

Relationship  
The Hidden Motivator  
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The moment we start teaching the dog we are presented with a problem. How do we get the dog interested in learning what we are going to teach? The fact is that the dog will not learn unless he is motivated to learn. In a sense the first “command” that our dogs must respond to is “learn this”. Think about it. In order for a dog to learn, he must put forth some effort. It may require a minor effort, or a great effort, but anyone who has spent enough time on the end of the leash will tell you that some dogs simply want to learn and others couldn’t care less. Dogs that are characterized as stubborn, dumb, or hardheaded are often simply not motivated to learn what they are being taught.

So the first question we must ask ourselves is, “How do I get my dog interested in what I am going to teach?” Most people rely on using outside (extrinsic) reinforcers to motivate the dog, such as giving the dog a treat, or a pat on the head, or using some type of negative “punishment”. All effective training involves these extrinsic motivators and they are certainly valuable tools. However, it is my opinion that these motivators are largely misunderstood. As a result their potential is rarely realized. Worse, improper use of extrinsic motivators can contribute to certain behavior problems and even long-term emotional disorders.

The common understanding of extrinsic motivators is that the dog learns in an effort to earn the reward, avoid the correction, or earn the reward while avoiding the correction. In other words, the dog’s primary motivator is the reward or the avoidance of the correction. I disagree with this assumption.

Alfie Kohn questioned the value of extrinsic motivators in his book “Punished by Rewards”. For example he states, “Few readers will be shocked by the news that extrinsic motivators are a poor substitute for genuine interest in what one is doing.” This, by itself, should be enough cause to reexamine our thoughts regarding motivation, but there is more. Kohn goes on to say “What is more likely to be far more disturbing is the further point that rewards, like punishments, actually undermine the intrinsic motivation that promotes optimal performance.” This statement might sound absurd at first, but if you think about it you will begin to see the logic. As Kohn explains “...anything presented as a prerequisite for something else - that is, as a means toward some other end - comes to be less desirable. ‘Do this and you’ll get that’ automatically devalues the ‘this.’”

Kohn’s words present us with a problem. We can readily see that proper reinforcement does seem to create more interest in learning, but we also know that just the opposite should be true. If we make the sit command nothing more than a method to earn a reward, we devalue the sit command. It becomes a means to an end for the dog. Likewise if we make it simply a way to avoid a correction, the word “sit” will automatically become a source of stress for the dog. Yet we see dogs enthusiastically sit when told to do so under all sorts of reinforcement methods. So what is happening?

The answer lies in the most powerful motivator we, as trainers, have at our disposal: relationship. The dog has an ongoing interest in his relationship with us. A scratch on the head, a treat, or a judicious leash correction becomes a sign of the state of that relationship. The reward is not the motivation. It is a message. The reward lets the dog know that you are pleased with him. Now, I don’t for a minute wish to suggest dogs just want to please. I have spent too many years with a leash in my hand to buy into that myth. If the relationship is properly structured however, the dog does have an ongoing interest in maintaining the quality of that relationship.

The dog wants to learn because he likes you. He enjoys interacting with you because you are his pack

mate and leader. Dogs are fundamentally relationship driven. In the best dog training the dog does not view the commands as a means to an end. They are not a way to earn a reward or a way to avoid a correction. They are part of a valuable interaction. *The relationship represented by the interaction between handler and dog is the reward.* Praise, food, and leash corrections are ways that we signal the status of the relationship with the dog.

Consider the exercise of the “sit restraint” as presented in “The Art of Raising a Puppy”. The handler sits on the floor with the dog in front of him and places the dog in a sit position. The handler then tells the dog to stay. At this time the dog does not know the meaning of the word stay, but he will soon learn. The handler will talk to the dog in a soothing voice while calmly petting him. Every time the dog gets up, the handler changes his voice to a less friendly tone and says “no.” He then physically places the dog back in the sit position. There is no physical correction, no unpleasantness, nothing to convince the dog to stay except for the kind words and pleasing touch of the handler. The dog does learn to stay, usually in a few minutes.

Let us look at this technique in terms of motivation. Why does the dog want to learn what we are teaching? Some might suggest that the dog wants the physical praise, that he is enjoying the attention. I am sure this is true, but I am also sure this is not the primary motivator. It is not hard to demonstrate this. The reason we have to stop the “reward” of praise and petting is precisely because the dog is trying to get away from us. To suggest that he would rather get the praise than go away when he obviously is trying to go away is contradictory. We simply cannot conclude that the dog stays only because he wants to continue the praise and affection. We have to accept that there is something else at work. Likewise, we cannot conclude that the threat of physical punishment is the motivator either. The answer lies elsewhere.

If we look at the praise and the affection (and the cessation thereof) as signals of the condition of an ongoing relationship, the puppy’s response makes perfect sense. When we stop the praise and affection and we change our tone of voice, we communicate to the dog that the state of the relationship is changing for the worse. We then put the dog back where he was and resume the praise and petting letting him know that everything has been set right again. It is this relationship that motivates the dog. *He will do what he pleases so long as the relationship remains unchanged.*

For the most part, the relationship is the base for dog's natural motivation to learn. Regardless of what the owner understands about this process, the dog is always seeking to improve the relationship, unless we inadvertently program him otherwise.

