

## **The Top 10 Behaviors of Expert Human Mentors**

Chris Jenkins, CPBT-KA  
Chief Operating Officer  
Natural Encounters

In his 2017 ABMA presentation “The Top 10 Behaviors of Expert Animal Trainers,” NEI President Steve Martin listed and operationalized ten behaviors he has observed in highly skilled and successful animal trainers over the course of his career in our industry. These behaviors are based on honest, two-way communication and empower animals with control, the result of which are strong, trusting relationships.

It’s an interesting exercise to consider the implications this list has for people in the business of training the human animals in our field: our leaders and mentors. Over the past 14 years I’ve had the opportunity to work closely with Steve as one of my mentors, and as a manager, training consultant, and member of the IAATE Professional Development Committee, I’ve had the great opportunity to observe and work with animal keepers and trainers from around the world. As I’ve helped others to grow their skills as animal caretakers, I am continually reminded of how vital strong teams are to the successful management and welfare of animals under human care in aquariums, aviaries, and zoos. In large part the success of those teams is often the results of successful leaders and mentors who set these teams up for success and foster a culture that makes continued success possible. Steve’s “Top 10” list provides a great framework for many of the behaviors that great leaders and mentors exhibit, and a fantastic list of strategies to keep in mind for those looking to become the leaders of the future.

### **1. Commits to Using the Most Positive, Least Intrusive Training Methods**

The professional animal training field has come to a point where the vast majority of people agree about the importance of positive reinforcement to the successful management of animals when their welfare is our primary goal. I think many of us would agree, though, that we might not always apply that same belief to the humans in our lives. The best mentors I have worked with are people who look for barriers to their teams’ successes and do their best to remove them. Does the team have enough time and resources to get their enclosures clean before the zoo opens? When people are successful in their roles, is someone providing them with feedback to let them know that it’s noticed and appreciated? Are the team’s leaders in touch with day-to-day operations enough to see if people’s tasks are drifting away from the institution’s goals? If so, are they able to communicate to the team quickly about where changes need to happen, and why? If someone on the team is behaving in a manner that is unacceptable, is leadership willing to step in immediately to make sure this behavior stops and is replaced with other, more acceptable behaviors? Whether they are familiar with the science of behavior change or not, these mentors arrange antecedent and consequence conditions so that their teams know what is expected of them, and have the tools to achieve those goals as easily as possible.

### **2. Empowers Animals with Control**

“Choice and control” are hot topics these days in our field, and it’s important to remember that they should be more than just amorphous buzzwords that we say we strive for with our animals. As it is increasingly clear of the importance control plays as a primary reinforcer in the life of the organisms

on planet Earth, great mentors will seek ways to give people under their guidance control in ways both big and small. Is your staff set up to feel like active participants in the processes and protocols of your facility, or are they simply carrying out “my-way-or-the-highway” commands that are handed down from above? Are employees micromanaged by their leaders in their daily tasks, or are they given a framework for the tasks that need to be completed, and then left to their own devices to determine the best way to achieve them? Giving people even small amounts of control over how to do their job has been strongly correlated with job satisfaction, and a lack of it has been shown to be one of the top three reasons for why people decide to leave their job (Collins and Collins, 2002).

One factor I’ve seen in many high functioning teams is leaders that encourage people to speak up with questions, issues, or new ideas about how to do things. Our team opened a new bird show in April 2018, and even today we are still having regular meetings to evaluate our operations and solicit ideas for new and more efficient ways to run the show. I appreciate working with leaders who welcome this discourse, because I know many people belong to teams where the presentation of new ideas is discouraged as “rocking the boat” that disrupts the status quo. Personally, I place a lot of value in “boat rockers,” because their contributions are what will move us and our industry forward as we look to do better by our animals and our visitors.

### **3. Constantly Adjusts What They Do in Response to What the Animal Does**

Great trainers are willing to throw out their training plans when their interactions with an animal tells them it’s time to change course. Great mentors are willing to do the same thing. Most facilities have set practices and protocols that are followed when they are onboarding a new employee, or teaching an existing employee how to take on new roles and responsibilities. The most successful programs I’ve seen do this by laying out a clear list of goals for each new role that includes the behaviors that need to be performed fluently in order for the employee perform the role autonomously, as well as a plan for how they will work with a mentor or mentors to build that fluency. I have also seen programs that equate fluency with something like “watched someone step up the owl 3 times.” The danger of such a program is that it doesn’t account for the large variability that exists between people, and the different types of skills and sensitivities they each bring to the table. Similarly, many programs will prevent people from taking on new tasks until they meet some criteria that has nothing to do with their performance or demonstrated skills, such as “After 5 weeks, new staff will handle the golden eagle.”

Great mentors understand that all people are individuals; that some people will take longer than others to develop certain skills than others might, and that some people may be ready to take on new tasks more quickly than others have in the past. Employee development plans that are focused on the demonstration of observable behaviors (“demonstrates getting the owl on the glove out of her mew...”) with detailed criteria (“...by asking her to approach and step on the glove voluntarily for a food reinforcer...”) and measurements for success (“...with mentor’s feedback and written approval”) allow an employee to move through the new task fluidly and at their own pace. If this pace fails to meet the criteria that leadership sets for the task, it gives the mentor more information about how to change the plan going forward in order to help the person grown into the role, or to find other roles they may be better suited for at that time.

