

AAZK Animal Training Committee
Don't Shoot the Keeper:
A Practical Guide to Training Your Co-workers

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Operant conditioning seems to be, more or less, a permanent fixture in our field, and proves to be useful everyday in a myriad of forms when we're working with our animal charges. And like everything else in life, each of us enjoys and understands training at different levels. So how does one address a situation in the workplace when a need for conditioning is proposed, yet met with resistance, concerns, or apathy from teammates? Karen Pryor, in her book "Don't Shoot the Dog" (1985), elaborates on the many uses for operant conditioning, including behavioral shaping of human primates. Let's explore some conditioning techniques to address common "people hurdles", or undesirable behaviors that are counterproductive to animal training progress.

Behavioral shaping involves small approximations that lead to a bigger goal. Each tendency or indication that the subject is moving in the desired direction of change should be reinforced. This concept works as well with human primates, just as it does with our animals. It's a matter of outlining behavioral goals and working one step at a time to meet these goals. In other words, take baby steps, be patient, and reinforce any hint of positive change. You're probably thinking, "How can I reinforce something that never happens?" Below are a few ideas that may encourage a 'training resistant' person to exhibit more desirable behaviors such as: tolerance, approval, affording time or materials, or even participation!

"Why do we need to train? Its always been done this way." We've all heard these frustrating comments. However, we need to remember that things were not always as they are now, with the field of zoo keeping developing rapidly. Many teammates who seem averse to new ideas like "training" or "enrichment" possess a plethora of knowledge and skills, acquired through years of successful animal care. Try to remember, in all the excitement of initiating a training program, that everyone sees things differently, and to respect your co-workers' abilities. That said, search out brief, yet interesting, articles or pictures of how training has accomplished something amazing somewhere else, and leave them for others to "notice". Involve long-term keepers at initial stages by utilizing their skills. Ask them about individual animals' histories and behaviors and use this information in developing your plan. Request assistance in building tools (like targets or platforms), and positively reinforce any interest or cooperation. Remember that a reward is something THEY appreciate: thanks, candy, cleaning out the microwave, frosty beverages ... Communicate often, and perhaps choose a simple behavior, train it with your animal subject, and then demonstrate a means in which it is beneficial to everyone. For example, you might target train an obstinate ungulate to follow a target into night holding. Then politely demonstrate how much easier it is than the current process of getting three co-workers with bully boards to come help bring it in every night.

"We have no time to train." This may mean the new trainer must do more work at first. Develop ways to squeeze in training sessions at odd times: 10 minutes in the chute while shifting, five minutes after coffee break, that sort of thing. Training sessions do not have to be half hour sit-downs at a specific time every day. Free up a bit of a co-worker's time so that they don't feel rushed or pressured.

Is it possible to cut up the diet for them the day before? Can some cleaning job be done for them? Look for options, and work to remove time constraints and perhaps the accompanying arguments. Eventually, co-workers will see the benefits, and hopefully join in the time management effort. And remember to reward the desired behaviors from staff!

"I have no interest in training." Apathy can be tough to deal with, but first working to remove any perceived added burden would hopefully negate resistance. Subtle education about the tangible benefits of operant conditioning may alleviate apathy. If it doesn't, perhaps work with their interests and develop a trade agreement. "I'll help you research your Macaque project if you ask the animals to step on the scale as they shift out." Some lack of interest may stem from negative associations with training or misunderstanding of training concepts. The education and demonstration piece may help stir some interest. Perhaps see if they are more interested in other aspects of daily care, like enrichment or even record keeping, and let them do more of that while you train, so everything gets done. However, interest must be developed prior to achieving active participation. Forcing a person to train or to take on other responsibilities probably won't result in success for the program, or the animals. Be flexible and work with each co-worker's "life history".

“Our manager/vet won't support a training program.” Manager endorsement is essential because they manage work time and resources. Some tactics used have been the subtle education strategy, that might even evolve into a friendly rivalry type of situation. “What? Their bears stand on their heads and let blood be drawn from their toes? Why, ours could do that in a second!” Managers and vets are proud of their staff and facilities’ accomplishments, and perhaps illustrating potential recognition in the field might encourage cooperation. Research the behaviors that would prove useful to animals and staff, providing examples of where they are used successfully. Finding success stories is not difficult with all of the papers and listservs that abound. When presented with potential benefits, and a well-thought-out plan, most managers/vets would be sorely pressed to maintain resistance. Be prepared and ready to answer questions that arise. These are just a few ideas to assist in some common workplace scenarios. They are by no means the be all and end all guide to “training” co-workers. But by utilizing these ideas as a starting point, being adaptive, and ensuring proper communication, eventually any difficult situation can be overcome. Keep the goals in mind, and reward everyone (staff, animals and YOURSELF). Hopefully then the urge to “shoot the keeper” will be long gone.

Reference

Pryor, K. (1985). *Don't Shoot the Dog' The New Art of Teaching and Training*. New York, NY Bantam Books.

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