One of the first things new trainers want to know is “how do I start?” Experienced trainers will then share their wisdom about choosing a clicker/whistle, or some other bridge, and pairing it with food, attention, etc. Therefore, the bridge, or conditioned reinforcer, becomes our first training “tool” (Animal Keepers’ Forum Training terminology). Each trainer has his/her own preference for bridge type, based on personal choice and convenience. The usual progression, after bridge selection, is often into target training. Get a dowel rod, attach a pool float, Whiffle® ball, tennis ball, etc. and attach ball to the rod, and you now have your very own target device. A simple tool indeed, but one that has tremendous potential for teaching an animal the basics of positive reinforcement and cue response. Targeting (AKF Training terminology) can lead into a myriad of positioning type behaviors such as: up, down, climb, follow, lean-in… The list goes on, reinforcing for us, as trainers, the usefulness of an effective tool. The target is simply a tool that helps approximate behaviors.

Now how about those other behaviors you want to teach the animal(s) in your care? When hammering out your shaping plan and considering your approach, stop and think, “Is there a tool that can help shape this behavior, and also help signal the subject as to my expectations for a response?” A personal example from my past is when I was training tigers for tail blood draws. We had no functional ‘squeeze’, so I had to figure out how to get hold of the cat’s tail without putting the animal or myself at risk. After several failed attempts with a pseudo-snake hook to grab the tails while the tigers were in a lean-in” position (including one instance of having the hook taken from me and chewed to bits), I noticed the irritated cat’s tail swishing. I designed a new, simple target pole: a dowel rod with a large washer screwed flat on the end. I started tapping this on the floor, and when the cat swished the tail, thus hitting the target with it, a huge shaping jackpot was awarded. Suffice it to say, the training progressed rapidly, and within a few weeks I could tap the “tail target” on the floor outside the bars, and the tigers would each obligingly slide their tail out to where I could progress further into shaping the behavior. The moral, in this case, being that the tool made all the difference for my training goal. There are many additional tools that can aid in the training process. Some trainers use a “hip” target to get an animal to “lean-in”. Hanging targets can be used to train remote stationing, as can a laser pointer. Building a barrier device to shape or improve positioning for a behavior is creative tool use. Try using a colored paint stir-stick as a target for a foot presentation, identifying it as a separate tool and cue from other targets that may be in use (i.e.- a nose ball-target). Many keepers have designed complex devices to assist in shifting and crate training, and some truly spectacular examples exist of chambers built to accommodate blood draws for several species (including big cats, primates, birds, monitors, crocodiles…). Remember, you are only limited by your imagination, AND your willingness to talk to others and see if they have any ideas to help you out.
A new tool doesn’t have to be all bells and whistles. It can be grabbing the rake off the wall and using the handle end as the target for an animal rump. The supplies to build great tools are all around, and likely free of charge or very inexpensive: wooden rods, or broom handles from your garage or zoo maintenance shop, balls or floats, washers, screws, plywood… Be creative, pretend it’s “keeper enrichment” (as animal keepers we view trash and recycling as a training and enrichment supply anyhow). Suddenly the mundane items you see every day take on new value as training “tools”.

A final suggestion, and that is to make all of your tools convenient and accessible. Try attaching small cup-hooks or eyebolts to the end of target rods. Drill small holes in paint sticks or buckets to attach rings. These tools then attach neatly to your belt or belt loop, and can also be hung in a safe and organized manner somewhere in your work area. Chances are, if you don’t like using the tools, or they are difficult to store or carry, you will be less inclined to use them. One of the goals is to make your life as a trainer and keeper that much simpler.

Operant conditioning is an amazing learning process for both animal and trainer. Sometimes it comes easy, and sometimes it’s a tremendous challenge to reach new behavioral goals. Just remember that like everything else in life, there might just be a tool that can make your task (and the learning process) much easier.

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