

The Power of Trust

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There are many antecedent sources of influence on an animal's motivation to engage in training such as social influences, distractions, and personal space. In behavior analysis terminology, our manipulation of antecedent influencers is known as motivating operations. A motivating operation is *an antecedent event or change in the environment that alters the effectiveness of the reinforcer and the rates of the responses that have produced that reinforcer previously* (USF Behavior Analysis Glossary, 1999). The focus of this article is one such motivating operation – the animal's relationship with its trainer, characterized by the construct **trust**. It is our assertion that when trust is established, animals are more motivated to control our reinforcers with their behavior, i.e., to learn.

Trust: What does it look like?

A useful way to operationalize trust is a level of certainty that interaction will result in good outcomes and so interaction increases. Trusting animals use their behavior to confidently approach, rather than escape, opportunities to interact with people. They not only accept invitations to interact with their trainers, trusting animals create interaction opportunities for their trainers as well.

For instance, the first time you approach a parrot you may observe that it moves away from you. But, if you quietly drop a piece of the bird's favorite food in the cup and walk away, the bird is more likely to choose to remain on the perch next time. Over the repetitions, many birds start soliciting your approach with their body language (e.g., eye contact, rousing, a tail shake, and dancing feet).

Of course the same can be said about our interpersonal relationships. When a person has a trusting relationship with another person, s/he chooses to interact with the other person more. We may not rouse when you approach but keep sharp for that tail shake!

The Trust Account

Like most things having to do with relationships, trust is not a simple dichotomy. It's more complex than "either ya have it or you don't." Between being a millionaire and being bankrupt, there are many levels of trust, and that makes the bank account metaphor really useful. The goal with all our relationships is to build a big enough trust account to withstand the withdrawals that inevitably occur with our animals and each other.

The international currency of the relationship bank is positive interactions. We make deposits into the trust account one positive interaction at a time. Positive interactions are not just about animals gaining valued rewards, it's also about

having opportunities to make choices. We make withdrawals from the trust account with negative interactions such as force, threats and punishment. If a withdrawal is so big that it exceeds a positive balance, we risk putting the relationship in the red; but even small or inadvertent withdrawals can add up over time, resulting in a bankrupt relationship.

Each of us has a trust account with every animal and person in our lives. It's unfortunate that there is no bank insurance fund available (like the FDIC) for trust accounts. The best way to protect a trust account is to ensure that you make many, many more deposits than withdrawals.

A History of Bankruptcy

It was not so long ago that trainers taught parrots to ride bicycles by tapping them on the tail with a stick. To escape this aversive stimulation, birds performed the behavior. After numerous repetitions, the stick became an effective threat (a conditioned aversive stimulus) so that just showing the stick motivated the birds to ride the bikes. Clearly, animals can learn new behaviors with negative reinforcement (i.e., doing something more to escape an aversive stimulus). However, negative reinforcement results in unnecessary withdrawals from the trust account and can reduce the behavioral repertoire of the animals. You won't see birds trained with negative reinforcement performing free-flight behaviors in programs – escape may motivate flight but it won't motivate coming back.

Animals also learn from punishment but, in addition to taking a big withdrawal from the trust account, the wrong behavior is often inadvertently punished. When a hawk sits in the tree and is slow to return to the trainer on stage, the frustrated trainer may withhold the food reinforcer when the bird finally returns. Although this is an attempt to punish the bird for spending too much time in the tree, it is the behavior of returning to the glove that decreases. A bird that can't trust reinforcement will follow returning to the glove will do it less often, and eventually not at all.

Unfortunately, effective punishment reinforces the trainers who use it, and so they punish more. This feedback loop surely accounts, at least in part, for the high number of bankrupt relationships we observe in the world we live in.

A Reinforcing Future

Positive reinforcement strategies are the key to building trust accounts with the birds in our shows. To maximize the trust building effects of positive reinforcement, make sure that reinforcers are consistent, immediate, and strong. Positive reinforcement training opens a whole new world of possibilities for bird shows. Free-flight behaviors have replaced bicycles and the number of species in educational shows has grown exponentially. Coercion is being replaced with cooperation and more often birds are performing species appropriate behaviors that help build trust accounts with audience members who are educated and inspired.

Besides creating strong human-bird relationships, we also build trust in novel situations and objects that we encourage our birds to interact with in our programs. Generalizing a behavior learned in a quiet training area to a crowded amphitheater involves small approximations and repetitions of positive reinforcement that put trust into the account. Even teaching a bird a basic behavior like stepping onto a new perch involves trust-building approximations. Many trainers miss this step assuming that since the bird has previously stepped onto a similar perch it will make the association and just step onto the new perch. This often results in the trainer moving the bird toward the perch too quickly or even trying to fly the bird to the new perch from a distance, which can easily cause a withdrawal from the trust account.

