

Not Every Trainer is a Keeper; But Every Keeper is a Trainer

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Many keepers, including me, often envy our colleagues with titles like Behavioral Husbandry Manager and Animal Trainer I, II or III. We imagine their days must consist of free-flying hawks and macaws, target training tigers and bears, and swimming with dolphins without ever touching a rake or shovel. Their hair probably doesn't stick to their sweat-free heads and their clothes are not stained the color of fresh fecal matter. Though I'm fairly certain that description is not entirely accurate (but if this job exists at your facility let me know if you have an opening!), I have learned to make the most of every minute I have for training. Lucky for me, every minute spent in an enclosure is time for training, so I have plenty of opportunities. Through speaking with behavioral husbandry managers and training consultants about their experiences working with keepers, I have begun to realize there is a common misconception among many keepers. We often recite the same mantras: "There's not enough time for training". "Training plans have to be written, then approved by managers, and then carefully supervised and it takes too long". "I don't know how to train my animals" or "I don't want to train my animals". "Why does it matter as long as the husbandry gets done?"

Keeper Ellen Dreyer conducting a brief training session with 0.5 variable flying fox (*Pteropus hypomelanus*) before shifting them in for the night.

Photo by Micaela McPherson

I'm writing this article to implore all keepers (including me) to remove these phrases from our vocabulary.

The most common complaint from keepers is this classic line: "We don't have enough time for training". I'll admit it. I've said it. I used to say this a lot. When I was a new keeper, the manager of my area and the other keeper in the section both left. I had picked up the husbandry routines fast, but being the only keeper in the area meant I was the one who needed to keep things running smoothly with the help of our swing keepers. I wrote nearly all of the records, made sure the monthly cleaning chores got done, and was in constant contact with zoological managers about the state of the run (or string depending on where you work). Because of this pressure, I was unsure if I could handle a new training project but I was eager to prove myself worthy. So, I wrote and submitted training plans for target training, scale training, and crate training Visayan warty pigs, target training and scale training cassowary, as well as, target training, station training, scale training, and wing presentations for our bats. Yep, I went all in. Within six months, all of the behaviors were trained (though bats were trained for wing presentations one-by-one so this took longer). I did it by carving out five minutes every day for training, no matter what. I would do a quick training session





Keeper Sam Kaeser demonstrates weighing Visayan warty pigs (*Suscebifrons*), a task that went from taking 45 minutes to 5 minutes after only a few training sessions. Photo by Ellen Dreyer

after I shifted the bats in. Then, I'd swing by the pig yard on the way to bring in a macaw for a 5 to 10 minute training session - whatever I could manage. Doing short training sessions as often as I could and at the most convenient times (right before feeding or right after cleaning for example) was very effective. Yes, if I had more time I could have trained the behaviors much faster, but I worked within my schedule as a keeper.

I often hear keepers explain that they cannot train their animals because they are waiting for plans to be approved or they can only train when a supervisor is present, and scheduling training time together is challenging. Training plans are certainly important, especially for more complex behaviors, and new keepers should be taught operant conditioning techniques and supervised during their early sessions. This is because we keepers are influencing animal behavior (whether positively or negatively), from the moment we enter their sight to the moment we leave, even if not engaged in a formal training session. When animals don't cooperate, we often reinforce the uncooperative behavior because we have other mouths to feed or stalls that need mucked. For example, when a group of lions stopped shifting to a far room, the keepers would acquiesce and put the food bowl in the middle room where they knew the animals would go for it because the keepers were busy running through their morning check list. However, at the suggestion of the behavioral husbandry manager, the keepers moved the food bowl a few inches closer to the shift door every day, and eventually reestablished the shift behavior.

While working around the animals, we can begin arranging antecedents to set the animals up for success during their next training session. Or, we can focus on husbandry behaviors to make them easier, better, or more stress-free for the animal. For example, when I began training pigs I had to separate them to allow the submissive pig a chance to be reinforced without being charged by the dominant female. This required me to train them each to shift in and out separately when asked. Because shifting was already in the morning routine, I worked on shifting them individually each morning to set me up for success when I began separating them for crate training.

