Mastering Motivation: Partner with Animals for Training Success

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Abstract

Motivation is something all animal trainers struggle with. But what exactly is it? More importantly, how do we measure and adjust it in our animals, especially when motivation looks different for each species and individual?

Evaluating motivation requires careful observation and consideration of an animal's health, environment, and existing behavior. Having a fluid list of strategies to alter motivation, before considering diet manipulation, allows trainers to create healthier and more balanced, consistent, and reliable motivation. Respectful modifications give animals choice and control which creates more positive situations and emotional states, improving training processes and outcomes.

A motivated animal becomes an active partner in training, participating willingly and learning the behaviors we ask of them so we can provide the best care. Highly motivated animals may even become ambassadors, willing and able to teach humans about their species and their needs.

Introduction

Motivation is a universal driver, a common thread in the fabric of all animals. It guides behavior and reflects how individuals perceive opportunity. Motivation is not a static state, but rather constantly shifts, shaped by past experiences, immediate needs, and current conditions. When the environment offers something an animal values — food, touch, attention, control — motivation inspires action.

We train animals to offer opportunities for stimulation, to engage and educate audiences, and to safely administer care. The methods we use impact the wellbeing of both trainers and animals. Giving animals agency — some degree of choice and control — produces more consistent, reliable, and positive outcomes.

This kind of respectful training begins and ends with motivating animals to willingly participate in training and to behave as requested. We start by evaluating an animal's current behavior and environment then test a variety of alterations to determine what will effectively motivate the individual to change its behavior.

Medical Considerations

Before we even start looking at motivation and ways to influence it we need to make sure the animal is medically cleared for training. Training can be an important part of an animal's recovery or medical procedure, but a vet should sign off on the training if the animal is not 100% healthy. Medication can also play a role in motivation. We all know how coffee in the morning can influence our behavior. So can medications.

Evaluating Behavior

As behavior professionals we evaluate motivation daily, hourly, or even every couple of seconds, in every session with every animal. We adjust what we do based on the data we collect for each individual animal. We understand that motivation is fluid and increases and decreases based on what we do, how we change the environment. In the science behind motivation B. F. Skinner (1938) argued that the causes of behaviors related to "drive" were environmental events, mainly deprivation, satiation, and aversive stimulation, not internal states like thirst and hunger. He also noted that these motivative variables were antecedent events.

All behavior is influenced by events that happen before it and events that occur after it. Dr. Susan Friedman (2001) refers to this framework as the “ABCs of Behavior,” which stands for Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence. As trainers we track changes in every stage. Dr. Friedman also describes the case-by-case nature of working with animals as “the study of one,” summarizing and confirming what we all have experienced: each individual is different and requires targeted attention and customized solutions.

In ABC structure, antecedents are events that happen before a behavior. They influence an animal’s behavior and motivation. For instance, the last training session we did influences the current session, and the current training session influences the next.

When my colleagues and I at the Wildlife World Zoo were training our black crested mangabey, Pokey, to shift inside, we started reinforcing him for taking steps inside the shiftway from the habitat. In subsequent sessions, he started a little closer — if not already in — the shiftway. Then there was a day that we had to shift him in because of a safety concern, before he was ready and before our training was complete. During the next training session Pokey was all the way back on the habitat, and we had to start over from there. The forced shifting, catching him in the shiftway before he was ready, was an aversive event that became an antecedent to the next training session.

Weather, lighting, social interaction, events in the exhibit space, food availability, medication, and more can be antecedents that affect motivation. With so many possible influences, we may not always know which antecedents are impacting a training session.

Like antecedents, consequences — events that happen after a behavior — influence an animal’s behavior and motivation. For example, if an animal that is reinforced after a behavior does the same behavior again, we may say the animal is motivated to do it again. We have many reinforcers at our disposal: food, touch, and access to other reinforcers.

Training can get tricky and complicated when we inadvertently reward animals for behavior that does not work for us. In these cases, trainers must pay close attention to the consequences the animal is experiencing when it performs a behavior. Our attention, by itself, can be reinforcing; a look or even a well-timed *"shut up"* can increase the screaming of a bird, a behavior we don't want to increase but rather keep at a normal natural level. Another complicating factor is that rewards have varying and changing degrees of value, so an animal's preferences from moment-to-moment matter.

