Understanding Behavior Chains

by Denise Fenzi

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Table of Contents

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Part 1 - The Basics

What is a Behavior Chain

A behavior chain is a string of discrete behaviors that are combined to create a finished chain. All dog competitions that I know of require that the dog perform behavior chains, either in a predictable manner (as in obedience) or as directed by the handler (as in agility). As a result, all successful trainers have learned to create them, even if they weren't thinking about it in those terms.

Why Should You Care?

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. If your dog continually makes an error when performing a behavior chain – say, the Retrieve over High Jump exercise in obedience – it's likely because your dog doesn't understand an element of the exercise, or that he thinks an undesirable behavior is part of the chain.

It's easy for these undesirable behaviors to creep into chains. If your dog makes an error within a finished chain, yet is still allowed to complete the chain, then that error is likely to become part of the final exercise. This is especially true if the error is in any way easier or if it's self reinforcing for the dog.

For example, the Retrieve over High Jump includes the discrete behaviors of sit, stay, run forward, jump, pickup, return over the jump, front, hold, release, and finish. If the dog is performing correctly but then stops and sniffs for a few seconds before picking up the dumbbell, and if the trainer does not provide clear feedback that sniffing is incorrect, that momentary sniff may well become part of the chain over time.

Preventing Extra Links

As you can see, it is easy for the dog to add an extra (undesirable) link to a behavior chain. As the trainer, you must be vigilant to protect against this. The first step is to be sure that each link is trained to fluency before creating a chain. If your dog does not understand how to be correct, you'll need to work on each behavior separately. You really can't train behaviors that are in a chain. This is important because if your dog does not know what's right, telling him what's wrong is likely to lead to shutting down or to avoidance behaviors. Try not to go there.

Once you are sure that your dog knows what's right, you can string the individual behaviors together. From there, it's possible that your dog will add in an extra link. There are three main reasons this happens. First, it's possible that the behavior is self-reinforcing. Second, the behavior is somehow easier for the dog to do than what you wanted. And third, the dog believes you want the behavior for some reason.

In all three cases, your response should be the same: end the chain. If you don't, and your dog is allowed to complete the chain even though he's added a "bonus" behavior in there, he will likely continue to do the chain incorrectly. With self-reinforcing behaviors, like sniffing, your dog may not think the behavior is desired, but he will believe it is allowable. These behaviors are then likely to show up whenever your dog is motivated to engage in

them. That sniff may not show up during every retrieve, but you will see it again.

Behaviors that are not self-reinforcing do show up from time to time, but it's usually due to random chance. For example, your dog might have picked up her paw immediately before being sent on a particular retrieve. Odds are good that this "paw lift" behavior will neither increase nor decrease in frequency unless your dog believes that you want the behavior. This usually happens if you have reinforced the behavior in some way; for example, you gave your dog a cookie in heel position just as the paw was lifted, and now your dog believes that you want to see that behavior. If you do NOT want to see that behavior in the future, then the accidentally acquired addition behavior should immediately end the chain once you become aware of it.

If the paw lift becomes part of the chain before you realize what's happening, and if you want to get rid of it, you need to break out that piece of the exercise (the stay before the send), and reinforce the behavior only when the paw stays down. If your dog raises his paw, re-set the dog, and try again. Once he understands the criteria well, you can add that part back to the chain, ending the chain when he lifts his paw. (Of course, if you don't care if the behavior shows up, you don't need to do anything.)

No Reward Markers: One Way to End the Chain

A very common way that positive reinforcement trainers interrupt an incorrect behavior chain is through the use of a non-reward marker (NRM). The goal of a NRM is to interrupt an unwanted behavior and give feedback in a neutral manner, free from disapproval. A NRM is typically a word or sound (although it could also be a hand signal or body movement) that tells the dog that whatever he just did was wrong and that there will be no reinforcement as a result.

Ideally, if you give a NRM, your dog will cheerfully and immediately return to try again. Of course, this does not always happen. You can think of a NRM like a reverse click. It marks a moment of time, but instead of saying that a reinforcer is coming, it takes the possibility of one away. This suggests that NRMs are neutral communication, right? I would say no. In addition to marking a moment in time, a NRM also interrupts the dog's behavior, which communicates that you didn't like what happened. You have an opinion and it's not neutral at all!

There's really no way around this. A NRM is a marker of both the dog's specific behavior and the opinion of the person giving it. No matter how neutral your tone is, you are clearly saying, "That is wrong." I believe that dogs care about whether or not their people are happy with them; after all, they evolved to work cooperatively with us. This means that using a NRM comes with some risk.

Some dogs will stop the behavior you didn't like, but then display a stress reaction; this often happens when the dog doesn't truly understand what you wanted. When a NRM communicates disapproval, but provides no information about how to be right, it will likely lead to a lack of motivation, shutting down, or uninspired work. Then there are the dogs who ignore the NRM entirely. These dogs just don't care enough about the trainer's opinion

or reinforcers to change his course of action, making the NRM ineffective.

Either way, you have a problem, and it's tempting to fix it by using a punisher, such as marching in (physical intimidation) or raising your voice (verbal and emotional intimidation). Look at it this way: with a reward marker, such as a clicker, if you mistakenly click, your dog gets a free cookie. While unfortunate for your training goals, it does not erode your dog's conditioned emotional response towards working with you. It's just poor training. But with a NRM, it's not just about your training goals - it's also about you and your dog and your relationship. It's more than just poor training. It's your foundation on the line.

It's not that NRMs should never be used; there is a place for them in training. But because NRMs tend to depress behavior, they should never be used during the initial teaching phase. The last thing you want to do with a dog that that is learning is to shut down his desire to try. The appropriate use of NRMs requires your dog to be trained to fluency on the individual behaviors before you pull those pieces together into chains. Don't spend energy pointing out what's wrong until the learner is clear on what's right.

Basically, a NRM should only be used when your dog is trial-ready for the exercise, and possibly learning to perform under unusual circumstances where attractive alternatives exist, or where the overall level of reinforcement may be minimal. A NRM in this circumstance is used to communicate to your dog that he is now 100% responsible for correct performance and that you will not help him. Be aware, however, that excessive use of a NRM will erode your working relationship with your dog. If this technique doesn't work very quickly, you need to consider the strong possibility that your dog is not ready for the responsibility you have given him.

If you're interested in a more in depth discussion on NRMs within the context of motivation, you might want to read Dog Sports Skills, Book 2: Motivation, which I co-wrote with Deb Jones.