All dogs have three common desires, and these drives are the basis for most reinforcement. If we are to understand our options for motivating our dogs and why our choices are so important, we need to understand the basic drives that are shared by all dogs.

#### The Drives that Drive the Dog

- Food drive
- Comfort drive
- Pack drive

**Food drive:** In the wild, dogs live a largely scavenger existence. They hunt and they forage, but are always, to some extent, at the mercy of their environment. They are very motivated by food. Food-based reinforcements rely on this drive for their success. So long as a dog is hungry, food will keep his attention. The food drive rarely shuts off; even when full, a dog often will keep scarfing treats. Food has proven to be a very valuable motivator and is extraordinarily popular, but many trainers discourage its use for various reasons. The most common reason is that they see food reward as akin to bribery. There is no small

amount of truth to this view either. Food reward is quite probably the most abused form of motivation available. I often see clients whose dogs refuse to work until they see the treat.

However, using food reward does not cause this problem; using food reward inappropriately or incorrectly causes it. Food rewards have their place in responsible dog training. Like anything else, the fact that they can be misused does not mean that all uses constitute misuse.

Comfort Drive: I used to call this the avoidance drive, but comfort drive more accurately describes its function. The comfort drive is the drive that causes the dog to seek the most comfortable existence. It is this drive that compels him to seek shelter against the elements. It is also the drive that compels him to avoid pain and discomfort. Any attempt to “punish” a dog is an appeal to the dog’s comfort drive. “If you want to avoid this, then you had better. . . .”

Misuse of discomfort in an attempt to teach a dog to mind, however, is a common abuse, so much so that some trainers have denounced the concept of physically correcting a dog as barbaric and useless. The problem with this attitude is that anyone who has watched dogs interact for any length of time knows that dogs physically correct each other. It is part of their dynamic and, as such, we should recognize it as having a place in responsible training.

Why should we limit our shared vocabulary because the idea of physical correction offends our sensibilities? While leash corrections similarly target the dog’s comfort drive, strictly speaking they are not punitive and usually are a useful training tool. Of course all corrections should be calibrated for the particular dog in question. If the correction is too harsh, the dog will be confused and/or fearful and the learning process will stop. The point at which correction becomes “too much” will differ for each dog.

Pack Drive: This is, in my opinion, the universal drive. Pack drive refers to the dog’s desire to remain in good standing within the group. The pack drive is fundamentally tied to the other two drives and a hierarchal relationship exists among them.

The comfort drive cannot be satisfied unless the food drive is satisfied; one cannot be hungry and entirely comfortable at the same time. So, it could be said that the comfort drive is partially satisfied by the food drive.

However, because of the teamwork essential to acquiring food by hunting and scavenging dog packs, the food drive likely will not be satisfied outside of the pack. Given this, the pack drive also can be viewed as developing from the food drive - which is an outgrowth of the comfort drive.

Logical progression then may lead one to believe that the comfort drive is the all-encompassing drive, forcing the dog into a pack so food may be sought through strategies available only within a pack structure. That would not be entirely correct. Because of the dog’s emotional makeup, he will not be comfortable, no matter how well fed and protected against the elements, if he is with a poorly structured pack.

The pack drive is so strong that the comfort drive must seek to fulfill it, even before it fulfills the food drive. Neither the comfort drive nor the food drive can be fully satisfied outside of the pack relationship. Once more we see that everything ties back to relationship.

We can, and should, utilize all three drives when they are appropriate, but the food drive and comfort drive always should be viewed in terms of pack drive. This is how the dog naturally frames them anyway.

### Building it Bigger, or Tearing it Down ?

One thing we must always be aware of as we train our dogs is the “build it bigger” effect. Whichever drive or drives we use to motivate the dog will, by that process, become stronger. Think of it like exercise: The

more you exercise a muscle, the bigger and stronger it becomes. This is the same for all skills and even fundamental drives.

A man who habitually eats too much will end up with a more voracious appetite than someone who can only afford one meal a day. When we focus the dog's attention on gathering food, for example, we condition him to go to extreme measures to get food. Trainers who use food as their primary motivator can readily attest to the results.

The more food is used, the more the dog focuses on food. If we are not careful we can unnaturally inflate his food-gathering instinct, possibly giving it precedence over his pack drive and even his comfort drive. Such dogs are being inadvertently (let us hope) conditioned to seek food above everything else. They often become annoyingly insistent, constantly nudging those around them in an effort to get more food. It is not unreasonable to expect that these dogs will readily dump trashcans and climb on counters to get food.

The same thing can happen if we over-emphasize the comfort drive and diminish the pack drive. In such cases, we get a dog that sees pack interaction as a potential danger and withdraws from it. The dog should find comfort in the pack, even if he is physically in pain, even if the pack is causing the pain. A dog with a strong pack drive will accept reasonable corrections without running away. However, this may change if the dog is over-corrected or corrected inappropriately and unpredictably.

