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Abstract: The most effective trainers are the ones who can successfully combine the art and science of operant conditioning into a flawless dance. If you have ever seen a truly talented trainer, then you have witnessed this dance, this unspoken language. You have seen first-hand the respect, trust and ease that the trainer and animal are sharing. However, this has been a learning process for both the trainer and the cat. The article gives guidance on how to become a good trainer.

# Developing a Behavior Modification Program for Your Cheetah

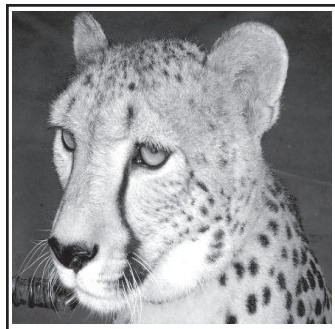
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B.F. Skinner wrote, “Teaching, it is often said, is an art, but we have increasing reason to hope that it may eventually become a science.” Animal training, plain and simple, is teaching. It is communication between two living organisms, a mutual exchange of information.

The most effective trainers are the ones who can successfully combine the art and science of operant conditioning into a flawless dance. If you have ever seen a truly talented trainer, then you have witnessed this dance, this unspoken language. You have seen first-hand the respect, trust and ease that the trainer and animal are sharing. However, this has been a learning process for both the trainer and the cat.

So where does one start? Like anything else, the more knowledge that you can acquire on a subject the better choices you can make and the more confident you are with those decisions. First, learn all you can about the cheetahs’ natural history as well as its individual behavioral history and traits. Having knowledge and understanding of the cheetahs’ behavior can give you keen insight for shaping future behaviors. Daily husbandry chores give you excellent opportunities to learn the subtle behavioral cues of your cheetah. Trainers who study and understand the behavior subtleties of their animal charges can usually be very effective with the timing of the bridge. Recognizing the initiation of a behavior can be a very powerful training tool. Some trainers have an innate ability to read a

cheetahs' relaxed and willing demeanor and respond quickly with the bridging stimulus and the reinforcement. These opportunities to bridge the cats' attitude help build the cheetahs' confidence. **An attentive, relaxed carnivore with a great attitude is an easy animal to train!**



01. six-year-old "Sabe"

Second, establish clear goals, short and long-term, develop a training plan. Without a clear training plan, frustration can arise for both the cheetah and the staff. Ask yourself some questions; what will the finished behavior look like? What should the behavior accomplish? How will it be used? Will the behavior facilitate routine maintenance, keeper safety, presentations that can enhance the guest experience, support research projects or medical care, enrichment, physical and mental exercise, decrease stereotypical or undesirable behaviors? Evaluate what the needs are for you and your organizations.

Know your limitations and abilities. Whether it is time, money, management support, or the physical and mental limitations and training knowledge of the staff. Do you and your staff have the ability to recognize the skills that it will take to train the behavior?

A beginning trainer should be able to identify, reinforce and maintain the desired behavior. An intermediate trainer is efficient with his or her mechanical skills, such as the use of the bridge, leash, side bucket and hand-feeding. They should also be capable of maintaining the consistency and quality in their training techniques, all of this, while constantly aware of their environment. Advanced trainers are experts in the application of operant conditioning techniques. Trainers at this level should also possess advanced skills for mentoring naive animals and staff. They should be confident in their strategies in any challenges they meet.

The bridging stimulus (generally a whistle or clicker) is an excellent tool for shaping behavior. The "bridge" is paired with an appropriate reinforcement and is used to gap the time and distance between the "mark" of the desired behavior and the delivery of the reinforcement. The bridge is a critical component in the operant conditioning process because it gives information to the animal. In essence, the bridge gives the cheetah exact information at that very moment. The animal learns that reinforcement will follow the bridging stimulus. The bridge becomes a primary tool for communication between the trainer and the animal. Operant conditioning is a learning process and the fundamentals build on one another. An animal quickly learns to look to the trainer for positive reinforcement and direction. Once the fundamentals are in place, the bridge can be used to shape future behaviors and in itself will be reinforcing.

To be effective, reinforcement should be positive, immediate and contingent. To be positive the reinforcement must be appropriate and desired. Immediate, the reinforcement must follow the desired behavior. Contingent, the reinforcement must be contingent upon that desired behavior. It should not be given at random. Do not unwittingly reinforce an undesired behavior. The more desired the reinforcement the more positive the reward. If food is the primary reinforcement it should never be an issue with your cheetah. Does the cheetah eat calmly? Is the cat comfortable with you? The cat must be comfortable with your body language and your voice. Read the cats' behavior. The cheetahs' behavior speaks volumes! Constant monitoring of the cheetahs' behavior, the small and subtle cues, allow you to assess their food drive and work them safely. Again, food and the delivery of the food should never be an issue. Safety should always be first for everyone who is involved. After your training plan has been developed, a familiar environment without audio or visual distractions (for you or the cat) is an ideal venue to start your bridge conditioning.

Clear, concise communication should be conveyed on the cheetahs' daily records. Records should reflect type of session, time of session, type and amount of reinforcement, rating of the session, behavioral changes, health and medical issues, and diet totals. These records are extremely important references when there is a behavioral break down. They can help show patterns or cycles in the behavior as well as promote consistency between trainers and sessions. This helps reduce discrimination and facilitates open and clear communication with the staff.

Training is communication that builds a bond of trust and respect with your cheetah. Don't over train and have fun!