Although each animal is different and will need to be evaluated individually, we can generalize about some things. You can be fairly sure you'll see more behaviors rapidly offered when you work with an otter or raven than when you work with a sloth or giraffe. Generally, the observable behaviors of an animal with optimal motivation include the following:

- The animal is attentive to the trainer. It sits/stands/swims/lies in place as the trainer gets ready for the next cue.
- The animal shows no other behaviors between repetitions in a discrete-trial training.
- The animal readily responds when being asked to shift inside or perform behaviors.
- The animal does not exhibit or exhibits only a small amount of anticipatory behavior, like pacing at the barrier, before the start of a training session.
- The animal generally chooses to participate in training, opting out no more than once or twice a month.
- The animal stays with the group, flock, pod, school etc. when not training.
- The animal goes back to the normal day-to-day activities in the habitat after training.

If an animal has too much motivation, we'll see a different set of observable behaviors:

- The animal might pace at the barrier for a long duration before the session starts.
- The animal might grab the reinforcers rapidly, and offer — show us — other behaviors between our discrete trials.
- The animal might shorten the duration of a behavior like a leg or hoof station, targeting, or holding in a stall to shift.
- The animal shows what we might label as “aggression” during the session when reinforcers are of extremely high value.

On the other hand, with no or little motivation an animal may not respond to any of our cues, like calling their name or asking them to shift over. When this happens, the animal is usually choosing other reinforcers in their environment — like sunshine, a higher vantage point, a view, or time in the water — over what we have to offer in our selection of reinforcers.

While there are many influences on behavior, there is very little that we can objectively measure. In the end motivation is a label: it’s an interpretation of a collection of behaviors that we then label as too much, good, low, or no motivation.

Historically, one data point used to measure motivation was weight. While the weight of an animal is relevant, it is also specific to that individual animal. Just like behavior is the “study of one,” so is weight. Every animal has its own ideal fluctuating weight in its own range tied to behavior. Personally, I like to aim for a balance between nutritional needs and behavioral needs, aiming for the sweet spot where both are optimal. When we feed the animal too much there is an unhealthy animal with behavioral needs. Likewise, if we feed an animal too little, we see an unhealthy animal with nutritional and behavioral needs.

Weight can be a quick, blunt way to evaluate and alter motivation: if you get the weight low enough most animals will do anything for the food reinforcers you provide. Unfortunately, animals rarely learn under these conditions because they are so focused on the food that they

fail to observe the environment. Furthermore, health is compromised because there is not enough nutrition and energy in the amount of food they are offered.

While diet and weight are important data points, there are better ways to improve behavior by considering, evaluating, and building motivation. If diet is your primary tool for altering motivation, I urge you to consider these alternatives for healthier, more engaged animals able and willing to offer the behaviors we ask for.

Creating Motivation: Antecedents

I like to start the process of modifying behavior through motivation by focusing on the ABCs of behavior, starting with antecedents. We begin by exploring ways we can set up our environment differently to affect motivation. Here, details matter. It takes time, patience, and minute attention to everything: where a target is placed, ambient noise, the strength of the sun, wind direction, who is doing the training, and more. It can be challenging to identify a difficulty that an animal is having, but it's worth taking the time to figure it out because a solution might be as simple as starting from a new position or elevating a perch. Focusing on the details in an animal's environment can open the door to improved behavior, more satisfying work, better experiences for both animals and trainers, and greater overall success for training sessions, public programs, and our zoo and aquarium facilities. This attention to detail gets easier with practice.

Antecedent arrangement is a big part of this kind of training, and there are many ways we can set our animals up for success before we even ask for the approximation or behavior. One of the skills of a good trainer is the ability to adjust the antecedents just enough for the animal to be successful. An animal's environment is full of distractions and competing reinforcers. It's not always possible to control distractions, but a sterile, distraction-free environment is not the best way to train anyway. I like to say, "let's train in the mud," meaning

let's train with as much distraction as the animal will allow and still make progress. Adjust the antecedents you can and train through the others. This might mean more repetitions or smaller approximations, and it will take a little more time, but you will see better, more generalized behavior from your learner.

What follows are examples of antecedent challenges and adjustments that improved behavior for specific animals. It's a good place to start investigating ways to influence motivation before altering an animal's diet.