Some keepers may not consider themselves trainers because they have never been formally taught the techniques of operant conditioning, the ABC's of training, or what the bridge signifies. However, there are a

number of ways to educate oneself. For example; ask to observe training sessions; try to read as many of the excellent books on training as you can (Ken Ramirez's *Animal Training: Successful Animal Management Through Positive Reinforcement* is my training bible); attend training workshops and conferences; participate in online webinars such as those from sites like the San Diego Zoo Global Academy. Learning the science of behavior change will help as you apply that knowledge in a training setting to gain experience and hone your skills. Sometimes, showing you are interested is all it takes for a senior keeper to take an interest in you. If you don't want to train animals, you are in a pickle because being a keeper means training. We all influence animal behavior through our actions around them and our interactions with them. If you move too quickly while cleaning a fox enclosure and the fox hides in the bushes when he sees you come into the enclosure, we can predict the fox will continue the behavior of hiding in the bushes, which can make catch-ups more challenging. If you move slowly when near the fox and he begins to come out of the bushes, then you are training the fox just as much as if you were holding a target in your hand and whistle in your mouth (or clicker depending on your preference).

In terms of stress, I think zoo keeping ranks somewhere between emergency room doctor and NASCAR driver. We have all had days where an animal has an exam in the morning, a team member calls out sick, a pipe breaks and floods the aviary, and the truck blows a tire all before noon. This is when I start to tell myself training can wait but husbandry must get done. But, this kind of thinking is a slippery slope. You're stressed out so you rush through your routine and skip training. Then, the next day something else happens and you skip it. Pretty soon, three months have gone by without a single note in the training log (yes, this has happened to me). Training is as much a part of husbandry as feeding, cleaning, and enrichment. A good training program makes the animals' lives better and therefore, our lives better as their keepers. I hope we can rally around our teammates and encourage everyone to reach our training goals (remember, positive reinforcement works on people, too). After all, not every trainer is a keeper but every keeper is a trainer.



While cleaning enclosures, taking quick breaks to work on behaviors seamlessly melds husbandry and training. Keeper Sam Kaeser targets Reeves's muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*). Photo by Ellen Dreyer

BHC Comments by Beth Stark-Posta:

What makes a trainer a trainer? Is it years of experience? Someone who's read animal training books? That person who has a way with animals and somehow gets them to modify their behavior? What about the person who hoses an animal to get it to move? All of these qualities can affect one's relationship with and ultimately the behavior of the animals we work with. Animal training involves modifying behavior, whether for better or worse. As the author points out, we all influence the behavior of animals we interact with. So how do we do that? We influence behavior through formal training sessions, in which we plan out training steps and can anticipate the animal's response. In these cases, we often have a game plan – we know what we're looking for and try to find a method that effectively communicates that to the animal. And the animal responds in return, indicating whether it understands what is being asked and whether it is willing to comply. However, there are so many ways we inadvertently influence behavior. A simple act of turning around quickly in response to a sound, or standing up can have a negative impact on an animal - and ultimately on the keeper's relationship with that animal. It is just as easy to have a positive impact on behavior through careful observations of animal behavior and body language and responding accordingly to make sure we put the animal at ease and build a positive relationship built on trust and honest human-animal communication.

Whether formal training or informal interactions, we can have a direct impact on an animal's behavior. For those of you engaging in formal training sessions, keep in mind that you don't need a lot of time to be successful. What you need is a few minutes on a consistent basis. It's easy to carve out one minute for training to obtain a quick response. If this can be done several times per week, you can make steady progress on training goals. The key is consistency and good communication with the animal. There are a lot of excuses of why not to train, many of which are mentioned above... but as seen here, even five minutes per day can have a huge impact. Congratulations to Ms. Dreyer – you're an inspiration to all of us who are time challenged! And keep up the good work. And for the rest of us, let's find our one minute or five minutes and shape our own training successes. Happy training! 🐘

We want to hear your Training Tales – the good, the bad and the fabulous!

Please submit your "Training Tales" and experiences in operant conditioning to share with *Animal Keepers' Forum* readers. This opportunity provides a convenient outlet for you to exhibit your training challenges, methods and milestones with the AAZK member network. Please submit entries based on the following guidelines:

- ▶ Submit a brief description of a training project at your facility. These can be 500 words or less, in text or bullet points – it can be longer (up to 1000 words); however, short and simple descriptions with a few images are just as perfect. Details should include the following:
- ▶ Define the training goal (what did you try to do and for what purpose?)
- ▶ List important steps (How did you do it – include plans that changed along the way/what worked & what didn't work)
- ▶ Timeline used (how long did it take)
- ▶ Tips you learned along the way
- ▶ Include 3-5 digital photos that clearly depict the animal in the learning process or performing the desired goal (provide photo caption and photographer of each image). Photos need to be 300 dpi and at least 1200 x 1800 pixels.

Please send submissions or questions to:

Kim Kezer at kkezer@zoonewengland.com or
Shane Good at shane.good@aaazk.org
(Use Training Tales Submission as the subject)



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