Cheerful Interrupters: Another Way to End the Chain

There is a much safer option: the cheerful interrupter. A variation on the NRM, the cheerful interrupter marks the moment of the error by totally interrupting the dog in a way that maintains the dog's enthusiasm and gives him the support he needs to be successful. Used correctly, the cheerful interrupter is an excellent option for dogs in the learning phase. The difference between a NRM and a cheerful interrupter can be tricky to understand, so let's compare them using the Retrieve over High Jump as an example.

First, the NRM: You send your dog to fetch, but as your dog gets to the dumbbell, he stops to sniff the ground, so you give him a NRM. From here, one of two things can happen. Either your dog understands the exercise and therefore stops and returns to you for another try, or he doesn't. If he doesn't, it could be that he didn't understand what you meant, or that your timing is off, or that he just didn't care. Regardless, you're stuck, and you'll likely have to enter the territory of punishment to reset the exercise.

By contrast, here's a working example of a cheerful interrupter: When you see your dog stop to sniff the ground, you immediately move towards him, speaking and moving in a cheerful manner that both interrupts the behavior and reorients your dog towards you. Now pick up the retrieve object and repeat the request as fast as possible. This combination of movement, cheerful chatter, and possibly showing the dog the reinforcer (that he won't get) almost always interrupts whatever the dog was doing wrong. In a short period of time, it becomes clear to the dog that there will be no reinforcement for that effort.

I prefer this approach because I believe it maintains the relationship you have with your dog more effectively than a simple NRM. An error doesn't have to mean that you're upset or angry – it simply means that the flow of training needs to be restarted. Being cheerful maintains engagement even though there's no reinforcement for that attempt. This approach can also be used in the learning phases; for a green dog, you might consider making the next repetition easier in some way.

Most of us use cheerful interrupters with human children, we just don't call it that. For example, if your child gets a math problem wrong, you wouldn't unemotionally say "no" (the traditional NRM). You're probably going to smile and say something like, "Close! Try again!" (the cheerful interrupter). Whether you're working with a child or a dog, the cheerful interrupter allows you to help your learner work through an error in an upbeat way, preventing a possible negative emotional response as a result. It also keeps your relationship intact, and maintains the joy of work.

If you're a visual learner, you'll want to check out this video example of a cheerful interrupter with my young dog Brito: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlqgjXHdooc

This video shows us working a send to platform exercise in a novel environment, giving us both distraction issues to work on as well as the actual behavior of getting up on the platform and sitting. Notice that I talk relatively little when he's working, and that I talk more while we are between exercises. You'll also see that I use the cookies to re-engage Brito when I lose him, but I don't actually give him the cookies – he has to earn them.

:36 I lose Brito when I set up for another repetition and show him a cookie to bring him back. In this case, I gave him the cookie for setting up because he is young and our recall is super important; I would not do that with an older dog.

:43 I lose him again on the very next send. Because I think he will be less likely to perform the target behavior if he's just gotten a cookie for setting up, I decide not to give him a cookie for setting up. He is successful when I send him immediately after setting up.

1:01 This time, Brito goes on his own. Because I'm starting to add the idea of stimulus control, I call him back with my cheerful interrupter before trying again. To avoid failure, I send him directly without another setup. If he were an older or more experienced dog, I would not have simplified my expectations.

1:29 Brito's head drops on the way to his platform. Because this could easily become part of the behavior chairn if I allow it to continue, I'm now on notice. If I see it again, I will make some kind of change within our training.

Part 2: Behavior Chains in Action: Heeling

Heeling is a behavior chain from the earliest lessons (two steps together are a chain, after all), making it an exception to the rule of only chaining together known behaviors. This fact means that heeling, while simple in concept (walk next to my side while looking up), is quite difficult in practice. Each step of heeling is either performed correctly, or it is not.

For example, let's say that your dog's first three steps of heeling are perfect. On the fourth step, he looked around briefly, but was back in good position at the fifth step. By the sixth step, the dog was lagging slightly until the ninth step, and at the tenth through thirteenth steps, the dog was brilliant. The handler was pleased with the end of the chain, so the dog was given a reward.

But this also rewards the entire chain; remember that a behavior chain includes all the behaviors seen from the start until the reward. Allowing a dog to continue a chain communicates that the behavior was correct. In this case, our dog has learned that looking around and lagging are perfectly acceptable heeling behavior!

So what should you do? End the chain and try again.

Of course, ending the chain and restarting only works if you dog knows how to win, and as we've already discussed, heeling is the one behavior chain in which our dogs won't know how to win in advance. Of course, it certainly helps to teach a fair amount of positional work with lures and aids - pocket hands, discs, platforms etc. - to get the dog very, very comfortable with being at the handler's side and looking up when there is no movement, but eventually you'll need to start walking... which brings us back to the question of what you should do when your dog makes a mistake. Enter the cheerful interrupter.

The cheerful interrupter is an upbeat method of interrupting an incorrect performance while also providing the dog with the support he needs to get it right. I typically introduce the cheerful interrupter fairly early on in the heeling process. During those first sessions, I will ignore errors as I shape the dog's position relative to me. If he's engaged, focused, and making an effort, I will reward him. I do avoid repeatedly reinforcing the same errors. I generally find that the dog understands the concept and is ready for the cheerful interrupter in only a matter of days.

Here's how I recommend introducing it. Let's say you want seven steps of heeling, but on the fifth step your dog looks away. I recommend stepping back quickly (I call this a stutter step), and when your dog notices that something has changed, restart quickly. There should be no down time. The goal is to quickly and smoothly move so that your dog is out of heel position for a second or two to interrupt the exercise, then quickly pick up and resume heel position. (As a side note, you may or may not be talking to your dog at this stage of training; if you think that your dog appreciates some chatter, then talk a bit!)

After that tiny stutter, try to re-engage heeling in a manner that allows your dog to be right. You might hold a cookie at his nose level to re-engage him - but do not give your dog the

cookie! Once I'm past the very beginning stage of training, I only reinforce when the dog gets it right on his own, without extra help. I'm happy to offer the help he needs, show him how to be correct, and praise him for that, but the actual reinforcer only happens when he gets it right on his own. Have your dog successfully complete another step or two before giving him the cookie.