Build Relationships

Problem: As I approach our pack of wolves they run to the back of the habitat and look at me. They do not come up to me to take the reinforcers I have. They must not have any motivation.

Solution: The first step in working with animals is to establish relationships. Relationships at their core are a collection of experiences. When we say we have a positive relationship with an animal, we have a collection of positive experiences with the animal. When we talk about a bad relationship or no relationship with the animal, we mean we have had an aversive experience or no experiences at all with the animal.

Steve Martin (2006) talks about your account at the Bank of Relationships. Using this metaphor, a relationship is a bank balance and as we create positive interactions (credits) we also need to limit or eliminate our aversive interactions (debits) because they work against our positive deposits.

In our wolf example, one of the first things we might think about is finding the distance from us at which they will eat. I might throw the reinforcer halfway down the habitat where they might normally eat food. As the distance between us decreases, we might look to go from a

baiting strategy to a reinforcement strategy and only deliver the reinforcer after the wolf has approached us within a certain distance.

Because the wolves look at distance as valuable (which we observe by them accessing it as we approach) we can use that as a reinforcer too. As the wolf approaches, we remove ourselves to reinforce the approach behavior, or we can even reinforce the wolves for approaching by presenting the food behind them, so they receive the reinforcer and gain distance from us as well.

Use a Preferred Trainer

Problem: A male zebra that I work with named Kibo was not coming over to the training area when I called. He was said to have “low motivation.”

Solution: One way to set up Kibo’s environment differently to alter his motivation is to have a more familiar trainer call him to the training area. A trainer who has a better relationship with him will likely be more successful. That tiny change can have a big impact. It sets up the animal for success, and from here we can slowly start introducing the trainer with the lesser relationship. Having multiple trainers build relationships with animals allows for greater training flexibility and provides animals with more opportunities for learning and stimulation.

Begin with Easier Tasks

Problem: A male Siamang, Archer, does not want to come to me for his injection behavior and leaves when I ask for the behavior, so he must have “low motivation.”

Solution: An injection behavior is an advanced behavior with an aversive consequence. It's a lot to ask from an animal and is best done by a trainer with whom the animal has a good relationship — more credit in the Bank of Relationships.

When starting to work with an animal, before a relationship is established, begin training with easy-to-achieve behaviors to create positive experiences, building relationship credit. Targeting, follow-me, and shifting behaviors are good places to start rather than asking an animal to step on your hand, which requires trust, or sit still for a blood draw, which requires holding still for a duration and an aversive stimulus. Plan training sessions that set the animal up to succeed to build positive interactions and a positive relationship.

Align with Natural Tendencies

Problem: I am teaching our pileated gibbon, Gramps, to go into his crate for his upcoming move. I put his crate on the ground to get this started. After a couple of training sessions, he is still slow to approach the crate. He must have "low motivation."

Solution: Looking at an animal's natural tendencies and environment will help us eliminate barriers causing hesitation. We can use nature as our guide. "Low motivation" might be discomfort due to unnatural circumstances.

In nature, pileated gibbons spend most of their time on branches high in trees. They rarely come down to the ground and are usually vulnerable during this time. Gramps was being asked to enter the crate on the ground and that might be part of the reason why we see "low motivation." Elevating the crate on a shelf or securing it off the ground keeps our animal's natural environment in mind and can help the behavior along. I am not saying we could not train that crating behavior on the ground, but we set Gramps up for better success if the crate is elevated.

Adjust for Group Dynamics

Problem: Cleo, a female California sea lion, moves out of her flipper-present behavior when other sea lions swim by, so she must have “low motivation.”

Solution: One way to set up our animal for success before we even start our training session is by looking at the group dynamics. Since Cleo moves out of the requested behavior as the pod swims by, consider rearranging the environment to eliminate the distraction. You might shift the other animals off the habitat or move Cleo to a different area. We might be able to train the behavior better in a different setting.

In contrast, some animals might prefer being trained in the group. Most of our herd, flock, school, and pod animals train better when they are with the group. We can increase motivation by training them in the group or where they can see, smell, and hear the other animals.

As always, it’s the study of one. It comes down to the individual preferences of each animal. As trainers we are responsible for setting up an environment in which each animal can be motivated in the least intrusive way to give the animal choices and a degree of control to maximize their success.