The comfort drive may become more powerful than the pack drive. Such a dog might become withdrawn and resistant to handling, and may seek to fulfill his comfort drive outside the confines of the pack. In this effort the dog will fail. His internal programming will not allow him to be satisfied outside of the group. Such a dog must learn to trust his pack, or he will forever fall short of his potential.

Likewise, if we concentrate on exercising the dog's pack drive, we will be able to put the "build it bigger" effect to good use. The dog will increasingly crave those rewards and avoid those corrections, not because of the food drive and the comfort drive, but because of the pack drive. This will have the result of building all the drives at once, and they will be built in the proper context and proportion. This will give us a better, happier and more responsive dog.

### Fully Functioning Motivation

Most people are not aware of the vital role relationship plays in the motivation and learning process, and therefore either don't consider it all or take it for granted. They get married to a reinforcement process without truly considering the motivation that makes the reinforcement work.

As Kohn pointed out, nothing replaces genuine interest in an activity. In the relationship-based model, the activity of interest is the conversation between handler and dog. The dog is motivated to learn and respond, not because he fears the correction or craves a scratch or a treat, but because he avoids what the correction signifies and craves what the reward represents. It is all about relationship.

Throughout the training process we should encourage, enhance and clarify this relationship. The commands, the corrections, the rewards should all be seen as tools to accomplish this. If the dog has a genuine interest in interacting with us and a genuine interest in maintaining the relationship, he will be ready to learn, ready to comply, and will genuinely enjoy the training process. This will become a self-perpetuating cycle.

The more time we spend engaged in activity with our dog, the more interested he will be in the process. The more interested he is in the process, the easier and more enjoyable it will be for us to train him. The more enjoyable it is for us to train him, the more time we will spend training him, which, as stated before, will make him even more interested in the process. There is a catch, however. In order for this to work we

must keep the process interesting for him. If the training becomes boring, the dog will begin to lose interest, and that will strain the relationship and make it harder to teach him.

You see, maintaining the relationship is a two-way street. It is not merely about our getting out of the dog what we expect or want. We must provide the dog with a reason to want to be with us. Again, that reason should not be something that we sporadically interject into the relationship such as a treat or a pat on the head. A dog that is not mentally engaged in the training process will become bored, stop working for rewards, and, to some extent will begin to ignore corrections. You may not see the dog refuse to respond but you will, at the very least, see less enthusiastic responses.

Some might say, "It doesn't matter if they are bored, they must learn to obey whether they want to or not." There is a certain truth to that statement, and a certain absurdity. A dog will never do anything he doesn't want to do, unless he is physically forced to, and in that case *he isn't really doing it*. Still, the point is well made. Boredom is not an excuse for disobedience, nor is excitement or distraction. However, excessive boredom will have a detrimental effect on a dog's approach to the training process. I don't suppose a dog has to enjoy a training session in order to learn, but remember what we established early on: "There is no substitute for a genuine interest in what one is doing."

We must maintain an enthusiasm for the process. We can do this by adding new elements, or new commands interlaced with the familiar ones. We can combine commands into patterns of behavior that can be performed on cue. We can work in new environments. There are all sorts of things that we can do to keep dog's interest. *Treats will not keep the dog's interest, and neither will incessant corrections. These things might get his attention, but not his interest. There is a difference.*

Training is a conversation, not a lecture. It involves a form of listening as well as speaking. When handling a dog we must speak with our whole body, not just our mouth. We must recognize that the dog is speaking to us with his entire body. By paying attention to what we are doing and to what the dog is doing, we will begin to pick up on his signals and recognize how our signals affect him. This ability will aid us in all interactions, not merely the moments of training. Relationships are built on trust. Trust is built on communication. Without real communication, we have no real trust. Without real trust, we have no real relationship.

Our relationship exists outside of, as well as within, the training sessions. While our communication may be more methodical during formal training sessions, our relationship should not change between formal sessions and mundane interaction. Whatever strides we make during formal sessions should carry over into all aspects of daily life. Likewise, progress made during daily interactions should directly affect our training sessions.

Early on, I suggested that rewards and consequences were merely symbols that communicated something more vital to the dog. I said that they were indicators of the state of the ongoing relationship. Anytime we train, we emphasize and amplify at least one of those basic drives. As trainers we must determine which drive will produce the best long-term results. For my money, the clear answer is pack drive.

In the weeks, and years to come, as you approach your dog for training, I want you always be thinking in these terms: "Am I building trust and leadership or am I tearing it down?"

I would like to thank Roger Hild for inspiring this article. He provided the quotes from Alphonse Kohn that prompted me to solidify the things that had been kicking around in my head for some time. All Kohn quotations are the fruit of Roger's research, he was gracious enough to allow me to benefit from his hard work and for that I am very grateful.

[Read Roger's article.](#)

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