



SELECTING A PET TRAINING AND BEHAVIOR PROFESSIONAL

You need help with your dog's training and behavior but don't know where to start in finding an expert to work with you. There are so many different methods and so many dog trainers available how does one go about screening and deciding who is best for their situation?

People should be asking what sort of methods a trainer will be using when working with their pet. There is a wide range of methodology and techniques that are practiced but there is no regulation of industry standards. Certified professionals have a code of ethics they must abide by in order to keep their certification. This code of ethics dictates the circumstances and order in which aversive techniques (i.e., punishment) are to be used. This means that professionals who have been certified through a national or international agency, as I have, must follow ethical and humane principals, as I do, when aversive techniques are required. While a certification is not required to be a dog trainer or behavior consultant, owners should give a higher consideration to a credentialed professional when selecting someone to work with their dog. Being certified is much different than simply being a member of training organizations. Certification shows that the person has been screened and academically tested for their professional competence. A membership with an organization simply means one has paid a membership fee.

In addition to being academically credentialed, professional trainers and behavior consultants should follow what the industry calls LIMA principals. That stands for Least Invasive, Minimally Aversive techniques when training your pet. This means that consideration must be given when using aversive techniques such as shock or stimulation collars, leash corrections, etc. It is not that the industry considers these methods to be cruel or inhumane, just that other, less aversive techniques must be used first.

You should be cautious of any trainer that only uses one type of training (i.e., choke collars, prong collars, shock or stimulation collars, head collars, clickers, treats, etc.) for every dog. Dogs are not one-size-fits-all. The complexity of their personalities merit more than a "one-trick-pony" application while working with your dog. This is very important as there are many trainers that subscribe to only one set of techniques.

Every situation, owner, dog, etc. is unique and should be considered individually. There is a place for most all techniques when used properly and humanely for the right reasons, in the right set of circumstances. This shouldn't be about having an attachment to a particular training method. This is about using the right techniques and learning principals on a particular dog. It is extremely important to not have a "one-size-fits-all" approach to training with regard to techniques, rewards, and corrections.

So let's look at some considerations when determining what technique is best for your dog or situation. Having an understanding your dog's personality thresholds will provide great insight with respect to how best to train him/her. By engaging a professional certified trainer he/she can help identify the best training technique for your dog; appreciate each dog's personality; and understand how best to deal with adjusting the training protocol.

Fear threshold – some dogs have a very low threshold for fear. This means it doesn't take much to intimidate or startle them causing a reaction.

* Lower fear threshold dogs are more sensitive.

* Higher fear threshold dogs are the opposite. These dogs do not startle easily, don't get their feelings hurt easily, and they are not as apt to look to a human for guidance because they don't experience the conflict of fear as much.

* With medium to lower fear threshold dogs, humans make everything better so it can be easier to guide them to a different behavior with less aversive techniques.

* Low fear threshold dogs can be too easily frightened or startled and may be overly dramatic in their reactions.

Either extreme with the fear threshold has its own difficulties. Somewhere in the middle is nice. Your dog's fear threshold must be considered when determining how best to work with him/her.

Pain threshold – some dogs have a very low threshold for pain or discomfort. This means that they are far more sensitive to certain training techniques.

* Super sensitive dogs scream and act as if their foot was shattered if you accidentally trip over them.

* High pain threshold dogs are again, completely opposite. They are barely sensitive to pain or discomfort and will work against most training techniques. They will choke and cough through most neck collars, run into walls when playing and not miss a beat, etc.

* Dogs that have a high tolerance for pain or discomfort are especially disconcerting for owners. No one wants to hurt their dog using aversive training techniques, so it takes special consideration to determine the best way to work with these very tolerant dogs. If a dog seems impervious to aversive techniques, that does not mean one should use even more aversion. Perhaps another tool or another learning application would be more effective with these dogs instead of simply moving up the aversion (i.e., pain and discomfort) scale.

Again, either extreme has its own difficulties so somewhere in the middle is ideal. Your dog's pain threshold must be considered in order to know how best to work with him/her.

Scale of social draw vs. environmental draw – some dogs are very owner focused or they have a high social draw.

* These dogs are often known as “pleasers” and are easier to train overall. They accept feedback and guidance more easily because their motivation for reinforcement is the social interaction with their owner. I'm not referring to fearful, clingy, insecure dogs. I'm referring to confident, happy, friendly, easy going dogs. Generally, these dogs are easier to train using the least invasive and minimally aversive techniques.

* Other dogs are very environmentally focused. They generally tune their owners out when they are outside. They may barely respond to their name and if they do, it is for a fleeting moment. The motivation for reinforcement for these dogs is “how can I get what I want faster” and they are less interested or not at all interested in “pleasing” their owners in this situation. In fact, owners are almost irrelevant to these dogs in this situation. Again, great consideration must be given when deciding how best to work with these dogs.

Your dog's social vs. environmental draw is very important when determining what consequences to provide during training. This includes reinforcements as well as guided corrections.

Scale of compliance vs. controlling – some dogs have a more compliant personality and accept guidance from their owners where other dogs are far more controlling and independent. These more controlling dogs generally “elbow” their owners out of the way to get to what they want. Where your dog is on the compliant/controlling scale is also very important when determining the best way to work with him/her.

Please understand that dogs are a combination of all of these personality traits. It is not an either/or. It is a how much of this and how much of that. But all of these (and many other) personality factors influence how easily your dog will be trained or how receptive he/she will be to training.

Human personalities – Just as each dog is unique, each owner is unique in their abilities and preferences. This is often where the trainer makes it look like magic and the owner struggles through the exercise. Professionals have expert handling, expert timing, and often many years of experience behind them. They also are generally “leaders” in their personality-type or they would not likely be very effective.

Most owners are not expert handlers and do not have expert timing. Each owner has their own “parenting” or training style already and professional trainers need to work within each owner's individual skill-set and style. Owners should not be chastised for not being an expert. Some owners are opposed to using force or corrections while others may be too strong when disciplining their dogs. It is my job as a certified professional to work within each owner's skill-set and find the best balance of the owner's personality and parenting/training style in conjunction with the unique aspects of their pet.

Nature of the behavior being addressed – Behavior issues need to be considered based on several factors:

* Is the behavior being addressed a safety and liability issue?

* Are the behavior issues about general training and convenience – things that would be nice to change?

- * Is there an urgency or time sensitivity for working with the behavior issue?
- * Who is the target of the dog's misbehavior? (e.g., infant, toddler, another pet in the household, guests, spouse, etc.)
- * Is the behavior issue being worked on going to determine whether or not the pet is able to keep his/her home?

These and many other questions put a spin on the priority and manner in which we need to address your dog's training.

Putting it all together – There are so many factors that must be considered when working with your family and your pet. As certified professionals, we must be flexible and skilled enough to meet the needs of the dogs first and foremost. The humaneness and ethics of choosing techniques based on your pet's personality are of utmost importance. We cannot make problems worse by coming in too strong nor can we be ineffective by coming in too soft. In fact, our own personal preferences and beliefs should take a back seat to the needs of your pet. Next, we must consider you, our client, and find a balance of appropriate training tools and techniques in order to be humane and ethical for your dog AND effective for you. Finally, the nature and urgency of the behavior issue being worked on must be considered and worked through in order to strike the right balance in each of these areas. There is no room for a one-size-fits-all trainer or technique when considering the complexity of everything that goes into working with you and your pet.