

Dominance: The Dragon Lurks Still

By Pamela Clark, CPBC

When I began to write this article, I felt the need to procrastinate a bit. So, instead of starting to write immediately, I decided to instead search Google for the word “dominance,” just for grins. Wow. I found the following phrases: “decade of dominance,” “estrogen dominance,” “hand dominance,” “brand dominance,” “the Roman dominance,” “market dominance,” “apical dominance,” “internet dominance,” and “energy dominance.” I could go on, but you get the point.

We humans are very fond of the word “dominance.” It seems to be our go-to word to describe any situation in which an entity is uppermost in any competition. And, it would further appear that we consider most relationships to be competitive, rather than cooperative. The Oxford American Dictionary defines “dominant” as to “be in command or control, to have a commanding position over.” Synonyms are supremacy, superiority, ascendancy, domination, dominion, mastery, authority, control, power, rule, and command.

Dominance in the Parrot World

Yikes! I guess it makes perfect sense then that so very early on we began to use the term to describe dynamics in our relationships with captive parrots. In 1992, there was a popular article written about “cage dominance.” The headline read: “If your parrot is the boss of its cage territory, then it will be the boss everywhere!” This article offered the advice, “To have a well-behaved parrot, owners must establish themselves as the dominant partner in the pair or flock bond.” The problem with this type of thinking is that it gives us permission to use force-based techniques with our birds. We must make them do what we want them to do so that we will be dominant...having mastery over them.

Have we moved past that destructive manner of thinking? In the horse and dog worlds, it would seem not. Dominance-based training approaches are still the norm. Negative reinforcement (the removal of something to increase a behavior) and positive punishment (the addition of something to decrease a behavior) continue to be frequently-used tools for behavior change.

In the world of parrot behavior, dominance-based thinking has had a much shorter history and perhaps less of a tenacious grip on our thinking. I don’t so often these days need to debunk the myth of “height dominance” when talking to a client. However, our commonly used vocabulary continues to bother me.

Vocabulary Rooted in the Dominance Concept

Every...read that...EVERY caregiver I talk to uses the word “command” when it comes to cuing a particular behavior. If that doesn’t smack of a dominance-based philosophy, I don’t know what does. How is it that our go-to vocabulary brings first to mind the word “command” when we are requesting a particular behavior?” If we command a behavior, that doesn’t leave much room for a refusal, does it?

We don’t command each other, unless in the service of the military. Instead, we request. We ask. We give the other human the ability to say “no” to our request. Do our beloved birds deserve less respect?

Do we afford our animals the same ability to calculate and refuse when we ask them to do something? No. With our birds, we have had the luxury of continuing in this fashion because the standard to date has been to keep parrots with clipped wings. Try “commanding” a fully flighted parrot to do something and see where that gets you. You will soon lose all control. Clipped parrots just learn to bite.

Evolution of Better Vocabulary and Better Practices

In the past decade, our thinking has been advanced, thanks to the dedicated work of zoo consultant and trainer Barbara Heidenreich and the Living and Learning courses created by Susan Friedman, Ph.D. We now have firmly in our vocabulary the words “positive reinforcement.” Not everyone knows what they mean, but are at least familiar with the term.

That’s a beginning to be sure. A second best step would be to actually practice it...with each other and our animals. This is both a practical and an ethical issue. When we force animals to do as we want, rather than giving them the choice, we create fear and distrust. Science has proven that fear creates changes in the brain that are long-lasting. And it can take a very long time to undo those changes. Certainly, that’s not what we want in our relationships with our birds.

Instead, we must learn to motivate our parrots effectively, perhaps by taking the treats freely given and withholding them to use as rewards (reinforcers), and then use positive reinforcement to have that well-behaved parrot. No one has to be the boss. We can live cooperatively with our birds, rather than turning our interactions with them into a competition. The term “positive reinforcement” means that we offer a valued reward when an animal does as we have requested. The net effect is that the requested (cued) behavior increases in the future.

The Value of Continuing Reinforcement

This brings me to the second thing that really bothers me and leads me to believe that dominance-based thinking is alive and well in our world of parrots and their owners. The vast majority of caregivers with whom I consult resist the idea that they should offer a food treat or other type of reward when the parrot has done as they have requested. They may be able to see the need in the beginning when the parrot is still lacking in compliance, but then are quick to want to drop the reward as soon as the parrot is performing the behavior routinely. Most seem unable to actually wrap their minds around the fact that it is a requirement to offer a reinforcer after asking for a behavior and that we don’t get to stop doing that once the parrot is compliant.

To me, this smacks of dominance-based thinking. Do we really believe that our parrots should do as we ask for no reason other than that we tell them to do it? Are we so lazy that keeping treats in a pocket at the ready is too much trouble? Would you go to work every day without a paycheck?

That is the ethical part of this dilemma. If we make a request, we should say “thank you.” The “thank you” is the treat that you offer after the parrot performs the behavior. It is as simple as that.

Perhaps confusion exists about the difference between a bribe and positive reinforcement. Certainly the word “bribe” has a negative connotation. Positive reinforcement has often incorrectly been compared to bribery. However, they are not the same at all. A bribe typically is offered before the behavior is requested and usually refers to a human-to-human interaction. The bribe has nothing really to do with the behavior, but merely tries to trick or change the person. A reinforcer is delivered *after* the behavior has been performed so that the behavior will increase in the future. The focus is on the behavior.

I said that this is both a practical and an ethical issue. On the practical side of things, behaviors break down over time if they are not reinforced. If you’re having problems getting the behavior you want, this may be why. Baby parrots are notoriously compliant; adult parrots are a whole different animal. You may turn your bird into a super-stepper-upper who no longer tries to bite you by rewarding the behavior of stepping up. But, if you don’t continue to offer some type of reinforcement, the behavior will at some point deteriorate again.

The Future Path to Embrace

It is time for us all to move forward in our thinking and our speech. Words are important. Let's cue a behavior and then reinforce it afterward with something that the parrot wants. There are lots of things we can use to reinforce behavior. It doesn't always have to be food. Let's give that parrot the right to say "no" when we ask for a behavior. That makes us better people because we are then challenged to really think about motivation. Better people make a better world.