

The cost of bribery

I love reinforcements, and so do you. If you didn't, than they would not be a reinforcer. Some of my reinforcements are food, water and money. I do behaviors in hopes that I get one of those things. I get up and go to the sink to get water. I work, so I can get money to buy food and other less essential, but equally fun items.

Our companion animals are no different. They do behaviors in order to get things, like food and water. When training, many pet caregivers use food to motivate their pets. With the election season behind us, (thank goodness), I would like to talk about bribes. Although I do have a timely joke:

Two politicians on the campaign trail encounter each other near a roadside diner, and decide to have a cup of coffee. They talk for a while, and then get up to leave. "You know why I'm going to be elected?" the first politician asks, as he pulls a roll of bills out of his pocket. "It's because of my generous personality. I always give the waitresses a big tip and ask them for their vote."

"That's interesting," says the other, "I always ask them to vote for you too, but then I tip them a nickel."

Bribery is a training technique I have seen used to get animals (and people) to perform behaviors. Bribery and positive reinforcement are two different tools, even though they both can use food. In bribery the food (good thing) is shown, the animal does a behavior and than is given the food. In positive reinforcement, the animal performs a behavior and then is given food (or a good thing). The food could be a single treat, five treats, normal diet etc. It can be variable because the animal doesn't know what they are getting. Bribery can lead to some frustrating situations.

To get a dog to sit, you hold a treat in your hand above their head, and they fall back into the sit position. The dog is sitting, so they get the treat. The next time you want your dog to sit, and you don't have a treat, how will you get your dog to sit?

Using bribery in the beginning of training is acceptable and often used. However, bribery needs to be phased out quickly or else the animal will not do their behaviors unless they see the food. Another, more serious behavior that this could happen with is the recall.

Using bribery, an owner could have multiple treats in their open hand and call the pet. Many times the pet will see the two treats and consider them not worth the effort to come over. Now the caregiver has to up the ante, until the pet sees the the amount of food and deems them worthwhile.

Using positive reinforcement the caregiver could call the pet and then reward accordingly. If the animal was quick to respond the trainer could go and get highly quality, multiple or large treats. If the pet was not prompt, the trainer could give them one treat. In positive reinforcement they don't see the reward at all, so they are more eager to perform the behavior. They don't know what they will get, but they do know it could be something really good.

Honest communication is key. If you have two treats in your hand and you place them over your pets head to get them to sit and only give them one treat for a slow or sloppy sit, the pet is going to get confused and upset. They saw you with two treats and they don't understand why you are withholding.

The next time you show them a handful of treats, they may not react at all, because they don't know how many treats you will be dispensing.

Here is a human example to help solidify bribery in your training dictionary. You are in the checkout line with a child. The child starts throwing an un-godly tantrum. You promise a candy bar if they behave. They settle down, so they get a candy bar. If you would have given them a piece of a candy bar, they would not have been happy with you, because that is not what you promised. This is bribery and it just cost you one candy bar.

Another situation is you are in the checkout line with a child. The child behaves for the most part, so you give them a half a candy bar or a small toy. The next time they are really good you give them a full candy bar or a really good toy. These above examples are of positive reinforcement. If the next time they throw a temper tantrum, they get nothing. They will learn when they are really good they will get something, but the reward will be a surprise.

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