Group Dynamics: Training Animals Labeled “Submissive”

Problem: Our capuchin monkey, Alfalfa, does not come up to train, and any time he does the others push him away and take his reinforcers. He is labeled “submissive” and “not very motivated.”

Solution: There are times when we are unable to alter the group dynamics or setting, and we might need to work within the antecedents that exist. For instance, when working with animals labeled “submissive,” we’re talking about a social dynamic that we can’t change.

Instead of deeming the situation unalterable, look past the labels of “dominant” and “submissive” and describe behaviors in observable terms. What does “submissive” look like in terms of the animal’s behavior? It might approach food later than others or hesitate to approach when other animals are eating. Perhaps this animal is similarly hesitant to train with the other animals present. If we need to teach that particular animal a foot presentation, we might first need to train the other animals in the group to station away in other areas. In this case, our target animal's success starts by training the other animals first.

Special Environmental Considerations

Problem: Scarlet macaw Pauly is hesitant to fly into the tree we are teaching him to land in. He landed there perfectly the last two sessions, but now he sits on my hand much longer. He must have “low motivation.”

Solution: The environment for birds that fly includes the air and sky and requires special attention. Given the way wind affects flight, we must take it into consideration when we train a bird to fly, especially for short distances. Although birds are built to fly, the easiest way to take off and land is into the wind. When you fly your bird into the wind from one place to another, you might get a fluent behavior: the bird flies to the perch immediately. But if the wind changes, and the bird has to fly with the wind at its back, you might see some, or maybe a lot of, hesitation when first training the behavior.

Experienced bird trainers will notice the wind and adjust training sessions accordingly, keeping in mind wind direction, the distance of the flight, and the angle of the flight, as well as the experience level of the bird and all the other antecedent factors mentioned earlier.

Creating Motivation: Consequences

After evaluating and adjusting the antecedents for behavior training, it's time to focus on consequences: what happens immediately after a behavior. When we want to encourage a behavior during training, we create consequences that motivate the animal to repeat it — that is, we reinforce it. The things we offer immediately after a behavior to reinforce it are called "reinforcers." These might be verbal, tactile, edible, or they might provide access to something the animal likes and wants.

Just as antecedents require careful attention and consideration, so do reinforcers. Their value and thus their effectiveness can change, not just over time, but during a training session, moment to moment.

Here are some examples of consequence challenges and ideas for overcoming them.

Evaluate the Reinforcers

Problem: When we are working with Flynn, the hyacinth macaw, he comes over and steps on my hand, and I give him a sunflower seed. I step him off my hand, and he does not come back to the session. Instead, he plays with his enrichment toys. He must have "low motivation."

Solution: The first step is to evaluate the reinforcer. Is the reinforcer valuable enough for the behavior requested? Animals often prefer one type of reinforcer over another. In addition to evaluating the value of different types of reinforcers, we can alter the size or amount to

determine if those factors influence the value. When testing reinforcers be aware of and work within nutritional guidelines.

As we train and build a relationship, we start seeing what reinforcers an individual animal will work for most of the time, what reinforcers have a big effect on behavior, and which have less of an effect.

Variety is the Key to Diminishing Returns

Problem: As I am teaching Joker, the spotted hyena, a voluntary blood draw, I am using scratches as a reinforcer. After three repetitions of the behavior, he stops soliciting the scratches as a reinforcer; he must be losing motivation.

Solution: Before the value of a preferred reinforcer diminishes or runs out, it's time to introduce and test new ones. It's likely that an alternative will be more valuable. If an animal who prefers touch over food loses interest in tactile reinforcers, try food reinforcers.

Preferences are a moving target. What an animal prefers one day might change the next. Thorough and ongoing testing of a variety of reinforcers reveals a hierarchy that we can use to respond quickly in a battle of reinforcers, empowering us and our animals to maintain focus for a successful training session.

Just as preference is a moving target, motivation is a sliding scale, and the two go hand-in-hand. The value of reinforcers and the level of motivation tend to be high at the beginning of a training session and diminish over time. Being strategic with our reinforcers can extend the animal's attention span, that is, the amount of time an animal will remain focused and engaged. For instance, we might start our session with lower-value reinforcers, saving the higher-value reinforcers for later to extend the session. We might also use the higher value reinforcers to emphasize when animals take bigger steps towards the end goal. We also want to be strategic

about what behaviors we reinforce with what reinforcers. I always think about making the value and amount of reinforcer equal to or greater than the energy the animal has expended.

