking a parrot into the forest to teach it to fly from one trainer to the other without first solidifying the behavior in an enclosed environment might not be setting the bird up for success. In fact, this approach could cause the trainer to lose the bird altogether.

And what about creating the right motivation? This is another misnomer that facilitates resistance in implementation of a training program. Many people are still under the impression that the only way to train an animal is to starve or dominate it into submission.

Modern zoological training is steeped in cooperation not dominance. When speaking of creating the right motivation, resourceful trainers refer to using food in strategic ways or, in some cases, non-food reinforcers. For example, if you are training a crocodile that is only fed twice per week, placing those training opportunities as far apart as possible will likely set you up to make the most of those opportunities. Or, in some cases, it might simply mean taking the favorite items out of the diet and using those singularly for training sessions, such as raisins or grapes from a gorilla's diet. With some tactile-oriented animals such as rhinoceroses, the right motivation might well be a ten-second belly rub with a hard-bristled scrub brush.

### **Moving at the Animal's Pace**

Training plans, as mentioned earlier, give you the opportunity to envision every small step along the way to a behavioral goal. There are several important time factors built into this component of the process. One is that having a clear vision of the potential steps to the final goal will allow you to recognize when the animal is capable of skipping ahead. For example, imagine training an animal according to a written training plan. The animal is currently at step three when suddenly it skips to step eight in the plan. If the trainer hasn't thought about each step in the process, it is likely that the opportunity to jump ahead will be missed, resulting in longer training time. If on the other hand, the trainer has exercised the forethought to have a written plan, when the animal jumps to step eight, the trainer will already have step nine pictured in his mind along with a plan of how to continue moving ahead.

Another benefit of having a detailed training plan is that it allows the trainer to see the smallest increments of the goal behavior. Though they keep each step in mind, the most efficient trainers move at the animal's pace. They can see when the animal is ready to move or leap forward just as they can see when the trainer has tried to take too large of a step. Just as it can waste time to hold the animal back when it is ready to progress, it can be just as inefficient to try to move the animal bounds ahead when it is not ready to proceed. A good rule of thumb is to remain at a particular step in the training plan until the animal performs that approximation without hesitation, and then proceed to the next approximation. Having the small steps written out, provides small distinct goals to work toward at each training opportunity. This allows the trainer to see progress with each session. This is especially beneficial when working with only one trainer and/or on an irregular basis. Even under these circumstances, progress can be made when it is approached with effective use of time in mind. Keep the sessions focused and to

point when your sessions must remain as quick as possible.

### **Making the Most of the Daily Routine**

One of the most effective time saving tips is to fit training sessions into everyday interactions such as the daily husbandry routine. Another common misconception is that training sessions have to take an exorbitant amount of time. In reality, most sessions take five to ten minutes. There are occasions, such as medical procedures, which can take substantially longer, but those cases are the exception, not the rule.

Learning occurs remarkably fast. It can simply be a matter of taking advantage of the opportunities you have everyday to capture and shape desirable behavior. Think about how and where animals are fed throughout the day. From the animal's perspective, receiving food can be a highly reinforcing event. Why not take advantage of that? When trying to teach an animal to shift inside a building on cue, doing something as simple as sounding the cue before presenting the food and slowly approximating the food closer to the building are the first steps in training the behavior. It doesn't take any extra time, but can quickly move the animal closer to the desired goal. Having food items and tools needed for your training sessions, such as a bell cue and pre-weighed pellets for training hoofed stock to shift inside a barn, will expedite the process even further. In this case, be sure that the entire team understands the goal and the steps that are being made. Otherwise, the animal may accidentally be fed, removing the opportunity for a training session that day.

### **Building a Relationship**

One of the cornerstones of successful positive reinforcement based training is establishing a solid relationship between trainer and animal. Relationship building can, and sometimes must, be paired with a strategy to desensitize the animal to the new trainer's presence in their environment. This is yet another way to take advantage of training during the daily routine. This strategy takes very little time or effort to begin to build a positive relationship with an animal, but is one of the cornerstones of training success. Some will take longer than others to acclimate to a trainer's presence, but they all begin the same way – by taking a step forward, by beginning the process. Remember to reward the animal for the smallest approximation in the beginning. The positive approach to this scenario is obvious and preferable whenever possible. For example, a trainer tasked with conditioning an overtly aggressive White rhino must first establish a relationship with the animal in order to work in the most productive, safest manner possible. The trainer might begin to build the relationship by tossing a cube of alfalfa to the rhino each time the trainer passes by the rhinos stall and the rhino shows no signs of aggression. This might progress to the rhino allowing the trainer to remain beside the stall for a few seconds, and then a couple of minutes, then the rhino initiates the interaction by approaching the keeper. Now, there's the turning point! This progression could take anywhere from a couple of days to several months, depending on the skill level of the trainer and the history of the rhino.

### **Taking Responsibility**

As training consultants, my colleagues and I often hear comments like, "That animal isn't trainable" or "He/she is too aggressive to train" or "That species is too stupid to train." Don't believe it! Whenever I hear a trainer tell me that they can't train something, I ask them what they believe they could do differently. It's important to understand that trainers are responsible for the behavior of the animals in their care – both desirable and undesirable. Taking that responsibility rather than blaming the animal is empowering. It allows the trainer to tackle and overcome the changeable obstacles in the path. As a trainer, it is not possible to change an animal's intelligence or to control their thinking. We can, however, analyze behavior and then plan and implement a course of action to obtain the behaviors we want.

### **Recording Success**

Record keeping, believe it or not, can also be an effective time saver. Records don't need to be long and complex to be valuable and they serve an important function. The point of record keeping is to provide a reference when you need it. If accurate records are kept, a trainer may be able to determine why a behavior breaks down, why it

becomes soft in predictable patterns, how to re-shape a behavior once it begins to break down and how fast the animal regularly progresses. All of which can be instrumental in improving an animal's behavioral progress. It's also a good reality check for the keeper. It may feel as though no progress is being made, but upon inspection of the records, the trainer may find that they are making more headway than they thought.

### **Conclusion**

As zoological facilities around the world continue to evaluate animal management practices and animal welfare related responsibilities, animal training continues to emerge on the forefront of this evolutionary process. Even with limited time resources, huge accomplishments are within reach. Through thoughtful planning, clear communication, and a little effort, trainers have accomplished feats in animal training once believed impossible. Though we are still in the infancy of animal training development, it is clear that with remarkably little time expenditure, training often saves more time in a daily husbandry routine than it extracts.

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