

The Resource as the Reward – Shaping Canine Behaviours without Treats or Domination

One of the arguments posed by dominance and compulsion trainers against positive reinforcement dog training is that the dog becomes too reliant on treats. The reality is that treats are merely one of many valued resources to a dog.

The use of resources in training including treats quickly strengthens the trust between humans and dogs, while dominance or correction based training erodes that trust - and a combination of both simply confuses the dog. This confusion leads to an increase in stress and anxiety for the dog, which in turn often manifests in other problematic issues, increased handler frustration and more corrections.

At the end of all canine behaviour whether wanted or unwanted is a resource – and dogs will continue to do whatever works to get it. Dogs don't work for free and in most situations, treats are actually pretty low in value on the canine resource list – would you continue to go to work if you didn't receive a paycheck and were punished for all your mistakes?

Dogs are social animals and love to be around family members. As a result, attention from humans is a very potent resource. Dogs also love to be around their own kind if properly socialized, leading to the conclusion that playtime and socialization with other dogs is yet another significant resource.

Dogs also know the difference between a human and a dog which is one reason the pack leader-alpha dog-dominance approach erodes the human-canine trust bond. There is a huge difference in a dog's mind between a correction from another dog and a correction from a human.

We all know that dogs require daily exercise making it easy to surmise that walks and exercise are highly valued resources, while letting a dog off leash becomes the most valued resource of all. Once off leash, many dogs become uninterested in treats – all the more reason to use off leash time as a reward. Many dogs will lead if given the choice but prefer to follow a benign leader, not a leader that dominates and intimidates. Ask yourself what kind of leader you'd rather follow?

There's no disputing food is a resource but so are toys, games and playtime with the handler. In fact, I once successfully treated a severe case of aggressive bullying with a tennis ball and a game of fetch. To that particular dog, the tennis ball, the game and ultimately my positive attention were of higher value than the other dogs. So you see it's simply about finding your dog's currency.

When humans consistently control the resources, they control the behaviours, which in turn control the dog. Dominance has nothing to do with it. In fact, the corrections associated with dominance based training are counter productive. These corrections give much valued attention to the very behaviours you wish to extinguish. If dog training is teaching a dog what you'd like it to do, then corrections are not dog training. The only lesson a dog learns through corrections and aversive techniques is to fear the reprimand and quite often the handler – they don't learn to choose the correct behaviour. It's easy to infer that dominance based methods simply create avoidance behaviours and avoidance behaviours are tenuous at best.

Every dog has one resource it will do just about anything to get. My youngest dog is not food motivated, but loves my attention and kisses on her muzzle – that's her currency. Luckily, I have an endless supply.

Based on my experience, I've created a short list of resources in order of importance to most dogs. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but covers all the most common resource categories. Again, each dog is unique so the list may vary. There are also resources within resources.

For example: When my dogs are off leash (primary resource) and we're approaching a body of water (secondary resource), they know they must sit and wait for a release cue to go play in the water. Or if we're approaching other dogs off leash, they must sit and wait for a "Say Hi" cue. The lesson here is to look for the secondary resources within the primary resource in order to establish superior self control in your dogs.

Make your own list and rank the resources in order of importance to your dog, but remember once you make the list it's not carved in stone – you can change and rearrange it as you continue to build trust and learn more about what drives your dog. Even if food is higher on the list for your dog, why wouldn't you utilize it along with all resources to control and shape your dog's behaviour? By indentifying your dog's valued resources, you can rotate the resource used as the reward to avoid creating a dependency on any one of them.

Resources:

1. Off leash play and exercise
2. Socialization / playtime with other dogs
3. Playtime with favourite toys and / or human handlers
4. General attention from humans
5. Food (including treats)
6. On leash exercise

Remember, it's all about finding your dog's currency and using that currency to shape desired behaviours in a respectful and humane manner. Be a benevolent leader and your dog will respect you – a respect based on trust.

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