

## Thinking Outside the Cookie Jar: Finding Reinforcers for the “Unreinforcable”

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It pains me to hear dog owners who have been through different trainers and upset because their dogs have “failed.” Some had been told their dogs were unable to be trained, not willing to focus and dumb. Some owners, at the suggestion of trainers, resorted to forcible means of training including choke collars, prong collars (aka pinch collars) and even electric collars. Others were ready to give up their dogs because they had no other idea what to do. We have been brainwashed to believe that certain breeds are smarter than others. Are they truly smarter or just bred to have traits making them easier for people to work with? Afghan Hounds are ranked amongst some of the dumbest breeds. I trained with a woman who got an advanced Obedience titles on her dogs. If a dog will not lure for food, most trainers will see if the dog will motivate for another common reward to reinforce the behaviors: game, verbal praise (happy voice) or a pat. What of the dogs who could care less about a common reward? These are the dogs called failures: stubborn, dominant, self-willed. These are the dogs often “flunked” out of obedience classes. **These dogs are train-able**; the trainers just need to think outside the cookie jar.

The need to think outside the cookie jar became blindingly apparent to me after I acquired a two-year-old Great Pyrenees (with little training) after much research into Livestock Guarding Dogs. One woman, who was instrumental in my learning how these dogs worked, told me they should not be food or play motivated. Responses expected from a Lab or Golden would be detrimental to a livestock guardian’s ability to work. I was told by other trainers that these kinds of dogs were difficult to work with because they did not motivate. If these dogs did not food or play motivate well, what should I do? As a trainer, I knew to find the motivation for this dog. That would become my reward: what is used to help reinforce in a positive way the behaviors I desire. For my Seven, this was the ability to stop working and patrol. I observed her and found she had that desire to patrol and protect. She would ignore food and attention. In class, I was told to put her on a choke (slip) collar and pop the lead to get her to listen. No, this was

not an option. I had a dog I needed to bond with. Instead, I used small steps. I asked her to walk with me; she followed out of curiosity, immediately “OK, all done, go patrol!” We would leave class, walk the perimeter and return. Seven learned that if she did what I want, eventually she would get to patrol. Sit was taught by telling her what I wanted, taking a step towards her while giving a hand signal. She did not lure for teaching a sit as other dogs in class, I did not want to yank up on her lead either. By stepping forward I gave Seven two options: step back or sit. After a few tries, she stopped taking steps back, sat and got her reward. Down, well I spent a lot of time on the ground until she got curious enough to see what I was doing – or she just got bored and laid down to get comfy – “OK! Go Patrol!” Once I found her motivation and used it to reinforce behaviors, I had that tool.

Even with breeds assumed to be food motivated we will have individuals who not following the norm. I had the chance to work with a Beagle who was not food motivated. He was scent motivated. He would look to see what made that scent if you had a treat. However, if there was something better on the ground to sniff, he quickly forgot that treat. His reward became the signal “Go Sniff!” Once he learned that “Go Sniff” meant he got to do what he wanted for a few moments, getting him to walk nicely on lead became easier. Take a step, encourage him to follow and reinforce. It was a lot of step-go sniff-step-go sniff-step step- go sniff, but it worked. It worked because I observed the dog, questioned the owner and we learned his best reinforcement: it was what scent hounds were bred to do. After some work, this guy was able to go on longer walks secure in the knowledge that soon he would be able to go sniff. He just had to go along with the human for a bit.

One of the more interesting dogs I had the fun of figuring a reinforcing reaction for was a little Bichon/Poodle cross. He WAS food motivated and play motivated, except while on walks. Though neutered, this little guy loved to leave calling cards on every blade of grass, pebble, mailbox, twig... Nothing else his owners were doing from food to yelling to leash jerks stopped him. Walking him was a pain. After observing the humans and dogs, I decided to reward the dog with “Go pee!” Finally he figured out that I would let him do what he wanted if he did what I needed first. I taught the owners what to do: there was no leash yanking or anything, just calm words and reinforcement done in close succession so the little walking fire hose was always succeeding. By the next session, he was able to walk the entire block with only three random, human-determined stops: one just after starting, one randomly during the walk and one at the end. There was no leash yanking or frustration, just a lot of short successes slowly stretched out to bigger successes.

When a trainer says your dog will not train, is stupid or whatever then fails you two in class, is it truly because your dog is not able to train or because the trainer has not taken a moment to observe your dog to find the best motivator then use it to reinforce? Your dog is not stupid; he just needs someone to think outside the cookie jar.

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