



Motivation and Rewards

With our dogs, several factors influence their learning. At the simplest level though, we can say that our dogs do things for us either because they want to avoid something, or because there is something in it for them, as in “show me the money!”

Getting a dog to do what we ask can seem difficult at times because a dog comes with predisposed motivations provided by Mother Nature that compete with our requests. Mother Nature can be worth a lot of money to a dog – hmmmmmm, chasing a squirrel, that’s worth about £20,000, affection from you, well that’s worth about £3. If you are competing with Mother Nature, (squirrels, chasing joggers, eating or rolling in a dead hedgehog, playing with another dog etc.), you will need some motivation of your own. That can mean really great food treats.

Motivating your dog - When you first start training your dog, what happens when you yell “sit!” just as a squirrel runs across your garden? Who’s worth more? The £20,000 squirrel or you? At that moment in time, chasing the squirrel is a huge payoff for your dog and your shout of “Sit!” is worthless, and if you keep repeating the word ‘sit’ the word loses its power. If the next door neighbour’s female dog is in season and your intact male hears you yelling “Come!” as he jumps over the fence, where’s the £20,000? It’s with the female dog, of course.

Chasing squirrels, barking at the postman, chasing joggers or people on bikes, meeting other dogs and rolling in unmentionables are all powerful motivators that distract your dog’s attention from what you are asking him to do. In these situations, you, the erstwhile provider of all things good in your dog’s universe, have taken a back seat.

Therefore, in order to get your dog to do what you want, **you** need to become worth more than the distractions. You want to elevate yourself in your dog’s eyes to the position of prime motivator, so no matter what, **you’re it**. You do this by controlling access to everything your dog wants. That means your dog must earn everything he wants, including food, toys and freedom.

The hierarchy of rewards - Dogs have different likes or dislikes. In human terms, think of a Las Vegas slot machine, the lottery, or horse racing. In all of these cases there are great rewards, good rewards and average rewards. In the dog’s Las Vegas mentality, one dog might consider a piece of liver cake as a £10,000 reward, while another dog, at times, might consider a squeaky toy to be the highest reward possible. You need to identify what your dog

values most. With some, chicken, cheese, liver etc will do nicely. With others, they might give their all for the ball on the end of the rope, a tugger, or squeaky. Use whatever works for your dog.

Primary rewards are special food treats, or play in some instances.

Secondary rewards are affection, praise and touching, play, including toys, social interaction, including allowing your dog to go places with you, such as a ride in the car. Walking up and down the stairs, going in and out of doors etc.

Lures, bribes and rewards.

A lure is a promise of a reward. It is a piece of food or other item that entices your dog to do what you want. For instance, if your dog is hungry and you put a piece of turkey in front of his nose you can get him to follow you. Squeaky toys can be a lure, as can opening a can of dog food and opening the front door.

A bribe, on the other hand, is a lure gone astray. If you have to show your dog a piece of turkey every time you want her to do something, you're bribing her. A lure is used only to get her interested, and then only if it is necessary. If you find yourself dependant on using food or toys in order to get your dog to do something, you can bet that you are using these things as bribes.

A reward is a positive reinforcement. Reinforcement is a reward for desired behaviour. Unlike a lure, which is used to get your dog interested in doing something, a reward is something you give him after he has performed the desired behaviour. When you give your dog a piece of turkey as soon as his behind hits the floor, you are rewarding him. Never bribe a dog – once he knows something good is associated with the behaviour, he will work to get what he wants.

As I mentioned before, rewards have a pecking order. Some are great, some good and some just okay. To keep your dog highly motivated, especially when teaching a new exercise or behaviour, always use great rewards, ones that are worth £10,000 in human terms.

To my mind, a great treat bag would have 3 different high value (things your dog really loves) treats in, for instance, liver and garlic cake, sausage, and mild cheese (cuts up better and doesn't crumble). Your dog is not going to know which morsel of food is coming next and will keep motivated for the whole session. The opposite treat bag to this, a rubbish treat bag, would be bits of smackos, gravy bones, or even worse, bits of crunchy bonio.

Think how your dog feels when he's performed a new behaviour brilliantly and you reward him with *ta – da!* – a boring bit of biscuit. Why should he do that brilliant behaviour again for you? He will lose interest and motivation, as you would – imagine you are at work and your boss asks you to take on a new project. You don't know anything about it but nevertheless, you throw yourself into it, do lots of research, stay at work late a few nights, go in early, and

eventually you finish it. You are really proud of what you have achieved and you present it to your boss, with eager anticipation. He picks it up, glances quickly at it and says, "Yeah, that'll do I suppose, now can you make me a coffee?" how would you feel? But more importantly, if he asks you to do another special project what would you say?

So think about what's in your treat bag, or pocket and if there are just crumbly bits of biscuit in there, do the same session with a bulging bag of £10,000 titbits and just see the difference it will make.

Going back to rewards, rewards have to **keep** their value. If the same great reward is given over and over again, it will lose its value. Other rewards, such as praise, can also be misused and lose their power.

Of course, you want to praise your dog consistently for doing what you have asked. But if you give him praise for doing nothing, he may begin to ignore you. The same goes for your dog's favourite toys. They too should be rewards for doing what you've asked, rather than always being available.

Rewards – to be rewards – have to keep their value. If your dog has done something spectacular, for example, you may have been trying to train the stay for ages, but he always gets up in the last 10 seconds, but this time he stayed rock solid, then give a jackpot reward, (quietly, while he is still in the stay position) £50,000 worth.

Of course, you can cheat a little and occasionally give a £10,000 treat just for the hell of it, because he's such a great dog and you're just a wonderful person!