At this point, I recommend only another 1-2 steps, not making the dog repeat the whole chain, because most of the time, the dog honestly doesn't know what he's doing yet. You want to make him successful so you don't risk spoiling his self-confidence, so just re-work the element where the error occurred. For example, if your seven steps included a right turn at the fifth step and that's when the dog lost attention, then stutter backwards to catch his attention and bring him back to you. Try to get the dog back into heel position by following your hand or a cookie lure, and then immediately attempt the right turn again, maybe with a lower hand position to pull him around the corner. If your dog makes the corner, reward immediately!

I'm generous with rewards as I teach heeling. Some dogs learn very quickly what I want, and their attention span for work allows for extremely rapid progress. Other dogs struggle to maintain strong attention and accuracy within heeling for more than a few steps, so I take my time with these dogs. There is no race.

As you can see, with the combination of stutter stepping, and then providing support immediately, the dog is never left hanging to figure it out on his own. He receives lots of support and encouragement! By cheerfully interrupting errors and providing appropriate aids to set the dog up for a higher likelihood of success, you can teach the skill of heeling without the dog practicing long stretches of incorrect behavior.

Of course, if your dog is very experienced and fluent in heeling, then you could mark errors with a NRM and then start the heeling chain over again. For a young dog though, the cheerful interrupter is the way to go.

Here's a video to give you an idea. This is a young dog I worked with in a seminar; this is her first time trying to move in heel position. She does not know me - which makes this more difficult. If she were my own dog, it's not likely that she'd try to keep leaving. Regardless, you'll get the idea:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UAFTIyFy3M&feature=youtu.be

As you can see, the cheerful interrupter is a combination of stuttering (breaking flow) and stepping in with good cheer and a cookie to re-engage immediately. Dogs quickly learn that if you aren't heeling forward with flow, then they won't get a reinforcer. The dog receives lots of support and encouragement, but no free food. It works.
Here is an unedited video of Lyra working on heeling in a new location. This is hard for her: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vYIv3k1IIY

0:06 to 0:21 This is as good as I've trained for, so she is rewarded.

0:31 to 0:46 This is also as good as I've trained for, so even though she fails to perform the spin cue, I reward her. Going forward, I should either pull the spin out, or give her more support when asking for it since she's not strong enough to do it independently at this time.

1:05 She looks away and I correctly end the chain.

1:11 She looks away on the next attempt and I correctly end the chain.

1:17 Again, she fails (by now I should be worried that she is not capable of doing better).

1:24 Here she succeeds. This reward covers the period from 1:21 to 1:24. Now I attempt to try the chain from the beginning.

1:49 to 1:54 She fails at the end - the same point she has failed several times before. It would make no sense to continue on this path of failure. If a dog repeatedly struggles at t he same point in a chain, then you need to stop what you are doing and pull it out to work on it separately. How you do that depends on the dog and why you think they are having trouble.

In this case, what I do is simply go right up to gate where she is failing and only ask for that very last step. I walk slower than normal to give her more support. We do this for the next minute; with this level of support she is able to succeed several times in a row. After a minute of isolating this variable, I add it back into the chain.

2:57 We have our final chain. She is successful and I end the session.

Part 3: Generalization of Behavior Chains

Like all training tasks, the process of generalization applies to behavior chains. Handling reinforcement when a chain is excellent in one environment, but falls apart in another, can be tricky, which is why I want to introduce my nine-month-old puppy Brito as an example.

At home, Brito can be brilliant for 15 or 20 steps of heeling - even with all sorts of turns and challenges thrown in! But in the local park, that same amount of heeling would surely include sniffing, sightseeing, and running off to find other interesting things to do. Because he's a curious puppy with many interests, his behavior is entirely normal; there is no reason to squash his interests or try to force him to work before he is ready. What I need to do is allow him the freedom to choose between his options. He can engage in either limited exploration on a short leash, or my fun games. My job is to make sure that I ask for such a short chain that it becomes a no-brainer for him. It is a much better deal to work with mom for one second, followed by a fabulous party, than to entertain himself in a limited space.

That means that I have to rethink what is an appropriate behavior chain under these more challenging circumstances, and I will have to do this by simplifying my requests so that success is very likely. Instead of 20 steps of heeling, I'm thrilled when he just looks at me for something to do- from either front position or side position. If he appears to be inspired or unusually attentive, then I can see about one or two or three steps of heeling. My job is to reward before the chain fails! If he makes a mistake once a chain has started, then I simply step out of position and when he re-engages, we try again. Give me five steps of excellence over 50 steps of mediocrity any day.

Here's a video of Brito training at the local park:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALYup3o4Co0

Note that all he really has to do is look at me with a bright attitude (the very first step in the chain). If he looks at me AND gets into position I will give him cookies almost continuously as long as he stays there. You'll see that he tends to look away after each click/cookie. That doesn't bother me because the treat ends the behavior chain. If he does not look back quickly after the cookie, then I step out of position, effectively ending the possible start of a chain called "ignore mom in heel position."

When I feel like Brito is settling in, then I ask for a little more. Brito isn't really learning a heeling chain as much as a focus chain; he's learning how to focus and enjoy his work in the face of environmental distractions. To be honest, focus is much harder to get (and keep) than heeling, so it's always my priority.

Progress is slow and steady here, but over the course of the session he becomes faster and faster to ask to work. Faster to maintain attention, and more determined when he gets to heel position. And that's all good! By the five minute mark, I really have a dog.
If he is over faced (heels for a few steps and then leaves), that's fine. He can go… but he'll go without a cookie. When he comes back, we'll start that focus/heeling chain over. If I realize that I've asked too much (and I'll know if there are several failures in a row), then

I'm happy to scale back on my expectations. Just remember that if failure happens too often, you need to re-evaluate your training plan. Frequent scaling back suggests that you are consistently asking too much of your dog.

If your dog's inability to perform is a result of emotional distress, such as anxiety, worry, or fear, that's different from curiosity or attraction to the environment. You need to get your dog's head in the game before you even think about training. The fastest route I know to creating a dog with a lifetime habit of shutting down or becoming frantic in new places is asking for more work than they can give whenever you enter a new environment. Don't go there.

Part 4: Basic Learning Theory

Let's veer away from behavior chains for a moment in order to discuss some basic learning theory. Later on, we'll combine these ideas in order to consider even more complicated scenarios.

How Animals Learn

Until now, we've assumed that operant conditioning has been at work, and indeed, this is one way animals learn. Operant conditioning is a simple if/then statement: the animal consciously realizes "if I do X, then you do Y." If the dog sits, you give him a cookie. Consciousness is very important here; in order for it to be considered operant conditioning, the animal must recognize how his behavior does (or does not) affect the outcome.