Not all reinforcers are created equal.

When we train our animals, we want to make sure that we don't just lean on one reinforcer, like food. Having a variety of effective reinforcers gives us flexibility and the resources to alter motivation in a range of conditions. Keeping our sessions dynamic and changing when behavior is established increases the attention span and motivation in this and future sessions.

Competing Reinforcers

Problem: A red ruffed lemur, Rufus, does not want to shift in today; he just sits in the grass sunning himself with all his mates around him. He must have "low motivation."

Solution: When we are working with our animals we are always working with competing reinforcers, and I would argue that when we do it right, we lose to those competing reinforcers every now and then. It's a great indication that our habitat is as full of valued reinforcers as our discrete-trial training is.

There has been great work done in exploring ways to arrange exhibits to encourage natural behaviors with inherent rewards that sometimes compete with the reinforcers we can offer during training. These natural behaviors in the habitat are called "free-operant behaviors" because animals are free to engage in them without any trainer-delivered cue or consequence, and the behaviors generate outcomes that the animals value in the same way they value training reinforcers. Free-operant behaviors include basking, grooming, and interacting with conspecifics. As in the wild environment, these behaviors have consequences that shape and maintain behavior. (Hester & Friedman, 2024)

It's important to remember that we want our animals engaging in free-operant behaviors. It's healthy for the animals and good for guests to witness. In his work with elephants, Gerry Creighton (2024) talks about a discrete-trial training session as part of the animal's day. We borrow the animal from the herd for a training session, and then the animal goes back to its day in the habitat with all the reinforcers there. Our training session should be *a* highlight of the animal's day not *the* highlight.

So when we are in a battle of the reinforcers as we always are — our sitatunga is standing in the water and not coming when called, or our lemur is basking in the sun, or our fish is in the rocks not responding to our recalls — we might look for a behavior to reinforce to get training started, or we might offer a higher-value reinforcer, or we might simply wait until the preferred reinforcer loses value. Allowing the animal to enjoy the reinforcer of its choice results in a positive experience that boosts the relationship.

Often when we are losing this battle there is not one solution or a perfect answer. Rather, the solution is in us changing our approach, waiting for the competing reinforcer to lose value, or relaxing our criteria. Current conditions, whatever they may be — a sunny exhibit, a windy day, a pool full of shifting shadows — are the environment we train in, and when that changes behavior changes. Your criteria on a sunny day are different from your criteria on a rainy day.

Adjust the Value of Reinforcers

Problem: As I am teaching my Pacific octopus Cruella to move into her basket to get weighed, she stops responding and now just nibbles on the scallop I offer her. Earlier, she took scallops readily. She must be losing motivation.

Solution: We can influence the value of the reinforcer before we start the training session, in the antecedent box. If we notice a cheetah showing a lot of interest in the reinforcers we have, to the point he offers us a lot of behaviors like sitting and pawing at the barrier, we might discuss feeding the cheetah some of the reinforcers before we start the training session. If we dilute the value of the reinforcer by offering it in advance of training, the cheetah will be less likely to keep offering up behaviors in quick succession, and our session will be more successful. In science this is referred to as “abolishing operations.” It’s something we do before the behavior, so it’s an antecedent.

On the other hand, if we want to make a food reinforcer more valuable, we can restrict access to that reinforcer. This is known as an “establishing operation.” For instance, we see that our blue-and-gold macaw has an interest in sunflower seeds, but when we get to the training session our competing reinforcers take over, and the value of the sunflower seeds is not sufficient to hold his attention. Since he has sunflower seeds available in his bowl all day, we might decide that we will feed him the same amount of sunflower seeds, but they will only be available from the trainer. This will increase the value of the reinforcer.

Training Mistakes

Shape Behavior at the Animal’s Pace

Problem: As we are shaping our cheetah Adriene’s lying-down behavior, we are making great progress; her chest is already 10 inches from the ground. With every repetition we have gained two inches. We know she will get it if we just wait, fingers crossed. But she walks away because she has “low motivation.”

