**Cooking up a Great Training Session**

**By Robin Greubel MCRP, MBA, ACC,**

Dog training is one of those profession or avocations where you wish there was a cookbook. There isn’t. In fact, dog training is more like being a chef. Just like a Master Chef who starts with an exquisite dish in mind, dog trainers must know the instruments and ingredients used to create a masterpiece and how to manipulate them. As a master chef of dog training, you must learn how to use those instruments, adjust the key ingredients to get the exact dependability of the behaviors you want, and then add on the finishing touches to guarantee fluency.

The instruments we must master require mechanical skill and an understanding of behavioral science.

**Observation & Timing Are Mechanical Skills**

Just like a razor-sharp kitchen knife, keen observation skills need to continually be honed. Recognizing nuanced body movements enables the delivery of consequences (reinforcement or punishment) at the exact moment which is a critical component of successful training. This precise timing ensures that the dog correctly associates which behavior is being rewarded or punished, either increasing or decreasing the likelihood of that behavior happening again.

One of the most beneficial ways I have found to help handlers train their eye is to identify what behavior they are looking for. Are you looking for that deep sniff or the head bob? Is it the shift of weight from the back feet to the front feet? Slicing behaviors down this small clarifies for the dog exactly what is expected of them and aids in shutting down unwanted behaviors before they get too established.

Think about that pesky ‘look back’ that your dog now has? Having honed observation skills to recognize when that slight head tilt began and the timing to mark it before it happened would have been so beneficial!

**Reinforcement Pay Scale in an Ingredient**

Have you ever thought about a pay scale for yourself? I am very happy to mow the yard because my reinforcement for doing that is listening to a podcast or book. But if you want me to do any trimming, there had better be ice cream involved. Just like us, every dog has a unique reinforcement pay scale. Some dogs may love their ball or tug, but only when it’s attached to a human for interaction. Some dogs may just want to possess the object and don’t care if it’s attached to anyone!

Let’s be clear: I try to be as cheap as possible when giving out reinforcement to my dog.   
  
My dog differentiates between holding his tug, holding his tug while getting petted, and a rousing game of tug. I use this knowledge to pay accordingly for different amounts of work. Based on the complexity of the task I asked my dog to do, I can deliver different types of reinforcement. In fact, knowing that my dog prefers to have his toy, switching him to treats occasionally makes it very clear in his mind which behavior gets the most pay. By strategically increasing the pay for more ‘perfect’ behavior, I can always reinforce the behavior that aligns with the training objective of the day and solidifies the lesson.

To effectively use this ingredient in your training, your dog must have a well-established reinforcement system (play, food, praise) and you must know the hierarchy. You can start playing with how much you vary it depending on effort. Is it a dash, a pinch, or a heaping spoonful?

**Progression Plans are an Instrument**

Progression plans provide you with the recipe for building foundation behaviors. They are detailed training plans, as close to a cookbook as you can get. The progression plan gradually adjusts your criteria, increasing the difficulty of tasks to challenge the dog while maintaining a high rate of success.

A well-structured progression plan starts with achievable behaviors that are then shaped and reinforced to withstand shifts in different criteria such as discrimination, duration, difficulty, and distance. This approach allows the dog to build confidence and competence at each stage before moving on to the next level.

By systematically increasing the difficulty, trainers can help dogs develop robust and reliable skills in multitudes of environments. Having a progression plan gives the handler a specific roadmap of what comes next, removing the guesswork of what to train.

**Blanks and Blinds are Ingredients**

Blank searches are an ingredient added to create a fluent detection dog. In most disciplines, there are a significant number of blank searches in operational settings. Blanks are when dogs learn to remain focused and continue to hunt, even when the target scent is not present. This ingredient is crucial for creating both resilience and confidence in detection dogs and their handlers.

Blind searches are also a necessary ingredient. Knowing when to judiciously add them in during the training process builds confidence for the handler.   
  
The combination of blank and blind searches creates the masterpiece of an operational detection dog team. However, using both too often outside of deployments can sour your training, just as a little too much salt can ruin a dish. These ingredients should be folded into training at opportune times and balanced with skill-building exercises.

**Changing Trainer Behavior**

If you are holding a leash, you are a trainer. Often, we get wrapped up in a method and repeat a setup or training challenge that does nothing but reinforce the wrong behavior or confuse the animal. This is where an understanding of behavior science is important. Understanding what to manipulate in the environment, the problem setup, or in yourself to change the outcome is crucial to advance the dog’s learning. By understanding the basics of stimulus control, reinforcement, punishment, and generalization, trainers can problem-solve beyond relying on a specific method to train.

This willingness to adapt and experiment is essential for effective training. By continuously adjusting and evaluating the effectiveness of their approach, trainers can create a more effective learning environment for their dogs.

**Bringing it all together**

The principles outlined above have been proven effective through years of practical experience across multiple species. In fact, most of these concepts are not new and were developed by Keller and Marian Breland (students of B.F Skinner).

Successful detection dog training requires a combination of keen observation skills, exquisitely timed reinforcement, progression plans that provide a roadmap for adjusting criteria, and the use of blind and blank searches. By understanding and implementing these concepts, trainers can maximize their dogs' potential and ensure they are well-prepared for real-world challenges.

If you want to learn more about the Secret Sauce of Training, watch this [YouTube Webinar!](https://youtu.be/aycZ2VJmXSk?si=_OD38D5BvDABvMOw)

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**Robin Greubel MCRP, MBA, ICF-ACC**

Robin has been training working dogs since 2001 and educating working dog handlers and trainers all over the nation since 2008. She trains and handles explosives, narcotics, and FEMA disaster dogs. Robin is a professional certified coach and the CEO of the [K9Sensus Foundation](https://www.k9sensus.org/), a foundation that focuses on coaching the human end of the leash. K9Sensus offers online and in person training opportunities for detection dog trainers across the world.