

Agility Feedback Foibles

During agility, use clear signals and feedback to create solid behaviors in your dog.

Terry Long

Imagine you have been hired by High Performance Gizmos, Inc. to assemble its A-1 Gizmo product. You are very excited because you have heard that the company is progressive and very supportive of its employees. You will receive all the training you need to perform your job before being assigned to a high-performance assembly team. Each team is responsible for meeting production goals that are monitored and rewarded by company management.

You report for training and meet Sally, your training coach. As part of the initial orientation process, you learn more about the company's history and find that it recently underwent a complete corporate restructuring, including a radical shift in its human resources philosophy. In the past, it relied upon punishment (reprimands, docking of pay, and public humiliation) to motivate its employees to reach production goals. A consultant was hired when the company began to lose more and more market share, and he helped to implement a new Employee Actualization and Rewards (EAR) program that focuses on building employee self-esteem. You are among some of the first employees who will go through the new training, says Sally.

Thankful that you will reap the benefits of the new corporate philosophy, you begin the training program under Sally's guidance. You are a star performer, amazed at how easily you carry out the tasks at hand. You and Sally have a great time together, working to assemble separate components of the A-1 Gizmo. There is a lot of laughter, bowls of M&Ms (the kind with peanuts!), and you eagerly follow her lead. Although you are sometimes surprised at Sally's flexibility about how some of the tasks are performed, you are having a good time and getting paid well during your training program. You feel pretty good about yourself.

It is now time to join your high-performance assembly team. You recognize all the individual components as they are laid out on the production table and go about putting together a variety of A-1 Gizmos in all the variations you learned about while training with Sally. At the end of the day, you search for your production count, knowing that each point counts toward your paycheck. You find your name and there it is! Zero? No, that can't be. There must be a mistake. You went through training. You did nothing wrong. Your coach praised everything you did! When you ask why you earned a zero, you are told that there is a specific way to assemble the A-1 Gizmo and that you will eventually figure it out. Don't worry.

You go back to work the next day, but now you are confused about what works and what doesn't. You wish Sally had given you useful feedback that would have prevented all this. Your attempts to assemble a Gizmo are now tentative and slow. You look around, desperately searching for any clues about how to do the job right. A senior team member finally takes you aside and supervises you as you start over, telling you "yes, that's right," "put it there," and "hmmm, try again" when she knows your efforts won't produce results. Finally, you see your production count rising!

What does this have to do with agility training? You have probably guessed that the moral of this story is that a training program rich in feedback for correct and incorrect performance is more successful than one based on either punishment or meaningless (i.e., noncontingent) praise.

Do we see this in agility training? You bet. How many times have you heard that if you tell a dog "no," or even use a no-reward marker, you risk diminishing the dog's drive and enthusiasm for the game? You also risk a lot, however, when you "lie" to the dog by implying that anything goes, as long as he is making an effort. At some point, you have to tell your dog that there is a correct way of doing things, and that will be a very rude awakening – and quite frustrating – for your dog.

For example, let's say that Jim's last agility dog was slow, lacked confidence, and was a "Velcro dog" – never good at working away from him. Jim wants to make sure that his new dog, Flash, is having fun so he rewards Flash for anything she does by praising her and throwing her favorite toy. Flash learns to drive with speed to take a variety of obstacles. Jim doesn't even need to cue her; she will go 30 feet away from him to do the A-frame, the tunnel – whatever is out there. Jim rewards all her efforts and Flash is having a great time.

Now that Jim has enthusiasm, drive, and distance with Flash, he decides to work on short sequences, and positions her next to him, facing the A-frame. He is just getting ready to release her, but before he can, she takes off for the tunnel, which was behind him. Jim calls her, but she's standing out past the tunnel, looking for her toy. When she sees that Jim

still has it, she trots back but then shoots off to the left and takes a couple of jumps instead of the A-frame. This time, she looks even more mystified about the absence of her toy. After a couple more attempts, Jim finally throws the toy for Flash because he sees that she is losing her usual zest for working.

The benefit of clear and consistent feedback cannot be underestimated in dog training. In the scenario above, Jim would have been better served to break down the training into easy-to-perform pieces (criterion), each of which would get generously rewarded, than to reward anything and everything (noncontingent reinforcement). He inadvertently trained Flash to ignore a critical cue in agility training: the positional cue. When he was facing the A-frame, Flash should have chosen to do that obstacle rather than any other if he had trained (rewarded) for positional cues from the start. Now he must retrain Flash to know that if he does not go forward or cue her to go on, she should look back or come back to him. That is going to be a very difficult lesson to learn at this stage. And you cannot blame Flash for being confused, frustrated, or disheartened.

It is widely accepted that punishment (verbal reprimands or physical corrections) is detrimental in agility training. But absence of punishment does not mean that there aren't other, more effective means of communicating what we want and what we don't want – without putting drive and relationship at risk. Marking correct behavior with "Yes" or a clicker and then delivering a reward provides a mountain of information to our dogs. The simple absence of that marker or reward is just as informative. The two used in tandem – marker and reward, or silence – is an extremely powerful feedback system. There isn't an animal on the planet, humans included, that doesn't appreciate clear feedback about how to be successful. Whether it's assembling A-1 Gizmos or learning positional cues, it's easier to do it right the first time, and for that, we need clear feedback from our mentors.

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