Classical conditioning is another way animals learn. This is a simple association between two things. It can involve emotions (happy, sad, nervous), physical reactions (increased or decreased movement), or involuntary reactions (drooling, hormone release, heart rate). From the dog's point of view, a classically conditioned behavior chain might go something like this: "Mom is preparing my dog food. When food is being prepared I get to eat. I love to eat! Drool is forming in my mouth because food preparation happens before I eat. Eating makes me happy. Feeling happy makes me excited, and that makes my body want to move more. When I see food I feel so much excitement that I leap around!"

The big difference between classical conditioning and operant conditioning is that classical conditioning is not conscious; the dog never had to think anything at all. Instead, simply associating food preparation with eating caused the behavior chain to form over time. With classical conditioning, learning occurs, and that learning causes predictable changes in the dog's behavior, but it's not a conscious choice on the dog's part to drool, feel excited, and leap around. It just happens.

People also experience operant and classical conditioning. I happened to experience a classically conditioned response recently. A few friends and I set up a practice ring for our dogs. When one of my friends took on the role of the judge and called me into the ring, I found myself feeling nervous! Even though I was well aware that this wasn't a dog show, I still had the emotions that I experience at a real dog show when a judge calls me into the ring. I became hyper-aware of my dog's behavior, and my heart rate increased! Logical? No - I knew that this was not a dog show - but classical conditioning doesn't have to be logical.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Dogs will associate meaning with anything and everything in the training environment – including their trainer! Dogs will begin to associate you with the entire process of learning. Whatever emotions your dog experiences in training will also become attached to your presence as the trainer. This is called a Conditioned Emotional Response (CER), and it takes place through classical conditioning. Your dog does not choose to be happy when the food preparer shows up - it just happens. In the same way, a dog does not choose to be happy at the start of a training session with a trainer who uses lots of desirable reinforcers - it just happens.

This is very good news for those of us who compete in events where our classic reinforcers are severely limited. We may not be able to bring our food and toys into the ring with us, but we always bring our dog's CER into the ring. If that CER is positive, then our presence provides a good deal of emotional support to the dog because they will find themselves feeling happy in our presence in a training context.

Although both operant conditioning and classical conditioning are two distinct ways that dogs learn, the concepts can and do work together. With just straight operant conditioning, the dog must be aware that his behavior creates consequences. Your dog might try out different variations on heel position to find out what works and what doesn't, eventually nailing down what is correct heel position. This is a very different scenario than a dog who is mindlessly drooling and leaping when food is being prepared. In this case, classical conditioning has created the behavior chain… but it can be changed through operant conditioning. If the trainer makes a point of causing the food to disappear every time the dog starts leaping, the dog will work to understand why his food has disappeared. Once the dog begins to connect his behavior of leaping around (even if it was unconscious at first) with the consequence of the food disappearing, he can try out other alternatives to see what works better.

Timing is critical when making the transition from classical to operant conditioning in order to affect a behavior chain. If the food disappears the very first time the dog leaps, he is likely to make the connection quickly. However, if the owner is slow to respond (the trainer doesn't remove the food until the dog has been leaping around for five seconds), or if the owner is inconsistent (sometimes the leaping causes the food to disappear, but sometimes it doesn't), the dog will struggle to figure out what causes the food to disappear.

Further, the longer that the dog's classically trained response is ignored, the harder it will be for the dog to become conscious of the change desired by the trainer. When the rules of the game are changed, especially after a behavior chain has a strong history of continuous or inconsistent (partial) reinforcement, then the dog is likely to be very frustrated because he won't know how to "win." Frustration leads to all kinds of bad things, including, unfortunately, an association between the owner and the negative emotions. If your dog associates you with the removal of what they want (food in this example), then you've got a problem if you cannot also find a way to either communicate to your dog the desired behavior to bring the food back, or find another way to reduce your dog's frustration.

To summarize, classical and operant conditioning are two distinct yet connected concepts. All operant conditioning involves classical conditioning because the dog is unconsciously developing a CER during training. Let's hope this CER is a happy, positive, and enthusiastic state! The reverse is not true, though; not all classical conditioning will involve operant conditioning. Operant conditioning is only in play when the dog is conscious of how his choices affects the outcome.

Why Should You Care?

So now that I put you through reading all of that... so what? Why should you care about the interplay between operant and classical conditioning? If you don't care about your dog's emotional state, then you might not care about the types of conditioning, but my guess is

that if you're reading this, you do care. There are definitely times when I prioritize my dog's emotional state over conscious learning, which is why I might reward my dog even though I don't like the behavior he's showing at the moment.

To help understand this, let's consider a scenario in which you are taking your four-month-old puppy to a new park for a little training. You start the session, get a few seconds of work, and reward your pup generously. This is operant conditioning: your puppy wanted the cookie and earned it by offering behaviors that you wanted.

And then your puppy sees a butterfly and runs off to chase it before you have a chance to intervene. One minute later, your puppy remembers that you exist and looks over at you. You believe that if you call with enough enthusiasm, your (now tired) puppy will probably come back. What should you do? Should you call? And if the puppy comes, should you hand over a cookie? If you hand over a cookie, are you rewarding the recall, or the running off followed by a recall? Should you go back to work and forget the recall cookie? Or just pack it up and go home?

I ask all these questions because of the fact that whatever happens during work becomes part of the chain. If you call your puppy and reward, you may be creating a behavior chain called, "Work, run off and chase butterfly, come back, and get a cookie." That said, in this particular scenario, the possibility of creating a behavior chain is probably not the most relevant factor. I might worry about this if the puppy consciously chose to run off after the butterfly, but with a young puppy, it's really quite likely that the puppy didn't think at all. Instead, his eyes saw the butterfly and the feet followed.

This distinction matters because if the puppy didn't consciously make a choice, there's not much concern about creating an operant behavior chain. A classical behavior chain could form, but remember that your dog doesn't choose to make these chains – they just happen. Of course, they will become stronger with practice, so you'll need to manage the training environment to minimize how often the dog runs off. That way, your puppy will learn focus, impulse control, and a love of work instead.

So back to the above scenario; what would I do? I'd give the puppy a cookie for coming back. And then I'd work hard not to let it happen again. This may not be the perfect solution, but there are tradeoffs with every choice you make. It's not all about behavior chains; don't forget those CER's that we talked about earlier! And what CER do you want your puppy to feel when he is with you in public? Safe! Happy! Eating! Approval! Remember, the running off happened - it's in the past. The puppy is no longer thinking about what happened a minute ago, he's thinking about how he feels right now as he's interacting with you. Make that CER towards you positive!

