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Using a Variable Reward System

In learning theory there are several schedules of reinforcement that we can use. A schedule of reinforcement is basically the frequency in which we deliver rewards when the dog performs a behavior. To simplify this we will concentrate on 2 general schedules: fixed schedule of reinforcement and random or variable schedule of reinforcement.

Typically, a fixed schedule is used to teach a behavior. This means that we always reward the dog after the same amount of repetitions of the behavior. For example, on a fixed schedule of 1, we always rewarded the dog after he performs 1 repetition of the behavior and on a fixed schedule of 3, we reward after 3 repetitions of a behavior (for example, we reward after performing 3 sits in a row).

A fixed schedule of 1 is great for the beginning stages of learning when we try to establish a new behavior. However, if we continue this schedule for a long period of time, it can actually work against us. Here is why: if we reward every behavior – once we stop reinforcing, the behavior will be extinct very quickly. This resembles a soft drink machine: this machine is always on a fixed schedule of 1. Every time you put money in it, a soda can pops out. One day, you arrive at a broken machine, you put money in and nothing happens, you try again because you are really thirsty and still nothing happens – you walk away – your behavior is extinct.

This is the reason that after establishing a behavior we need to change our schedule of reinforcement to a variable schedule. On this schedule, the dog never knows when the reward is coming. It can come after repeating the behavior twice, 4 times, 1 time, 6 times, 3 times, etc. For example, we start by asking 2 behaviors for 1 treat; we ask for the dog to sit, we don't reward but rather we take a step back, get him/her to walk towards us and ask for a sit again – now we reward. Right after that, we ask for another sit and treat immediately. Then, we might ask for 3 sits before we treat and right after that only 1 sit, and then 2 sits, etc.

The problem I find is that as humans we set a variable schedule but the dog soon figures out the reward schedule and it becomes a fixed schedule to him. For instance, you command sit, down, stand and then reward; if you always reward on the stand that is a fixed schedule. So, keeping the reward variable is very important; never reward on the same amount of behaviors or on the same behavior.

Both humans and dogs are creatures of habit, so the habit of responding to commands should be consistent but the reward schedule must always be variable.

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