When problem situations do occur, it's best to focus on replacing the problem behavior with more desirable alternative behaviors and to teach new skills. For example, a parrot that bites can be taught to perch calmly in an upright position on the trainer's hand. Stepping onto the hand can be trained with shaping – reinforcing smaller approximations of the final behavior such as looking at the hand, raising a foot, moving a foot near the hand, etc. Once the bird steps up, deliver the reinforcer and immediately allow the bird to step back onto the perch for another treat. Remember, the most effective reinforcement is certain, swift and strong. Once the bird steps on and off your hand without hesitation, you can begin increasing the amount of time the bird remains on your hand with reinforcement. With this approach the bird will learn that perching calmly on your hand for increasing amounts of time is the way to control its own outcomes, i.e., access to the treats. This plan not only results in significant deposits in the trust account but also produces lasting behavior that improves the bird's quality of life.

Make a Balloon Payment: Give Them Power

Control is a major factor in the relationships we form with the animals in our lives. To give control to a bird means providing opportunities for the bird to have choices, to make decisions, take actions and experience consequences of its actions. We give control to birds in countless ways, such as when we open the door to let a bird fly free in our show and when we cue a bird to fly to our hand. The bird has the opportunity to act according to the cue or stay where it is.

Trainers take away control from a hawk when it lands on the glove and they grab its jesses or launch it into the air. These actions take big withdrawals from the trust account, which many trainers fail to realize. When the hawk that has been launched from a trainer's hand hesitates to return to the glove, some trainers escape responsibility by blaming the bird for being overweight. When the macaw that is moved in an unsteady crate refuses to go back in the crate the next time, again some trainers are quick to blame the bird's weight. Sadly, when they lower the bird's weight the bird is forced to perform the behaviors out of hunger and the trainer is reinforced for unnecessarily lowering the bird's weight. All too often, it isn't a weight problem, it's a trust problem; and, training with trust building strategies is a better way.

By giving birds control we make substantial deposits into the trust account and we find we can work birds at extremely high weights in our shows. At NEI we have realized how much trust we gain by not holding jesses, so none of the hawks in our shows are held by the jesses. Levi, a star performer at our state fair show, used to bate repeatedly as we walked him to the weathering yard and to the crate for his ride to the release site. He also became hesitant to land on the trainer's glove on stage, or he would land quickly and take a bit of food and bolt off. So, we decided to change his management style and avoid holding him on the glove. We managed him like we do our trumpeter hornbills, ibis, macaws and other non-raptors in our programs. He lived in a cage with a good view, sunshine, bath pan and multiple perches. We set a scale inside the door to weigh him and positioned the crate by the slide door to load him. His performance improved dramatically. He became reliable at weighing, loading into the crate, flying to the glove and exiting through the backdrop into the crate. Plus, we were able to work him at a much higher weight than ever before.

We did the same thing with our Trumpeter and Silvery-cheeked hornbills, and all of our macaws. We weighed them on the hand, but that was the only time we handled them. They flew directly from their cages to the stations on stage and then back to their cages. Their behavior was solid and their weights were at or above ad-lib weights, and our trust accounts were overflowing.

We give our birds control over their environment at every opportunity. We offer our hand and if the bird steps on, the behavior is reinforced. We never force a bird to step on our hand and take that withdrawal from the account. When teaching a bird to go into a cage or a crate, we let the bird decide if it wants to stay inside or not. The reinforcement history we provide for being in the cage is combined with the opportunity to leave the cage anytime it wants. Soon the bird learns that if it stays in the cage it will receive more reinforcers and the crating behavior is strengthened.

People often ask if they should be present when the vet examines their bird, or if they should leave the room so the bird doesn't blame them for the stress. Our answer to that question is usually "it depends ... how's your trust account?" In high trust relationships it is often beneficial for the person to be in the room, or even be the one to hold the bird, during an exam to help calm the bird. Most birds with strong trust accounts will head toward their trusted person after the exam even if that person was the one holding the bird. However, if a person has a tentative relationship with a bird, being associated with the exam may bankrupt the trust account.

Not Just For the Birds

Karen Pryor (2002) hit the nail on the head when she said,

"Nowadays many educated people treat reinforcement theory as if it were something not terribly important that they have known and understood all along. In fact, most people don't understand it, or they would not behave so

badly to the people around them." (p. xv)

Animal trainers are succeeding in unprecedented ways to change what they do to build trust accounts with their animals and the result is effective, humane training. We have videos of teaching cooperative tooth brushing behavior with animal species as different as gorillas and African wild dogs. In these videos the bottom line is a big trust account born of high rates of positive reinforcement. Yet, when we searched the Internet for examples of parents teaching children how to brush their teeth, we were amazed to hear the last word of advice: "...and it works best when you have them in a chair where you can strap them down."

Building a trust account with co-workers may take the form of catching one another being good much more often than offering measured criticism. A simple thank you, or even a smile or supportive nod puts trust in the account. Disparaging remarks, an eye rolls, or even a small joke with a negative twist can cause serious withdrawals. Shaping approximations of a desirable behavior rather than expecting too much too soon, and practicing clear, honest communication are the trust building behaviors we most need. With a good relationship, one based on a full trust account, relationships can weather the occasional withdrawal that is bound to come up in even the best relationships.

It may surprise some people that animal trainers would lead the way when it comes to improving interpersonal relationships but it doesn't surprise us. When contemporary trainers apply what they know about positive reinforcement to one another, the result is trust accounts that pay big dividends to relationships with people and the animals in their care.

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Related Readings

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