Indeed, the ideal situation in public with a very young puppy is a whole lot of cookies, toys, and play in a short period of time, all for pretty much no work at all. The only thing the puppy needs to associate with you and being in public is how great it is to be there, eating cookies, basking in your approval, and developing a classically conditioned response to public places – and to keep an eye on you because food keeps coming.

It won't be long before your puppy makes the association between you and cookies, and once he does, he will have a tendency to look to you to get cookies. At that point, it's a very small step to switch over to operant conditioning. You just add some criteria - the if/then statement. "If you follow my cue, then I'll give you a cookie."

There's no need to continue with free cookies in that environment. If your dog decides that he cannot or will not work that hard for the available reinforcement, then you can stop. Just make sure that whatever criteria you are asking for is reasonable – and reasonable, for a typical young dog in public, is probably one or two seconds of work.

You'll make lots of mistakes in training, and that's fine; even the most experienced trainers make less-than-ideal decisions. Just make a point of evaluating your session when you're back home. What did you do very well? What can you do better next time? On balance, are you heading in the right direction? If yes then all is well. If, on the other hand, you find that you're dealing with the same issues month after month, and long after the puppy phase, then it's time to consider what you have. What is your dog's CER towards you and training? Is your dog actively avoiding you? Is your dog making conscious choices or simply responding to the environment? If your dog is continuing to show you behaviors that you don't like (running off, for example), how have you altered your training choices so that it is either impossible (long line or small area) or less likely (less interesting environment or better foundation skills)? These are important questions, which we will delve into next.

Part 5 – Learning Theory & the Other End of the Leash

Let's say you have an adolescent dog who has been in agility classes for a year now. He started at 6 months of age and worked his way up through all of the classes – a puppy class, a foundation class, a class on equipment, and a class on basic sequencing. You're now in a class that does longer and more complex sequences. Many of your class-mates are beginning to compete. Your dog, however, runs off. A lot. Maybe 25% of the time, your dog is heading for a tunnel and... keeps on going. Past the tunnel. Past the jumps. And straight out to the dogs waiting outside the ring. Fortunately your dog is friendly, so after wiggling around for awhile outside the ring, he is easily caught and returned to you.

Before we start talking about behavior chains and classical and operant conditioning and CERs, let's talk about you for a bit. You. The handler. More specifically, let's talk about your behavior chains, your classical and operant conditioning, and your CERs.

The truth is, when you set up for a run, you are beginning a behavior chain. What does it look like? Has your dog trained you to stay close, to feed him constantly, or to chant "stay stay stay" at the start line? If he breaks his stay, has your dog trained you to just go with it and run the course? What happens when your dog runs off? Do you take your dog back to the course and continue on? Do you crate him? Take out another dog? Go home? Yell? If this describes you, you've got a unfortunate behavior chain going. You've learned to compensate for your dog's behavior rather than adjusting your training to change your dog's behavior. And my guess is that it's not pretty.

You've also developed a CER to running agility with your dog. How do you FEEL when it's your turn to run? Are you nervous about what your dog might do? Are you concentrating on your dog or on evaluating the environment for the places you are most likely to lose your dog? Is your heart pounding? Are you embarrassed about what your class-mates are thinking about you? Are you depressed about your lack of progress? Or are you irritated with your dog, who doesn't seem to do what the other dogs do?

That's classical conditioning at work, and you haven't even left the start line. Unfortunately, it's likely that all of those negative feelings about running with your dog is also affecting how you feel about your dog. It's easy to become angry and resentful, which will naturally make your dog want to avoid you, which will cause you to become even more upset.

Do you see how your behavior chain begins to intersect with your dog's behavior chain? You've trained your dog and your dog has trained you. You have feelings about your dog and your dog has feelings about you, and those feelings impact your training. Both your conscious (operant) choices and your unconscious (classical) ones are involved.

If this is you, then there is a problem… and the problem may - or may not - involve the dog. Both you and your dog are over-faced. You're in a situation that neither of you can handle, and the longer it goes on without intervention, the harder it will be to fix it. All teams make errors, but when you no longer make training decisions to further your training but instead

to prevent disaster, then you've crossed the line from an error to a problem.

Well-trained and well-prepared dogs will mess up and run off on occasion. That's okay; it's part of the learning process… but it should be relatively unusual, and it should not impact your basic handling decisions. And when it does happen, you'll want to take a moment to figure out what happened. Was there a distraction outside the ring? Did you ask for work that was harder than usual? Did you change your reinforcer? What factors may have existed that caused this result? Once you know that, you can either use it as an excuse (and change nothing), or you can set up scenarios that allow for a miniature version of the same situation within a more controlled environment, so that over time your dog can learn to work in spite of his triggers.

But once you're at the point where running off is a routine happening, then the dog is probably training you rather than you training the dog. The dog has set your handling and your reinforcement schedule. You have to regain control of your training. That means you need to forget about what the rest of class is doing and create a plan for how you are going to get your training back on track. Where did you go wrong? Is it a foundation issue? Is there a problem with your dog's emotional state? Is he unsure of what you want? Is your dog more excited about the world than whatever you might have to offer as motivation?

Or maybe your dog's foundation is excellent, his impulse control is perfect, and your dog's emotional state is also fine. Maybe your dog is simply multitasking. He likes to run agility and he also likes to visit other dogs, people, etc., so he leaves and then comes back to continue with work. If that is the case, then you have a classic behavior chain issue; your dog has learned that there is no real consequence to adding his own personal twist on the courses. To be honest, I find this to be the least common scenario, but if that is what is happening, then your run must end. Every time. Have the person who catches your dog put him in the crate while you continue the run without him. Yes, you heard me right: you will continue the run, having as much fun as you and your imaginary dog can muster.

With my young dog Brito, I have a pretty good chance of keeping him engaged under some, but not all, circumstances. I know what motivators work best (high value food) and what surfaces he can function best on (concrete or indoors). I know his best training times of day (morning or evening) and I know when he'd prefer to sniff and wander (afternoon). I know which environmental triggers are deadly to our engagement (squirrels and unseen noises). I know which exercises we can practice in public (easy ones where he is mostly facing me) and which ones need to be worked at home (working at a distance or independently). I know how long he can work before he gets tired (about fifteen minutes split into two sessions - shorter outdoors) and I know how being tired affects his behavior (sniffing and wandering).

