

Temperament and Pet Dog Training

by Jerry Bradshaw
President, Tarheel Canine Training, Inc.

Introduction

In recent years, training methods have become a subject for contentious debate among canine professionals, both trainers and behaviorists alike. Much of the discussion seems to center around what methods are better in a general sense, either “traditional” methods of a more compulsive nature, or “motivational” methods of a more reward driven nature. While discussions about general training frameworks are certainly useful, one issue that seems to be dropped from these discussions is the temperament of the individual dog to be trained.

It used to be a cliché that methods could not be discussed outside the context of temperament. In this article I wish to open a discussion regarding the importance of temperament considerations to training methodology. I think that much of the popular literature on training has been reduced to arguments over methods. Arguing whether compulsion or motivation is “better” in some objective sense without considering the temperament of the dog being trained is a useless rhetorical exercise. A dog that is devoid of food drive and play drive is a hard sell for motivational training. Conversely, a dog with a handler aggression problem because of dominance, is a poor candidate for compulsive methods. It can be argued that applying methods, without regard for temperament characteristics, cannot only be ineffective, but dangerous as well.

It is not my intention to come to a conclusion regarding what methods are better in any general sense. I do however believe there is a place for both motivation and compulsion in the training of dogs. I believe those who prima facie wish to dismiss one or the other are either ideological in their motivation, or are simply unwilling to see the truth. It is not worth debating whether one or the other “works” or “doesn’t work”. Both have their place in training, and both can change behavior through proper application. [1] In my experience, the majority of dog trainers apply traditional methods devoid of any food- or toy-reward based reinforcement. In response to this a very well organized, and vocal group of trainers has espoused a purely non-compulsive approach. Both extreme positions are fundamentally flawed in my opinion. [2]

What is Temperament?

Temperament Characteristics

In this section I will discuss important temperament characteristics that both singly and in combination have important consequences for the training of pet dogs. Temperament itself cannot be observed, yet traits or characteristics of temperament can be observed. As trainers we are schooled to “read” the dogs we are working with, both for their inherent characteristics of temperament, and their behavior during training, so that proper choices and adjustments in method can be made

Public Sociability

I wish to differentiate the general outward sociability of the dog from the social drives and behavior toward pack members and those with a training relationship to the dog. A protest biter can be exceptionally social in general, but show aggression when corrected. When evaluating the dog we look for whether the dog is overtly social, neutral, or unsocial. In overtly social dogs, the greeting is usually immediate and forceful, though no prior relationship has ever been established. Usually we see such behavior in very confident dogs who have been provided good

experiences (they may anticipate food reward) in their formative social experience. Some others who behave this way may be more submissive in temperament and wish to make a ritual display of submission to forestall an aggressive dominant display by the human greeter.

In the neutral dog, no fear is registered, and the dog simply ignores the person. This may be a sign of a more defensively motivated dog or overly handler dependent dog. In the more defensive temperament, on neutral territory, there is no perceived threat if the dog doesn't confront the individual during the greeting. The dog has learned to avoid conflict by ignoring the presence of others. This same dog at home may behave very territorially defensive, as intruders cannot be ignored on the home turf. The more handler dependent dog, also avoids fear or confrontation by ignoring anyone but the handler. Both these dogs have learned that their approach to greeting forestalls the question of possible conflict. [3]

The unsocial dog does not approach, nor will allow anyone to approach. The unsociability can be manifest as a defensive aggressive display or through flight and hiding, or a combination of both. The aggressive display is a learned behavior. The dog learns that aggression successfully relieves the fear that has become a conditioned response to greeting situations.

Clearly, sociability is a very important issue for the trainer. The more social and gregarious the dog, the easier to work with he is. The more social the more he responds to voice, and tactile stimulation, though some of these dogs have as their main problem greeting that is out of control. One needs to choose a course of action that can temper the greeting yet not alienate the dog from being social. With neutral dogs, using motivation to interest the dog in greeting and make him more social and responsive will build confidence. Using compulsion in the learning stages of training will reinforce the neutrality and displacement behavior.

