The four levels of correction

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In a previous article ("Quick and Effective Sheepdog Training"), I discussed my thoughts on some aspects of sound training techniques that I believe enable training be as quick and effective as possible. In today's article I thought I would delve a little deeper into an aspect of that which is often misunderstood, particularly amongst less experienced handlers.

This relates to the use of correction, and in particular to the *level of correction required*. However, before considering the *level* of correction, it is imperative that two requirements be met in order for correction to be effective:

1. The dog needs to understand what it is being corrected for, and
2. The dog needs to understand how to avoid being corrected in the future.

A vital point to realise is that:

Correction works because the dog learns how to avoid being corrected in the future.

So, assuming that these two requirements have been met (how this is achieved is perhaps the subject for a future article), we can turn to the subject of the "Four levels of correction". These four levels I describe as:

1. Rewarding correction
2. Nagging
3. Short term correction, and
4. Long term correction
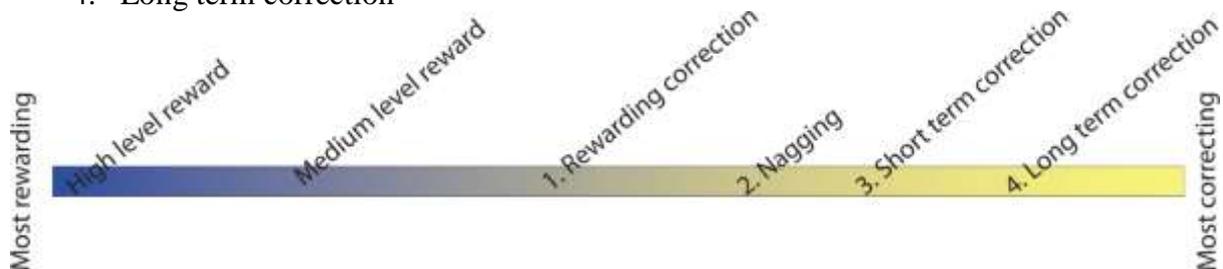
Rewarding correction

Of course "rewarding correction" is an oxymoron, however this is what many people use thinking that they are correcting their dog, when in fact they are rewarding it.

A most basic example is to take dogs that jump up and put their muddy paws on everyone. Many handlers push the dog off them while telling it to "get down", or "no", etc. However, as what the dog was seeking was attention, it did in fact get some attention, and was therefore rewarded. And being pushed off and told "no" is too low level a correction to outweigh the reward value of the attention it received. Therefore in the handler's mind they were correcting the dog, and yet it functioned as a reward. Obviously this form of "correction" will not diminish unwanted behaviour, but will rather make it worse, or at best maintain it.

Nagging

The next level of correction does in fact function as correction, however it is again ineffective. I define nagging as a very *low level correction that needs to be applied repeatedly* to have any effect.

So to take our jumping up on people example again, this might be giving the dog a smack on the nose when it jumps up on us, but quite softly, so that after 5 or 10 little taps on the nose the dog finally hops down. It did so simply because being tapped on the nose gradually annoyed the dog enough that it stopped. However, and this is the important point, the dog will jump up again next time knowing that at the worst it can hop down if you start nagging at it again.

Correction only works if the dog wants to avoid it happening again in the future, and if it outweighs any other reward the dog might receive.

So nagging, although it might "work" in the short term after repeated applications, will have no real long term effectiveness.

Short term correction

As we move up the scale of correction again, we come to what I call short term correction. Nagging is where multiple applications of correction are required to halt a behaviour, say 5 taps on the nose in a row before the dog hops down off us. If it only takes 4 corrections then that is better, if it takes 2 corrections that is better again, however I still consider it nagging. When we progress to the point where only 1 correction is required to halt the behaviour, then I consider we have moved on from nagging to "short term correction".

This can be quite deceptive as it appears to work – one correction and the behaviour stops. However the question is, does the behaviour resurface? Does the dog stop jumping on us after 1 correction, but then half an hour later, or tomorrow, is back jumping on us again? If so, then we are using correction that is slightly better than "nagging", but still falls short of effective, long term correction. Ten years from now and your dog will still be jumping on you, and you will still be correcting it.

Long term correction

Long term correction is correction that halts a behaviour the first time it is applied, but over and above that, it affects FUTURE behaviour effectively. So tomorrow the dog thinks about jumping on you, remembers the correction it received yesterday, and thinks better of it. Thus the correction is working effectively, and we can then *discontinue the use of the correction*, and *reward* the dog for not jumping on us.

Correction should work very rapidly, and not need constant repetition to achieve results. If this isn't the case, then either the correction is 1) actually rewarding, or 2) nagging, or 3) only effective short term, or 1) the dog hasn't understood what the correction is for, or 2) how to avoid it happening again in the future. Get these things right, and your training will be both quick and effective, as well as fair. "Firm but fair" is a good motto for all animal handlers.

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