I can manipulate all these factors to allow him to succeed, and if that is not possible, I can choose not to work him at all. Every management decision I make is designed to further our long term goals; none are designed to keep up with a class. I don't care if the rest of the class can do scent articles facing a field of cows. We'll practice our articles in the bathroom so we can have lots of success. We'll join the class when we're ready.

If you recognize yourself in this conversation, then here's what I think you should do at this point: go talk to your instructor and start an honest conversation. You need to know exactly what has to happen at this point to get you back on track. You need to know if your dog's behavior is disruptive to others in class or is being perceived as dangerous in any way. You need a plan.

And then you need to listen to what your instructor has to say. If she says that you've got a great big mess, then hear that. If she says that you need to take your 18 month old dog back to a puppy class, then do it. If she says that the other students in class do not feel comfortable with you and your dog, then hear that too, even if it makes you mad. If your instructor says that she can create a plan for you, but it will require private lessons, remedial training, or working on foundation skills on the sidelines, then give it some thought. Most of us professional trainers are loathe to bring up these hard conversations with our students, so if you don't ask outright, then you'll find that the conversation is not likely to happen. What you do with that information is up to you.

If you are the instructor, then this is the time to be both honest and kind. Create a plan to address your student's issues. If you cannot or will not do that, then refer them to someone else. And if you don't think the dog's circumstances can be helped, either due to the seriousness or complexity of the problem, then now is the time to put it out there. There is no shame in admitting that you're in over your head, too.

If I could, I would lay out a plan right here, but there are thousands of reasons why dogs and handlers find themselves in this situation. You need to figure out the root issue and then work to address that.

Part 6 – Learning the Rules to Break the Rules

I've already alluded to the fact that I will sometimes ignore behavior chains in order to support a dog's CER or self-confidence within the training relationship. In this section, I'll examine several scenarios that fall into this category, and why.

Handler Error

Look, it happens: we make mistakes sometimes. My general rule when this happens is to provide a reward – even if this choice will reward a fault within a behavior chain. This reward may be either a classic reward (like food or toys), OR it might be the chance to continue on in the chain. Here are three scenarios that examine this in detail.

Scenario #1:

I set up for a retrieve on flat, say "stay," and then I send my dog to fetch with the WRONG command. Let's say I asked her to "take it," but her cue is "bring!" As a result, she looks at me with a ready expression but she does not move. My response? I would hand her a cookie and act like she was the most clever dog on the planet. Of course, if she had chosen to fetch, I would have treated that as super clever as well. In essence, whatever choice she makes is going to be right. If you ask your dog to do something that she is not trained to do (in this case follow an unfamiliar cue), then there is no "right" answer. Fetching a dumbbell on the wrong cue is just as wrong as doing absolutely nothing. As a handler, your options are to either start over (effectively punishing the dog), or offer a reward. I choose to reward so that my dog will continue to feel absolutely confident. Hopefully I'll do better next time.

Scenario #2:

I am directing a handler through a heeling pattern. As I call a right turn, the handler is unsure of what I asked for. They "bobble" their handling, which throws the dog off, so the right turn is wide and unsure. Your dog has no idea what "bobble" handling means, so there is no way for your dog to be correct. If you simply start over, then you risk a loss of confidence in a dog who has been working correctly. For your dog to maintain faith in your leadership, you have to lead so that the dog can follow. Keep the dog in the game! Either hand over a reward or simply continue the chain as if the error never happened.

Scenario #3:

You're running an agility course and you pull your dog off of a correct jump with an inadvertent twist of your shoulders. Your dog guesses about what you want. It doesn't matter if your dog guesses correctly or not; reward your dog with a cookie or by continuing the run. In effect, make it so the error never happened.

Each of these scenarios shares one thing in common: your handling has made it impossible for your dog to be right. If you restart the chain, you're telling your dog that he's wrong… which effectively punishes him for a circumstance over which he had no control. That choice may not matter for dogs with stronger temperaments, but it can be death on more fragile dogs. If you're not sure about your dog's tolerance for errors, watch your dog's behavior carefully after you make a mistake. You might be surprised at how often your dog's next attempt ends with classic avoidance behaviors like sniffing or zooming, or even just a slight decrease in speed and forward momentum.

This is why in each case, I will go ahead and reward the dog - and then try to prevent those sorts of errors from happening too often! This sort of thinking is better understood in agility than in obedience because dogs with less confidence in their handler's abilities are often slow and methodical, and a slow dog is the death knell of a serious agility competitor. In obedience, on the other hand, slow and careful can be rewarded by high scores, so there is less incentive to consider WHY the dog is slow and careful.

Sadly, I screw up more than I'd like to admit, because screwing up covers a lot of territory in the world of dog training. I may have asked for a behavior that my dog cannot manage in a challenging situation. I may have miscued my dog. I may have put her in a frame of mind that is conducive for routine work but not for learning new skills. I may have gotten distracted and disconnected. There are a lot of ways to screw up, and professional trainers are not immune.

That said, your dog should not pay the price for your learning curve; if you make a mistake or "bobble" in training, then reward your dog. If you follow this rule while you are learning to be a better trainer, then your dog's attitude will remain intact, even if you're making a bit of a mess of the process. Teaching behaviors is relatively easy once you master the mechanical skills, but recovering a dog with a bad attitude is actually rather difficult.

Rewarding Attitude over Behavior

When a normally un-engaged dog exhibits a significantly more enthusiastic attitude than what is typical for that dog, I may reward him even though he made an error in the behavior chain. In effect, I'm rewarding an attitude at the expense of a behavior.

To be clear, I'm not rewarding the dog to CAUSE the improvement in attitude, but if the dog brings it to the table, I want to acknowledge it. The dog's attitude drives my behavior. I am not using the cookie to drive the dog's behavior.

Here's a human example to give you a better idea of my reasoning: imagine that you're a relatively reserved person by temperament, but you find yourself telling a story with great excitement. Just as you're getting completely wound up, your listener interrupts to ask you to speak more slowly and clearly. While you might finish your story, the interruption will likely deflate you, and now it's just not as much fun to tell your story. While an interruption might help a confident storyteller improve her skills, it might kill the storytelling career of a more reserved person altogether. What's more, the interruption is likely to change how you feel about the person who did the interrupting; maybe you feel a little less positive about them right now.

