



THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT IN TRAINING

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“Life is simpler when you plow around the stump”—Farmer’s Proverb

We’ve all heard the phrase “fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me.” But how many times have we allowed our fearful, anxious, or aggressive dogs to react to the same trigger? How predictable is it when a dog who has a history of lunging at other dogs lunges at the next dog he sees? A critical aspect to the success of any proactive behaviour modification training plan is preventing reactions by eliminating unstructured exposure to triggers. Much more than “avoidance,” management creates a window of opportunity for training to take place.

Effective management affects the environment but does not directly impact the dog. This also known as *antecedal* management, or controlling environmental triggers. Managing the environment is important because it prevents the dog from experiencing the cascade of emotions caused by over-threshold exposure to a trigger.

An over-threshold dog is living in her limbic brain. This is where the fight-flight-freeze response originates. When a dog is in this state, her ability to think rationally, problem solve,

and learn what we want her to learn is nearly non-existent. She isn’t physically able to be “well-behaved.”

A dog is able to learn when he is below threshold, meaning that he isn’t experiencing stress to the point that he is mobilizing for a fight-flight-freeze response. If you suspect that someone with a knife is waiting for you around the next corner, would you be willing and able to learn a new calculus equation? Not likely!

The more often a dog is triggered to react and goes over threshold, the

more likely she is to do it again. In addition to elements of reinforcement (“lunging at that dog made it go away, what a relief!”), we also need to consider how the brain works.

Neuroplasticity, or how the brain’s structure changes in response to experiences, thoughts, or behaviour, is well documented. Brain structure affects behaviour, but behaviour also affects brain structure. When a dog repeats a behavioural or emotional response, the correlating neural pathways in the brain become stronger. Management prevents the neural pathways associated with the reactive behaviour from becoming more deeply etched in the brain. Training creates and strengthens new neural pathways – perhaps those associated with looking at his owner when he sees a trigger, or perhaps those associated with new, pro-social behaviours.

Environmental management means that the dog is never given the opportunity to react. Exposure to the trigger should happen under threshold and when the owner is ready to actively train a new response.

There are very few exceptions to this rule about environmental management. For example, the use of tools such as leashes, muzzles, harnesses, and head halters directly affect the dog. However, a leash should not be used to restrain or correct the dog in order to prevent a reaction; instead, it should be used to control the dog’s distance from the trigger (i.e. preventing a reactive dog from approaching the trigger). A muzzle should never be used as an excuse to put a dog in contact with its triggers; rather, a muzzle is a back-up safety measure.

Management strategies that affect the dog directly are valuable, but they must be used with caution because they are easily misused.

Management gives you a window of opportunity to train, and it prevents the unwanted behaviour from getting more resilient. It also reduces stress. It is obviously stressful for a dog to react to a trigger, but it can also be very stressful to own a dog that reacts in this way. Management is a great way for owners to reduce their own stress levels so that they themselves are able to learn how to train their dog effectively.

Just like dogs, when humans are put over threshold by their dog’s reaction, they are unable to learn new skills and will fall back on their own default behaviours – and often, this reaction can make the dog’s reaction worse! Using environmental management to eliminate a dog’s reaction gives the owner an opportunity to think through and implement an effective training plan.



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