

What's Your Motivation?

There are a lot of dogs who work dirt cheap - they'd get excited if you offered them a handful of lawn clippings. Others will fall all over themselves just to get noticed or touched.

Others are not so easily rewarded. Their handlers will have to be very creative to get enthusiastic work, or to motivate the dog to work through the frustration of a difficult training challenge.

Giant breeds, especially the livestock guarding breeds like Great Pyrenees or Newfoundlands and many northern breeds and scent hounds don't come with a built in work-to-earn ethic. You have to work very hard to build one. Genetically they are programmed to work alone or in a pack without human direction - for intrinsic rewards. Some breeds come with their own agenda and mindset of "what's the point?"

The other complication is that these breeds work at their own pace - often a slow one - without a lot of wasted enthusiasm. Getting a giant breed to lie down will be easy, getting him to get up will be more difficult. He may not repeat an exercise more than a couple of times before he loses interest, while a Border Collie will repeat the same behavior until they drop from exhaustion. (And it isn't that the Border Collie is smarter - in fact, some would argue that the opposite is true!)

WHAT IS A REWARD?

A reward is anything the dog wants and is willing to put forth effort to gain access. A hound might work for a chance to go sniff something. A Newfoundland might work for a chance to go lie in the shade or go swimming but turn his nose up at liver. A bully breed might do anything for a chance to play a rousing game of tug, but not have the energy to walk across the yard for a cookie.

If you make getting to engage in the ultimate favorite activity contingent on working to earn it, you can increase motivation and performance. You also become a better leader - the dog ends up doing your bidding on your terms instead of you begging for a mere smidgeon of his attention on his terms.

A "primary reinforcer" is something an animal can't survive without. He was born pre-programmed to have to have it. Food is a primary reinforcer - if a dog goes without it long enough, he will die. A thirsty dog will work for a drink.

Attention is high on a lot of dogs' lists of things they crave. But praise is a secondary reinforcer - something they have to learn to appreciate, not something they are born needing. Most secondary reinforcers become important to the dog because they have become paired with a primary reinforcer.



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AVOID SATIATION

He isn't going to put out any effort to earn it if he gets it for free. Why work for something you can have anytime you want and as much as you want? This applies to attention, playing with dog friends, full food bowl on the floor 24/7. A dog won't work to earn garlic marinated liver if his stomach is stuffed full of kibble.

QUIT WHILE YOU ARE AHEAD.

Don't train 'til he's full or bored or loses enthusiasm. You want him to say "darn!" not "thank heavens" when it's time to end a training session.

HOW DO YOU BUILD MOTIVATION WHERE IT IS LACKING?

Control access to what the dog wants: If _____ > _____ then:

If you do what I want, you will get what you want - in spades.

Sit at the door, sit before feeding, petting, throwing a ball. Access is contingent on a prompt and correct response, calmness, self-control, good manners.

DOES YOUR DOG LACK FOOD MOTIVATION? RATIONING WORKS.

Create a perceived shortage. It creates greater value where previously there was little appreciation. Competition increases motivation. If someone else might get what you are working to earn, you'll work a little harder. (Dog doesn't follow a command? Show him what he missed out on, and give it to the cat!)

If the dog believes it might be awhile before he gets his next meal or gets one more throw of that favorite ball, he will put out extra effort to earn even the most brief access to it. When you do get a crisp response, let the party begin!

PICKY, PICKY, PICKY

Lack of motivation can be addressed by:

- Using rewards that are smelly or salty - think outside the box!
- Bait rotation - reward hierarchy - grade better work with better treats
- Training in short, fast, fun sessions
- Training when your dog is really hungry - give part of a meal or skip a meal entirely if you will be competing with environmental distractions.

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VARY THE REINFORCERS!

Food, toys, games, access to something the dog wants, praise, petting, belly rubs, playing with a hose, swimming, sniffing, running, jumping, tug of war.

Be spontaneous and unpredictable. Surprise your dog! Make sure you have a list of things your dog enjoys. Keep a favorite thing hidden out of sight. Jackpot superior work with a chance to run to the bonus box!

USE WHAT YOUR DOG WANTS!

If your dog is crazy about squirrels or tracking a scent trail in the grass where a squirrel ran two hours earlier, working to earn a chance to follow the path of that squirrel can be the best jackpot you have to offer.

Be spontaneous. If there is something in the environment your dog wants to go see, instead of telling him "leave-it" use it as a training opportunity! Help him learn how to earn access through you.

CREATE A "CONDITIONED EMOTIONAL RESPONSE" - ONE THING PREDICTS ANOTHER AND BECOMES REINFORCING ITSELF.

A sit with eye contact can make you touch/turn the doorknob. Holding that sit can make you open the door (bolting makes it close). Waiting for the release can get you through the door. Sitting at the top of the steps can earn you permission to come down the steps. Walking nicely without pulling can get you to the car (pulling causes the handler to go backward - increases the distance from the desired thing.) Sitting at the car door can cause your owner to open the door. Waiting for the cue to "get in" gains you access to the ultimate jackpot - a ride! Each part of the chain reinforces the previous behavior.

Because the car ride is such a major reinforcer, every sit, every wait, every bit of impulse control along the way is an increasingly valuable reward in the sequence that brings the dog one step closer to the car.

A FAVORITE TRICK THAT MAKES YOUR DOG SMILE CAN BE A REINFORCER.

If he loves to spin in circles, give that cue at the end of a string of random cues and then reward. The spin that he already enjoys becomes a signal that he's just earned a jackpot for all the other work he just did. If food isn't handy, reward him with a spin instead! Does he love to jump up? Put it on cue and save it as a special reward he can work to earn.



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BE A CHEERLEADER. ACT SILLY!

Boring handlers make bored dogs. Ordering and nagging create deaf dogs who'd rather be anywhere else, doing anything else. Are you more exciting than grass? No? Then why would your dog choose you in the park? If you can't get his nose out of the grass, all is hopeless when a squirrel runs by. Attention and connection is everything. Your enthusiasm is infectious!

SET UP FOR SUCCESS! PRACTICE WHAT YOU DO WANT!

Set the dog up to enjoy sessions, don't set him up to refuse. He will reflect your attitude. If you have seen him romp and play, then you know if you can just find that button, you can push it!

RAISE CRITERIA TO KEEP THE WORK CHALLENGING AND SATISFYING.

Boring repetition: one behavior equals one treat, repeat... It's the enemy of motivation. Eager workers are made by prudent use of unexpected jackpots, variety, spontaneity, genuine enthusiasm and challenge met with success. Be generous - but only when your dog has put forth enough effort to be worthy of earning it. If you reward mediocre work, that's what you'll get! Reward animation. Reward joyful happy attitude.

MAKE THE MOST OF ENERGETIC MOMENTS AND QUIT WHILE YOU'RE AHEAD!

Does your dog jump around and get excited when you get out the food bowls? Use that instant while his energy is up as a daily training moment. "Sit!" "Down!" "Sit!" "YAY! Dinner time!!" Increase the number of behaviors or reps before the "yay!" as time goes on. Pretty soon you'll have a dog who is heeling up and down the living room strutting his stuff, eagerly awaiting the release to run to the kitchen for dinner.

WHERE IS YOUR DOG DYING TO GO? USE IT AS A REWARD!

With this paired association you are creating a conditioned emotional response. Working equals the highlight of his day - dinner. Pretty soon you don't even have to do it at meal time. The cue "wanna work?" will predict a chance to earn rewards - the excitement of getting to work has become paired with the excitement of the all-important dinner.