The unsocial dog needs a program of counter-conditioning the fight/flight response, through classical conditioning and removing the reward for the aggression. [4] When I deal with a dog in my kennel who shows aggression at the approach to the kennel door, having already been determined fearful, I make a practice to stand there and not withdraw, while simultaneously dropping treats into the kennel. I do not stand frontally, because I do not want to send a message that I am confronting, rather I stand obliquely. The combination of not withdrawing from the display, and simultaneously presenting a tasty treat, allows the dog to interrupt the aggression and consider a new course of behavior. In this way we do not create conflict. [5]

“Nerves”

This characteristic is one that surely will get me in trouble with behaviorists. Dog trainers use this term as a general descriptive of a dog's adaptability to change. Change, of course, can come in many ways. It may be a change in the dog's environment (e.g., boarding or traveling), or a change in the dog's social situation (e.g., new owners, or the addition of a new pet to the family). Change can come in more specific ways. A new surface the dog has to negotiate like slick floors, steeper stairs, dark rooms, tight spaces, etc. can cause problems as well. The dogs adaptability to change can be classified as follows: (1) Fluid, (2) Studied, (3) Cautious, (4) Incomplete, (5) Halted, (6) Accelerating Anxiety.

I characterize the adaptability as fluid if the dog makes no hesitation at all, and accepts his new situations immediately and confidently. Studied adaptability means that the dog may initially show concern at the change, but has the ability to investigate using his senses, and enough confidence to negotiate the changes with little pause or lingering concern. Cautious adaptability means the dog adapts but takes significantly more time and effort on the part of the trainer to shepherd the dog through the changes. [6] Incomplete adaptability means that the dog is functional at a moderate level under the new environment, however, doesn't ever recover the same activity level and comfort level that he has in his familiar circumstances, and the dog takes an inordinately long

time to register even this limited functional level. Halted adaptability refers to a dog that cannot function at more than a minimum level of his normal behaviors when faced with a change in environment, and never improves from this minimum level, no matter how much time is devoted to de-conditioning. Accelerated anxiety refers to the dog who cannot function at all (shuts down completely) and through continued exposure in a systematic de-conditioning program becomes increasingly fearful, beyond the level initially experienced, and portrays anticipatory anxiety despite trainer's efforts to desensitize the dog.

Clearly this is not the most scientific classification, however, as a trainer, the important issue is whether the dog shows adaptability in a useful sense. Does it require a lot or a little effort to get the dog to his normal state of confidence? Clearly, dogs who are better socialized in their formative periods, learn how to process change and adapt more quickly. The important thing to remember is that the dog with better nerves can take to the changes in situation that training requires more easily and more quickly. Many working dog trainers refer to the dog that is at the lower end of the scale as "strong" nerved, and those at the higher end of the scale as "weak" nerved. The clear implication being the former is a better candidate for work that requires high adaptability like Police Dog Training or competitive training which involves traveling or unpredictable trial circumstances or exercises (e.g., surprise scenario trials in Belgian Ring, and some of the American Protection Sports).

Drives

In this characteristic we find the basis for motivation. Recognize also that these drives go hand in hand with the dog's nerves. By this I mean that the weaker the nerves, the less the drives will rule the dog's temperament, and vice versa. A dog with high food drive can easily adapt to situations that are new and involve the opportunity to eat. As the dog develops more experience doing this, the dog is classically conditioned to adapt to and even like new situations. The same is true in the working dog arena. I have tested numerous K-9 prospects who I know for a fact, have never seen the inside of a building with slick floors (like a school) but who for a retrieve object would go on these floors, slipping and flailing, with only the goal of reaching the object thrown.