Solution: A great trainer uses shaping effectively, moving from one approximation to the next only when the animal is ready, repeating the approximation if the animal shows low fluency, and relaxing criteria when the animal is not successful. Experience teaches trainers to evaluate the size of the next approximation based on the animal's abilities and track record.

Eeking out behavior or hoping for behavior happens to us all. We see fluency in behavior and one approximation building on the next, so we decide to take a chance and take a big step. Sometimes it works, and when it does, we can move along, but in my experience, we try for too long, hoping that the animal will magically take the approximation. When we do this our rate of reinforcement often goes down so far that the animal will move away or start offering us other behaviors. Realizing quickly that you are taking too big of a step and relaxing criteria will help keep the animal on track, staying in the session and moving forward.

Getting Stuck: Too Many Repetitions

Problem: As I am training my prairie dog, Cheyenne, to come out of an artificial mount, all he does is stick his head out. I have reinforced him for this approximation all week to make him more comfortable, but he is not getting past it. He must not be motivated.

Solution: As we described earlier, shaping is our bread and butter and deciding when to move on to the next step is crucial in a great trainer. In this example we have lost the flexibility of our shaping program. Too many repetitions of the same approximation will slow your program to a grind. The behavior will lose its natural variation quickly and get "stuck" in that one approximation. Keeping the behavior fluent is important, when you see the behavior sticking in the same approximation think about moving forward or even back in your approximations before taking the same approximation again. We often see shaping as a linear process from one approximation to the next, but in practice it's on a sliding scale, moving back and forth within our

approximations. Staying on the same spot, reinforcing a single approximation, will make moving backward or forward much harder.

Repetitions play a very important role in training and shaping behavior, but they are a powerful tool. Steve Martin (2006) teaches that repetition builds confidence and fluent behavior. When you see an animal perform an approximation or behavior with hesitation, which might look like leaning back or moving slowly toward the end goal, another repetition will help create more fluency in that behavior. As repetitions build fluency, we want to make sure that we keep moving forward in our shaping plan. In my experience as soon as you see that fluency it's time for maybe one more repetition before moving on to the next approximation or we risk getting stuck.

Timely Delivery of Reinforcers

Problem: Our North American river otter, Gary, repeatedly looks away during a training session. He appears "distracted." He must not be motivated.

Solution: Consider whether this behavior is being inadvertently reinforced. Look closely at the consequence that happens immediately after the behavior. Is the reinforcer delayed until the otter has looked away? Do you see a pattern?

Rate and timing of reinforcements are common training problems. It takes practice to deliver reinforcers at precisely the right moment so that the right behavior is followed by the reinforcer. If we ask Gary to raise up and as we reach into our treat pouch he moves on to a different behavior — looking away — before being reinforced, he will mistakenly learn that the subsequent behavior is what is being requested. You will see a pattern of looking or moving away.

When we talk about timing, we will need to talk about our markers or bridging stimuli. What is the stimulus that tells our animal that what it just did is right when there's a pause

before the reinforcer is delivered? Too often that stimulus is us reaching into our treat pouch. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we are aware and use it well, but if we are not paying close attention, we might inadvertently reinforce a different behavior than we intend, resulting in an animal that might be labeled as distracted or just not motivated.

Markers like a clicker, whistle, or verbal “good” can be great tools, but using them is a skill, so learn to use them when you are not in the middle of your training session. We have all played the training game and it’s a great way to learn about all aspects of our training skills. There are many variations from playing it across a table with another trainer acting as the animal or watching TV with a marker in your hand, marking as the scene changes or when a team passes the ball.

Conclusion

The techniques demonstrated here modify animal behavior by adjusting motivation in a way that allows the animal to choose to participate. Respecting the animal’s agency makes it a willing partner, creating positive engagement and enriching experiences along with increased ease when administering care.

Assessing and adjusting motivation is an advanced skill. It requires building relationships with the animals, constantly evaluating each animal’s environment, and adjusting the antecedents and consequences around its behaviors. An animal with too much motivation can show anticipatory behavior and may not be getting proper nutrition. When there is low or no motivation, animals are usually missing necessary activities in their day. They might be overweight and understimulated.

Teaching our animal care teams what motivation looks like, how to properly evaluate it, and how to respectfully alter it using the ABCs of Behavior increases animal and trainer

wellbeing, resulting in positive experiences, relationships, and outcomes. It allows us to partner with animals for training success.

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