It's the same for our dogs. Is breaking the flow of training on this occasion actually worth the cost? Keep in mind that you're interrupting both the behavior chain AND the dog's enthusiasm. I find it much easier to train precision into a "high" dog than to add enthusiasm to a "low" dog. As a result, if your dog tends to struggle with attitude, then it might make more sense to focus on that factor instead of on the precision chain. This is why I will reward a dog showing unusual amounts of energy and confidence in order to get a better overall picture and more long term toughness, even if that means I'm allowing

precision errors.
A great dog training session is a conversation. A dog who comes to a training session especially engaged offers a valuable opportunity to build an exciting and worthwhile relationship. Your dog's attitude needs to be nurtured if you want to keep it! You may not agree with every word in the conversation, but don't interrupt. Over time, as your storyteller's confidence grows, you'll have a chance to get in your opinion. In the meantime, let your dog be the storyteller.

I've been learning this with my young dog, Brito. Brito is a happy worker, but he is not a high energy or intense working dog. I have noticed, however, that he does have some sessions that are clearly much better than average in the attitude department. When those sessions show up, I run with them! Some people prefer to get the precision first and then bring the speed while others work for speed and allow a bit of slippage in accuracy on occasion. I'm in the second camp, so when Brito is in one of his really good moods, I reward that intense CER above all else - even if his actual work is something of a mess!

Then again, I'll be careful in what I choose to work on, as well. Super happy dogs tend to forge in heeling. They forget how to sit straight. They retrieve extra fast, but sometimes drop the object because they never had a good hold on it in the first place. The examples continue; speed and enthusiasm tend to come with some specific challenges for accuracy. Since accuracy is important to me, I will focus on work which allows Brito to express his energy (such as heeling, retrieves and jumping) while avoiding work which is more technical or slower paced overall (like scent articles or long stays). If I select work that is too difficult when Brito is in a particularly excited frame of mind, then I'll consider rewarding the occasional wrong attempt and then we'll move away from that exercise and towards something more appropriate.

Mostly, I want Brito to feel like a star and sure that he can do no wrong! I want him even more excited about the next session! As long as we're still in the training phases and not proofing for competition, this is not going to hurt his career. Experience tells me that dogs who believe that they are superstars in training have much better resilience when I start demanding more precision. These dogs will stay in the game longer and will work harder, even when the going gets tough and the behavior chains get longer or more complex. Dogs who are more passive in their outlook, accurate but uninspired, are much harder to keep in the game when the work gets more demanding.

What's more, it's possible to reward only absolutely accurate performances and STILL create problematic behavior chains. If you only reward a behavior chain if it is absolutely correct, then you risk a slower and more careful worker. This is not a problem for some dogs who will be happy to bounce into perfect heel position by virtue of their temperament, but other dogs simply cannot generate speed and enthusiasm until chains are formed and movement or games are involved. In effect, they require "flow" to create their love of work, and without it, they're dull workers. Practicing uninspired work over a long period of time will give you more of the same. Precise and...dull. The trick is to only reward dogs who make technical errors if the dog is offering a SIGNIFICANTLY better attitude than what is normal for that dog.

Decisions to ignore behavior chains are made to prioritize classical conditioning over operant conditioning. The more fragile your dog by temperament, the more you need to consider your dog's CER towards you and training. The stronger your dog's temperament, the less important classical conditioning is, because your dog is already driven to really want to work with you!

If you're a truly stellar trainer who is extremely good at creating and maintaining each behavior to absolute excellence before you create a behavior chain, and if you have a dog who is amenable, then you'll rarely run into any of these issues. But if you're a more average trainer, or if you have a softer dog, then it's worth considering the less-than-ideal situations where prioritizing your dog's attitude over a specific behavior probably makes good training sense.

Low Motivation Dogs

Working with dogs who are seriously lacking in motivation or enthusiasm for performance training is another situation in which I do not allow behavior chains to drive my decisions. Worrying about accurate behavior chains in this case is like putting the cart before the horse because developing excellence within behavior chains assumes that your dog will care if the behavior chain ends. If your dog doesn't care about what you have to offer, then restarting the chain will not be effective and is likely to cause trouble for you instead.

I'm going to tell you a story about a dog who I work with regularly. Her name is Lumen. When I first met Lumen, she was about 10 weeks old. Lumen ate to live, she did not live to eat. Her basic approach to food - any food - was to sniff it carefully, place it on the ground for contemplation, and then taste a tiny crumb before slowly chewing the whole treat. The process took as much as 15 seconds and almost any change in the environment could interrupt the process. Lumen once went on a three day road trip with her trainer and ate close to nothing the entire time. Lumen was not sick; she was simply expressing a temperament trait that is very common in her breed - minimal interest in food. (If you do not believe dogs like this exist, see my video blog on this topic: http://denisefenzi.com/2012/11/20/do-all-dogs-have-food-drive/)

How about toys? Lumen liked toys! Well, sort of… for maybe ten seconds… and under very specific environmental conditions… and for no more than five repetitions… and not all toys, either, just toys on lunge lines that allowed for a lot of movement. Lumen does enjoy exploring, staring at movement, and snuggling on her soft and fluffy dog bed, but none of these are sufficiently motivating that they could be tied to work.

Lumen is calm, stable, gentle, and self sufficient. She's the perfect pet, but not an easy competition dog. Behavior chains are not a primary consideration with a dog like Lumen; it's not realistic to hold out for perfection when you're pretty much training a cat.

What does progress Lumen's training is using movement and flow. Lumen's trainer focuses on successive approximations and capturing what she wants. She ignores what she doesn't like and just keeps moving because she knows that restarting the behavior chain will interrupt the flow, and that is much too punishing for a dog like Lumen. With

low-motivation or low-energy dogs, developing a working rhythm and flow is more important than fussing over details. Remember, these dogs don't get frustrated if you withhold a reinforcer - they don't care if they get it or not! To succeed, they must develop an appreciation for the activity itself. Don't interrupt the flow!

If this doesn't make sense, let me tell you how Lumen's trainer has been teaching her to heel using flow and successive approximations. Lumen's trainer would get her moving with a toy attached to a lunge line, and then suddenly pull the toy around to the front of her so that Lumen would come in close to her side - effectively near heel position. As soon as Lumen showed up, the toy would come back out. Over time, Lumen figured out that coming in close to her trainer's left side would cause the toy to reappear. Soon Lumen would offer two steps on her trainer's left side before the toy showed up, and then three… and one day, many months later, Lumen was heeling. On days when Lumen was showing more interest in food, the same game was played; if Lumen showed up on the left side, food was thrown straight ahead and then Lumen was encouraged to come back and re-start the game.