The following drives are the important ones for pet dog training: Food, Prey, Social (Pack), and Defense. Food drive is an obvious one. If we are going to train motivationally, food is an easy motivator that we can control (deprivation increases this drive fairly easily). Prey drive can be used as a mechanism for delivering rewards as well. Tennis balls can be thrown for the prey driven dog, or tug toys can be offered, and the dog releases his drive and finds pleasure in it. [7] Defense drive is important in the following sense: When the dog has a low threshold for defense, the dog can perceive a threat from the trainer through a correction, body posture, etc. A dog with this characteristic is a poor candidate for compulsive methods. Social drive is the basis for praise as a reward. There are dogs that are so socially responsive that all the handler needs to offer is verbal praise or tactile stimulation to reward this dog. Consider also the dog's dominance profile. The more dominant the dog the more he will react to being controlled through compulsion in a negative way. This dog is also better approached motivationally, at least for a time, until he can be conditioned to accept correction properly. [8]

Hardness

This is a term that is bandied about among trainers, but is seldom understood. Hardness refers to the dog's ability to deal with adversity. It is usually used in reference to how a dog deals with corrections. If a dog can take a fairly stout correction, he is said to be "hard", and conversely, a dog that becomes upset or overly submissive after a fairly mild correction would be characterized as "soft". This issue is a very important one, as different dogs, like different people, have differing levels of pain tolerance. For some dogs a fairly hard correction on a pinch collar causes them to take little notice. For others, a verbal correction or a hard look into the eyes can cause the dog to display ritual submission [9].

There do exist some extreme cases on both ends of the spectrum. For the very hard dog, compulsion does not make an impression on him initially nor does the effect last very long in his memory as a reason not to engage in a certain behavior. This compulsion may not be an option, as he may choose to take the correction in order to engage in a behavior he values more highly than he wishes to avoid the correction. This situation is not often seen in pet dogs, but more often with highly prey driven working dogs. For this kind of dog, withholding reward and building a motivational foundation that is very strong is important. It is important not to allow the dog many choices among competing motivations. The process is slow, and in many cases training will always be incomplete, as the dog may choose what he wants to, as he fears no correction in the face of his attractions. [10]

On the other end of the spectrum is the extremely soft dog. This dog can get caught up in a loop of submissive ritual at the anticipation of correction. Thus compulsion must be used carefully. The interesting thing to note is that the dog does respond to the compulsion, i.e., it makes an impression on him, but can cause him to feel that the way to escape the effect is to show submission rather than engage in the proper behavior. Laying a foundation in motivation is very critical here as well to instill a pattern of proper response before any limits to misbehavior are set. [11] Here is where compulsion introduced through mild collar corrections, and then the e-collar on very low levels can have a tremendous positive impact. It takes the pack element out of the correction if done properly, the human stays the good guy, and it is not necessary for the dog to display ritually submissive behavior, since the human is not displaying aggressive postures (which are inherent in verbal and physical reprimands through a leash and collar). If the trainer can concentrate on providing big rewards for compliance after successful corrections, the trainer is seen as a source of reward and pleasure and no longer associated with as the source of compulsion. [12]

Focus and Attention Span

To me these are two different issues. Focus refers to how the dog relates to the trainer versus his environment. The outwardly focused dog seems to respond to distractions more than the attractions of the handler. This can be because the dog is lacking in social skills, and is overly concerned with threats to himself or his handler (low threshold defense), or because he is highly prey driven and anything that moves gains his attention. He might also be very dominant in nature, and thus doesn't look for leadership, but rather exercises his independence.

Attention span is similar to focus, but usually refers to younger dogs who may have a high capacity for attentiveness, but who are still experiencing their environment, and are distracted but will return focus. The concern here is building attentiveness to the handler, through systematic and variable training sessions aimed at capturing the dogs attention and building his drive for the reward the trainer has to offer, and in the process de-conditioning him to distractions, and when the time is correct, correcting his lapses in attention.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to bring attention to some of the major temperament characteristics that affect the training of pet dogs. Many of these temperament characteristics combine with one another to either facilitate or complicate the process of conditioning a dog. For example, a dog that is low in food drive, soft to corrections, and outwardly focused may be a difficult dog to work with. He gets distracted easily, is difficult to motivate, and crumbles in the face of corrections. Another example might be a socially aggressive dog who is not food motivated at all. These combined traits make de-conditioning all the more difficult. Noticing these characteristics and how they impact training will help you choose the method that best suits the individual dog, rather than choosing a method based on ideology or tradition.

