



Training or Behavior – Is There a Difference?

Frequently I am asked what the difference is between obedience training and behavior. People often think of the need for training or even a board and train facility (i.e., boot camp) when dogs behave aggressively, or their behavior is otherwise unacceptable. There is a distinct difference in approaches between training and behavior. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive and there are several professionals that have their expertise in both. Let's look at how each approach is different.

Training Approach

The goal of obedience training is to control behavior. Behaviors we want are reinforced or rewarded making them more likely to occur and behaviors we don't want are corrected making them less likely to occur. In theory, rewarded behaviors then compete with corrected behaviors and the dog is more likely to choose the behaviors associated with a reward.

The problem is that there are many behaviors that have an intrinsic reward attached to it. In this case whatever behavior has the biggest reward associated with it will often win out. This is why some behaviors such as barking, guarding, leash reacting, jumping, etc. are so persistent. Despite our attempts to correct, these behaviors have intrinsic rewards making them quite impermeable to many corrections.

Training is the most common solution for dogs with behavioral excesses. Dogs that do too much of something generally respond well to training since the goal of training is to control behavior. Training is not as effective when dealing with dogs that have behavioral deficits.

When dogs are inhibited, fearful, in conflict, shut down, shy, etc., there isn't much behavior to control. With behavioral deficits, inappropriate behavior usually has less warning or fewer precursors prior to it occurring. These dogs are usually more conservative or guarded in their overall behavior and are cautious not to engage in any extraneous behavior. Dogs with behavioral deficits make more progress through a behavior approach.

Behavior Approach

The goal of using a behavior approach is to address the motivation of the behaviors, leaving less to control through training. A behavior approach focuses on why a particular behavior or a set of behaviors is occurring.

Once the motivation of the behavior is identified, a behavior protocol is implemented to manipulate the dog's perceptions that underlie the motivation. As an example, with a dog that guards a chew bone - training would focus on decreasing the behaviors associated with guarding, such as growling, snapping, hovering, etc. through corrections. A behavior

approach would focus on manipulating the dog to WANT people around his chew bone by learning that good things happen when people are around, and good things stop when people leave. Then, whatever inappropriate behavior remains once that motivational shift was made would be handled with training.

This makes it much easier to train. Dogs are more responsive to feedback in changing their behavior when we address what motivates it instead of simply trying to get the dog to stop doing something. It is always better to understand why a behavior is occurring and adapt a protocol to specifically address it. Dogs with both behavioral excesses and behavioral deficits respond well to a behavior approach.

So how can you determine if a professional is adept with both approaches? First, do they embark on a one size fits all approach. If they advise the use of a particular training collar prior to seeing and working with your dog, that professional most likely specializes in training where the attempt is to control behavior.

If the professional needs to interact with both you and your dog in order to understand all dynamics and attempts to get a thorough history by inquiring about all aspects of the behavior sequences, the professional most likely specializes in behavior or behavior and training approach. With a behavior approach, we need to know what was happening before; what happened; what did you do; how did the dog react; etc. Professionals with a behavior approach want to get to the bottom of all interactions, everything that contributes to the situation, and the dynamics in the household. Only then can a protocol be advised, and that protocol would be tailored specifically to you, your family, and your dog.