### **4. Builds a Big Trust Account**

“Maximize good experiences, minimize bad ones.” Simple, isn’t it? Most of us have experienced that trust can be built through a history of positive experiences, so we seek to create as many of those experiences as we can. Expert mentors look for every possible opportunity to provide genuine, positive, and specific feedback to those they lead, which can be an important component of what builds high-trust teams.

But what happens when a situation occurs that threatens that trust? Relationships built on a high degree of trust can usually weather most situations, allowing for the two parties to discuss what has occurred and commit to working together to find a way forward. Those with a lower degree of trust – from “tenuous” all the way down to “bankrupt” – will have a much harder go of it. Great mentors will work to find ways to slowly rebuild this trust, even when they don’t believe they are the ones who violated it. They are willing to be honest with their employees about how they feel about the situation, and will do so in a way that makes the conversation safe for both parties so that honesty can be reciprocated. This allows for both parties to make a commitment to the things they each can do to go back to building a history of shared positive experiences.

## **5. Minimizes the Use of Time Out**

Time out from positive reinforcement means the removal of the opportunity to earn positive reinforcement following an incorrect or unwanted behavior in order to reduce the frequency of that behavior in the future; it is a negative punishment strategy. While most of us have (hopefully) graduated past the age of being sent to sit in the corner if we do something wrong, it’s common to hear about situations where a person’s opportunity for growth or advancement is held back following the fallout of trust being lost as a result of past struggles or mistakes. Mistakes happen – they are a reality of the human condition. I believe it is how a mentor deals with the mistakes of those they advise that can make what could be an uncomfortable, punishing situation for all involved into an opportunity to look at what happened with the benefit of having more information about what to do in that situation if it were to occur again.

In a “time out” culture, though, a mistake – even a seemingly small one – might be enough to cause a leader to dismiss all future successes from the person who made it, and decide that it is simply not worth it to continue to invest in that person’s growth. This could be the result of interpersonal challenges between the leader and the other party, or from a mistake that caused that leader to lose face in front of their own peers and mentors. In some cases, the strain between the employee and their leader may be so bad that eventually that person will decide to leave the team because they feel any positive contribution they could make wouldn’t be enough to “erase the black mark from their record.” Where in other environments the error might have been a speedbump that’s allowed to rapidly disappear in the rearview mirror, instead it grows into a sinkhole that the employee felt they might never see the bottom of.

The best leaders take responsibility for their role in the failings of those they mentor (more on that point in a minute). Indeed, they don’t see them as failings at all, but rather as feedback about what occurred under a specific set of environmental conditions. They don’t make excuses for the errors of others, but rather reinforce a culture of accountability where everyone understands that they have

behavioral expectations and responsibilities that need to be met, and where mistakes become the starting point for building new skills and competencies.

## **6. Accepts Responsibility for their Animals' Behavior**

The best animal trainers take responsibility for their animals' behavior. They set them up for success by arranging environmental conditions to make the behaviors they want to see more of easier to do and worth doing again, and when they see things they don't like, they ask what they might be doing to influence it, and think about what they can train the animal to do instead in its place. In high-functioning, high-trust teams, employees and their leaders treat each other similarly, looking for ways to have a positive impact on one another and maintaining clear, open, and honest lines of communication.

Unfortunately, in some facilities a tenuous "us against them" relationship exists between frontline staff (keepers, trainers, animal care staff) and their leadership (supervisors, curators, and directors). Whether the result of recent interpersonal challenges or just a cultural carry-over of "the way things have always been here," there are always opportunities for relationships to improve, and an important first step towards changing things for the better is for the parties on both sides to take responsibility for what they have done to contribute to the current state of things. This can be an extremely difficult thing to do, especially in low-trust relationships where you may not believe that your behavior is what has caused the problem in the first place.

I believe it is the job of a leader or mentor to ensure the healthy functioning of the teams they oversee; indeed, at NEI we have explicitly decided to evaluate the performance of our leaders by the performance of the employees that they lead. Being honest with others requires trust, but trust is also built when people are willing to have difficult conversations that begin with "I don't like the way things seem to be going with us right now; I'm sorry for whatever I've done that might have contributed to it, and I want to know what I can do to help make things better." The best mentors are the ones always willing to say this when it is needed, and to create environments where others feel like they can too without fear of punishment or retribution.

## **7. Demonstrates Flexibility**

Conditions change, and when the bird poop hits the fan, people look to their mentors for information about what to do next. Our jobs can be stressful and unpredictable, and the lives of the animals in our care literally depend on our ability to do them well. We rely on our leaders and mentors to set the tone when things go awry, whether it's with the animals themselves, our guests, or between members of the team.