1[1] See Lindsay (1998) for a fuller discussion of the effectiveness of compulsion.

2[2] See Bradshaw (1998) for a discussion of the problem of competing motivations with regard to the effectiveness of pure motivation.

3[3] In my experience, the overly handler dependent dog may pay an inordinate amount of attention to the handler rather than greet a stranger, and this may be a manifestation of displacement behavior. Some dogs will sniff around inordinately, keep their back to the stranger, if the handler is not present.

4[4] Removing the reward for the aggression involves having the dog see that its aggression does not impress the greeter. This is why it is so important to have this kind of dog work first with professionals who are not afraid and can communicate to the dog that the aggressive display is a strategy that no longer works. The dog will abandon a strategy that doesn't produce the effect of reducing the level of threat.

5[5] See Whitney (1971) for a discussion of conflict. In this case, the classical conditioning using the food as a positive association with the stranger, allows the dog to change from aggressive to more neutral without causing too severe of a conflict. Imagine the dog who is used to scaring approaches away by aggression suddenly finds out that this doesn't work with this person. He is left in a behavioral limbo, not sure how to behave. This uncertainty creates more fear, the very emotion we wish to dispel. The food offered gives the aggressor an out. Only people he is social with already offer him food, and he already knows how to feel around such people. By also being non-confrontational in our approach, we are telling the dog that his aggression doesn't work, we are in fact not threatening him, and indeed we are behaving in a familiar social manner by offering him food.

6[6] In these cases, usually we will see the dog's drives eventually overcome the problem. For example, a dog with high food drive will in a couple of days get over his nervousness at being at the boarding kennel, as he is plied with food treats, though he may suffer some anxiety for a the cautious period.

7[7] This drive can be manipulated through frustration.

8[8] The "No Free Lunch Program", known to most all trainers allows a dominant dog to be conditioned to accept discipline over time, and to become deferential.

9[9] It has become vogue for some who espouse pure motivation only to decry any tool of compulsion, even verbal corrections, because of the "painful" effect. However, these ideologues fail to recognize that a hard dog doesn't process physical correction in the same way that a soft

dog does. I have done exercises with willing human participants where we used an e-collar starting from level zero and gradually moved up the scale (1-60 levels) and different people felt the first static electricity-like buzz at different levels. Some felt it first at level 5 and some not until level 30! This corroborates 10 years of experience with the e-collar as a tool for correction with dogs, as some dogs require higher levels, just to feel the aversive than others do.

10[10] It has been my experience, that once a clear motivational foundation is laid, compulsion can in fact be re-introduced to set some limits. The dog then knows clearly what the correct behavior is, and has been withheld the reward for incorrect behavior on many occasions. Once this routine has been established, the compulsion can have greater effect on the dog, because the reward for misbehavior loses its value, and the motivation for misbehavior stimulates the dog to a lesser extent. Thus the compulsion is not competing with the dog's drive as much as it was initially, where the dog anticipated a great reward despite the correction.

11[11] Note that I do not usually find any use for compulsion in the acquisition phase of training (see Reid (1999)). Providing a foundation of proper behavior, and never allowing behaviors you don't want to see, can be accomplished in this phase of training, because the trainer can exercise complete control over the training environment. We can set the dog up for success. However in order to proof responses, we must present the dog with situations that may induce non-compliance, and anticipate the dog's non-compliance and instruct him that it is not acceptable to disobey. In my opinion, it is virtually impossible to de-condition a dog to every possible distraction using the "withhold" the reward method. Limits must be set in a general way with compulsion.

12[12] Most people who criticize e-collars know little about the proper use of them. Those trainers, who employ their use properly, know how the relationship with our partners grows tremendously through these described effects. We are the center of all good things, and offer relief from any corrections that are experienced. Thus we concentrate on rewarding good behavior that is shown, once limits are set. Correction becomes unemotional when the physical component of it is removed.
