

Evaluating the Trainer

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How is a curator, veterinarian, director or even supervisor supposed to tell good training from average training? An expert should be more than someone who read Don't Shoot the Dog, has a whistle in their mouth, a clicker on their wrist, and speaks in jargon hard for non-trainers to understand. An expert trainer should be evaluated based on observable skills and knowledge. Below are a few characteristics of expert trainers.

An expert trainer uses positive reinforcement training strategies to build trusting relationships with all animals they work with, especially the human animals on their team. Exceptional team behavior is a hallmark of expert animal trainers. Building trust with any animal involves careful antecedent arrangement, clear, two-way communication, and positive reinforcement to promote desirable behavior. Expert trainers catch people doing something right and reinforce that behavior, often with recognition in the form of a simple "thank you" or "nice job." Other trainers catch people doing something wrong and focus on the problem. Average trainers are quick to criticize others. They take the "My way or the highway" path that usually reveals how much more they have to learn.

Expert trainers understand the value of prompts to help an animal understand criteria for reinforcers and promote performance of desirable behavior. Prompts can be body language such as hand gestures, vocal encouragement, baiting strategies and most anything other than a cue that can encourage an animal to perform a behavior. One large difference between an expert trainer and an average trainer is the speed with which they fade the prompts. An average trainer may continue to use prompts for days, weeks, even months without fading them out of the training program. When a trainer fails to fade the prompt, it becomes the cue. By definition, prompts should be faded. Expert trainers fade prompts in conjunction with the animal's performance of each approximation. When an animal performs a behavior without hesitation, an expert trainer moves to the next approximation, which often includes gradual fading of the prompt. Expert trainers often fade prompts in just a few repetitions.

Expert trainers take responsibility for the behavior of the animals they are training. When things go wrong, and things are bound to go wrong eventually, the differences between an expert and average trainer are often apparent. Experts see problems as opportunities to improve communication and understanding that will promote better learning. Average trainers often just blame the animal and wash their hands of responsibility as if thinking "it's not me being an insensitive trainer, it's the animal that's broken." Non-expert trainers often label an animal as aggressive, stupid, untrainable, messing with your mind, or more. Experts don't waste their time blaming animals, they spend their time solving problems and training behavior. When things go wrong, expert trainers evaluate the training session to discover their role in the performance of the undesirable behavior. They then develop a plan of action to promote desirable behavior. This plan often includes antecedent arrangement, clearer communication,

higher rate of reinforcement, paying closer attention to body language and empowering animals with more control.

Expert trainers use clear, honest, two-way communication with animals. Clear cues, bridging stimuli, careful antecedent arrangement and exceptional observational skills are characteristics of expert trainers. Experts give cues only when animals are ready to receive them. They know the value of timing of the bridging stimulus and demonstrate precise marking of small approximations of behavior. Whistles, clickers and audible bridges are all tools of expert trainers; however, experts know that clickers and whistles are not necessary in all training sessions. In fact, clickers and whistles often get in the way of training progress and verbal bridging stimuli, such as the word "Good" is often the best bridging stimulus in many cases. Some people think they cannot use a verbal bridge because they have different trainers working with a particular animal and each person has a different voice. Animals easily adapt to different stimuli in their environment and easily adapt to different voices used as bridging stimuli.

Through careful observation of an animal's body language, and responding appropriately to those signals, an expert trainer gives an animal a voice in their partner relationship. The animal's voice, through its body language, is as important as the trainer's voice through her cues, prompts and reinforcers. Giving an animal a voice also gives the animal a vote in its management, training and welfare.

Giving animals a voice will lead to providing more choice and control in their environment. For instance, when opening a door for an animal to shift inside, the trainer gives the animal a choice. If the animal chooses to stay outside, the trainer recognizes the reinforcers for staying outside out-compete with the reinforcers for going inside. An expert trainer will then build a plan to provide reinforcers for going inside that out-compete with the reinforcers maintaining the behavior of staying in the outdoor yard. Some average trainers will simply get out the hose and squirt the animal with cold water to get it to shift outside.

In a case like this, an expert trainer might do a functional assessment to evaluate the reinforcers and punishers associated with the animal behavior of staying outside. By evaluating the antecedents and consequences associated with the behavior of staying outside, an expert might realize the consequence of being locked inside in the past has become the antecedent condition for staying outside at this time. By staying outside, the animal avoids being locked inside.

An expert might deal with this problem behavior by giving the animal control over the door. If the animal is inside, a trainer can open the door anytime the animal moves in the direction of the door. High value food would be offered for staying inside as the door opens. After several repetitions the animal will learn that it has the power to open the door simply by moving in the direction of the door and staying inside will result in high value food reinforcers. This control of the door is a primary reinforcer for the behavior of moving toward the door. Control of the door and high value food items are the reinforcers for the behavior of staying inside while the

door is being closed. Each time the door is closed, high value food reinforcers are provided to the animal. Soon, the animal will stay inside when the door is opened because the food reinforcers, combined with the history of being able to open the door, outcompetes with the reinforcers of being outside. Control over the door closing and opening will also reinforce the behavior of coming inside because the animal has reinforcement history associated with being able to open the door by moving toward it. A large quantity of high value food should always be given any time the door is secured for the night.

Conclusion

To properly evaluate a person's training expertise, one should look at many indications of skill and knowledge. Team behavior is a very important consideration when evaluating any trainer. Even more important than animal training skills, exceptional team behavior should be required for someone to move ahead in a training system. It is often easier to teach a great team player to be a contributing member of a training team than it is to teach a great trainer to be an outstanding team player.

Expert trainers give animals a voice through their body language and respond to subtle signs to empower animals with control in their environment. By giving animals a vote in how they are managed, an expert trainer increases enrichment experiences, improves training outcomes, and creates conditions that improve welfare. Expert trainers are not always the smartest in the room, but they are often the most sensitive at reading body language and arranging antecedent conditions, and reinforcement history, that promote desirable behavior.