In effect, Lumen learned a version of "choose to heel," but with very loose rules and a very long timeframe. On those (frequent) days when she didn't want to engage with either food or toys, we moved on to other activities or worked her later in the day. Holding out for perfection in the behavior chain of heeling would have been the death knell of Lumen's early obedience career. Instead, heeling simply became a fun game that Lumen controlled when she was in the mood to engage.

Some behaviors cannot be taught with flow. Positions such as sit and down come to mind, as do stays. To teach these, you'll need to use "non-flow" training sessions. These sessions should be short, sweet, and successful. Use errorless learning wherever possible (platforms, channels, etc.). You may only get a few repetitions, and that's okay. If your dog gets tired of the game, simply move on to another activity or end the session with an upbeat attitude.

Use a crazy high reward schedule. Use as much reinforcement as your dog will accept. If that means 90% food, toys, or play and 10% work, then go for it! If your dog shows no interest in work even in a very simple environment, then cheerfully end that session. Train on the dog's schedule and at the dog's pace. Forever. Find your dog's best time of day. You may well find that certain environmental realities make all the difference. If your dog hates the cold or wet, then don't train on wet grass in the early morning. And if you get to the point of showing, then pick shows very carefully to account for her opinions.

Learn your dog. You must know exactly how much energy to give to keep your dog in the game without becoming overwhelming or hyper intense. When it comes to energy, more is not better. That's easier said than done, because the sweet spot of "enough energy but not too much" can be very hard to find, but with time you can find the energy that gets you the maximum amount of engagement for your team.

Set process oriented goals. Dogs like Lumen are working to humor you, at least in the beginning. They might learn to enjoy their training time, but recognize that they did not pick their career path; you did. Be grateful and appreciative for the skills they show you,

and celebrate every single success and improvement.

So…what's the prognosis? How far can you take a dog like this? Well, each dog is different, but Lumen is now almost three-years-old, and she is almost unrecognizable from her younger self. She knows almost all of the work through Utility, and she has all of the skills for agility with amazing speed. When she wants to. With plenty of reinforcement. Lumen attended her first trial recently and scored a 99/100. And then she failed Novice altogether. That's ok.

Lumen will never have an impressive ability to work for a cookie, but at least she enjoys them most of the time. Ignoring mistakes and rewarding generously helped her overall willingness to try, and it's hard to over state the importance of her trainer's attitude. Lumen's trainer is always accepting and upbeat. I work with this trainer towards her OTCH with another dog, and towards whatever we can accomplish with Lumen. The ability to accept each dog in this manner is something I cannot teach, but I know that how much fun you have with this type of dog is in direct proportion to the trainer's ability to celebrate the process rather than the outcome.

While Lumen happens to be from a non-traditional performance breed, the fact is that her temperament can show up in any breed. Sometimes dogs are born this way, and other times trainers inadvertently create them by poor training that removes all of the initiative from the dog.

So what does all of this have to do with behavior chains?
Simply put, if you train by prioritizing flow over chains, you will likely end up with poorer quality behavior chains because the dog practices a lot of bad habits on the way to each cookie. But if your dog cannot handle the pressure of focusing with intensity, or if your dog could not care less about any food or toys, then let's be realistic. Rough heeling is better than no heeling at all. Besides, you never know... over time, that heeling just might become more and more inspired, at which point you can raise your criteria.
Slowly.

Part 7: Don't Lose the Forest….

Imagine that you wanted to learn to ski. You could spend hours in a classroom studying the art of skiing. You could evaluate how to move your body and you could memorize each step of the process. You could watch videos and critique style. You could study for thousands of hours, and eventually you could get so good at observation and theory that you might become an excellent coach without ever stepping foot on a ski. But that does not make you a skier. It makes you an observer, possibly with excellent skills of analysis. Best case scenario, you recognize your limitations and retain a degree of humility. Worst case scenario, you become a know-it all-skier - one who has never been on skis but who could do triple flips, if only you felt like it.

And so it goes for dog training.

Now that you're educated about behavior chains, you're convinced you'll do it right. You will control the environment. You've identified three behaviors that you train well and you practice them over and over, perfectly! You study every single thing you do with your dog and you're determined not to proceed until you have perfected each step. You have decided that you'll train with such care that you'll never find yourself in the complicated territory of NRMs.

If you do proceed with any of these conservative, strategic, and thoughtful approaches, then be prepared to accomplish absolutely nothing. Training a dog requires you to, well, train a dog.

Dog training is very much an applied art as well as a science. A theoretical understanding of how you are supposed to train a dog won't make it happen unless you practice. Through practice you'll develop muscle memory and a natural responsiveness that matches your dog's needs at any given moment. Not over days, weeks, or months, but over years. Practice and thoughtful reflection after you train will place you on the road to mastery, not reading about training while your dog takes a nap.

Bear in mind that it is quite difficult to effectively apply theoretical knowledge to practical applications without plenty of trial and error. Mastering the scientific principles of training without including a dog for practice leads to armchair training; excellent for conversation but only loosely related to the real deal. If you're serious about becoming a better trainer, eventually you'll just have to get out there and put your theory into practice. If you're serious about competition, then eventually you'll have to enter a show and see how your training holds up under taxing conditions. And you might as well accept that you'll make your fair share of messes - which is great, because now you can take on the challenge of fixing them!

for the sake of understanding, I have explored dog training at a level that is fascinating to dog geeks and nauseating to the rest. My experience is that trainers who both study the science of training and simultaneously attempt to apply that knowledge make the greatest strides in the shortest period of time, and that is why I wrote this series. But experience

has also taught me that those who study at this level without also training a dog to perform more complex behaviors have no more applied training skill than the pet owner down the street. Simply put, you have to make your share of mistakes. People have been training dogs longer than we've understood the science and while it hasn't always been pretty, kind, or efficient those trainers often reached their goals, simply because they practiced the art of training dogs.

Do not allow yourself to become paralyzed by a fear of doing it wrong. Yes, you'll do it wrong. I do it wrong every single time I train a dog. I could not show you a five minute clip of training in which I do not make errors or wish I had done something differently. But For the most part, doing it wrong doesn't matter because I believe in treating my dog with kindness. When I do, the worst thing that happens is the dog learns the wrong thing. I also evaluate what does (or does not) work and consider it against the alternatives. This allows me to improve. If not with this dog, then with the next one. If not this month, then next month.

In short, I don't get so fixated on tree bark that I forget there's a forest out there. And neither should you.

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