There are countless factors in any given day that have the potential to cause stress for an individual on the team, and part of good mentoring is being able to identify and intervene when those stressors are the result of the "organizational stress" that comes from the workplace itself. These stressors may be the result of factors outside of the team that the mentor has little to no influence over (ex: budgets have been cut, so Sally now has to do the work that has always been the job of two people in the past), or the result of problems in the antecedent and consequence conditions relating to the behaviors required to get the job done. Both types of stressors can have tremendous impact on both

the individual (leading to health issues, stymied personal development, and lowered confidence) and the organization itself (increased absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, and increased conflict) (Michie, 2002).

The best mentors work to identify the factors in the workplace that can lead to stress for their employees, and work to either mitigate those factors through antecedent changes or by helping their team develop strategies and coping mechanisms that allow them to deal with these stressors in healthy, constructive ways. Indeed, the ability to work together as a team to deal with a challenge is one of the best ways to strengthen relationships and build trust!

## **8. Practices Two-Way Communication**

In my experience, there are very few issues that I have ever experienced or helped others sort out that haven't, at their root, been an issue of poor communication. Great mentors understand the importance of good communication in their relationships, and work hard to uphold their end of any exchange of information with a coworker. When speaking, they understand that *how* they say things are as important as *what* they say. According to author and public speaking specialist Richard Greene, the words we say when speaking only account for 7% of the impact we have on a listener, while our voice tone and body language account for 38% and 45%, respectively (Greene, 2014). Great mentors not only avoid using labels and inflammatory language to place blame on others, but they also keep their tone calm and even, and maintain open body language (arms uncrossed, for example) and ignore other distractions in the environment to reinforce that what they are saying is worth listening to.

Speaking of listening, great mentors demonstrate that they are able to do so actively and with undivided attention. Maintaining eye contact, nodding to acknowledge comprehension of what is being said, and holding their tongue until the other party is done speaking are behaviors that we could all stand to work on in a world that increasingly seems to reinforce that the loudest, most insistent people are the most important. Good listening can be reinforced by the speaker by having the listener repeat what was just said in their own words.

Perhaps most importantly, great mentors follow up on these conversations to make sure that progress is being made, and offer advice about the actionable things that an employee can do to be successful, thus avoiding the need to use punishment to tell them what *not* to do in the future.

## **9. Backs Up Every Use of the Bridge with a Well-Established Reinforcer**

In their paper entitled "Blazing Clickers," Steve Martin and Dr. Susan Friedman detail the breakdowns in behavior that can occur when the relationship between a secondary reinforcer and other reinforcers breaks down. While our work with the humans in our lives doesn't always involve clickers and food treats (though the latter are always appreciated), mentors often have the opportunity to reinforce behavior through what they say and what they do in response to behaviors that they want to see repeated.

When great mentors want to let someone know they did something well, they go beyond a simple "good job" and back it up with information about the specific behaviors that their employee

performed that they appreciated. “Great job with that parrot; I saw that you recognized when her eyes were pinning, and the way you adjusted where your hand was placed so that you could wait for her body language to change and let you know that it was ok to come closer.” Without specific information about what behaviors are being praised, it’s possible that those behaviors might not repeat themselves in the future, in which case a tossed off “attaboy” is just words and not a reinforcer for behavior at all. Specific feedback also shows that close attention was being paid by the mentor, which sends the message to the person being observed that what they were doing was important and valuable.

## **10. Demonstrates a Strong Commitment to Welfare**

According to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, animal welfare “refers to an animal’s collective physical, mental, and emotional states over a period of time, and is measured on a continuum from good to poor.” While most people would agree that working to improve poor welfare conditions should be core tenet of what we do in the zoological community, many institutions aim to exceed the goal of “good” and seek instead to create welfare conditions where their animals have the opportunity to thrive. Isn’t it our job as leaders in the community to ensure that our employees are given that same opportunity? Great trainers know they can achieve their institutional and programmatic goals while keeping animal welfare a priority; great leaders seek to achieve their goals for their teams while keeping their employees’ welfare a priority as well.

I think it benefits any leader or mentor to regularly ask themselves the following question: are the people on my team thriving? I would operationalize a “thriving” team as one with a high degree of open communication, an eagerness to participate in the feedback loop of seeking and offering information to one another in a positive and honest manner, strong relationships with animals that are eager to participate in the training dialog, and a willingness amongst its ranks to push against the boundaries of their comfort zones in order continually improve themselves and their practices. If this is the team you *have*, take pride in being a leader that helped create the conditions that made that possible. If this is the team you *want*, the 10 behaviors listed above are a great place to start to think about the conditions you have the power to personally influence so that each and every day your employees can be their best selves for the benefit of our animals, our guests, and – maybe most importantly – one another.

## **References**

Collins, SK and Collins, KS. Micromanagement – A Costly Management Style. Radiology Management, 2002.

Greene, Richard. The Seven Secrets of the Greatest Speakers in History. Presented at TEDx Orange Coast, 2014.

Martin, Steve. The Top 10 Behaviors of Expert Animal Trainers. Presented at ABMA Conference, 2017.

Martin, Steve and Friedman, Dr. Susan. Blazing Clickers. Presented at ABMA Conference, 2011.

Michie, S. Causes and Management of Stress at Work. Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 2002.