VSA Learning Guide
Module 1: Positively Philosophy

Before the module lessons:

Overview

As professional dog trainers, we strive to help people live a more harmonious life with their dog. To achieve this goal, we follow the positively philosophy and focus on bridging the gap between dog and human needs and wants. In order to effectively create change in the home, we must first understand what is needed, what the client's goal is, how to communicate with both parties, and how to help them achieve their goals together. By using positive reinforcement, avoiding the use of intimidation, physical punishment and fear, understanding the misconceptions of dominance theory, and learning about the canine experience from the dog's point of view, we can help dogs communicate with their people. By utilizing VSA training objectives, and the VSA training road map, we can help clients communicate with their dogs.

By using all of the tools in our training toolkit we can help achieve client goals while simultaneously improving the lives of their dogs, and helping them live more harmoniously together. However, before we get there we need to understand the fallout of using aversive methods, the myths about dogs, and the power of positive training.

? Module Problem

During a consultation you ask a client what equipment they are using to walk with their dog. The client walks you over to their closet and pulls out a prong collar and a well-worn leash.

Answer these questions in your head before proceeding to the module lessons:

- Why might this client use a prong collar? What function does it serve for them?
- What function does this collar serve for the dog?
- When and how might you approach the conversation about the use of this equipment and its fallout?
- What would you recommend instead of the prong collar?

Learning Objectives

- Define positive training and recite the Four Pillars of Positive Training
- Identify the differences positive vs. traditional training tools and methods
- Explain the pros/cons of positive/aversive training
- Define dominance in domestic dogs and explain why "pack theory" is outdated
- Recite the 9 Rules of Punishment

Key Terms

- Positive & Aversive training
- Cue
- Dominance
- Punishment
- Learned helplessness

Module Outline

- Lesson 1: What is Positive Training?
- Lesson 2: Positive vs. Traditional Training
- Lesson 3: The Negatives of Aversive Training
- Lesson 4: The Truth About Dominance & Pack Theory
- Lesson 5: Common Myths & Misunderstandings
- Lesson 6: Applying the Positively Philosophy

Lesson Summary

At Victoria Stilwell Academy we focus on **positive training**. While positive training is not a scientific term, it is associated with the use of positive-reinforcement to teach learners new skills. Positive trainers focus on positively reinforcing good behavior, working in alignment with the dog's cognitive style, and building a bond with the dog.

The **Four Pillars of Positive Training** are 1) use positive reinforcement, 2) avoid the use of intimidation, physical punishment, or fear, 3) understand the misconceptions of dominance theory, and 4) learn about the canine experience from the dog's point of view. As positive trainers we focus on establishing a bond between dogs and guardians, managing the environment properly so that the dog cannot practice undesirable behavior, teaching desirable behaviors we would like to see, and preventing the "wrong" practice while encouraging the "right" practice. We focus on the dog's strengths, teach clear and salient cues, create training plans to help dogs learn fluent behaviors, and use negative punishment sparingly.

Key Concept Questions

- Recall the definition of positive training. Write how you could describe this philosophy to a client:

- Reflect on your experience with a dog. When have you used positive training?

- How might you use positive reinforcement with your dog?

- Why do positive trainers avoid the use of intimidation, physical punishment, or fear?

- What is one behavior that dog owners might mislabel as dominance?

- What is one concept you could learn about to understand the canine experience from the dog's point of view?

- How does the idea of dominance relate to what you already know? How would you describe the concept of dominance to a client, or a non-dog industry person? Could you use an analogy?

- Are there any other terms or ideas in this lesson that are new to you? Write down any unfamiliar terms and their definitions in your learning journal. Be sure to review these before the module test.

Summary Question
- What is this lesson about? What was the 'take-home' for you? Take a few minutes to write your own summary of this lesson:

Synthesis Question
- As positive trainers, we strive to use positive reinforcement with both dogs and humans. If you were involved in a conversation with an owner about their use of a shock collar, how could you use positive reinforcement to help change their behavior?

Lesson Summary

As positive trainers, our goal is to work "with" dogs and give them the tools they need to be successful in a human domestic environment. To set the stage for change, positive trainers are carful with their word choice, and tend to use words that help clients begin to change their mindset. For example, positive trainers refer to commands, do this or else, as cues, or opportunities to learn reinforcement. Positive trainers prefer to lead rather than dominant, change behavior rather than control behavior, be a partner rather than the alpha, and to form a relationship based on trust rather than fear.

Positive trainers strive to incorporate choice for the dog into their training. Choice, the opposite of learned helplessness, allows for a degree of autonomy, lessens anxiety, and increases dogs' confidence. A 1972 research study on babies suggested that when given choice the babies had a more positive reaction to the stimuli. As with human babies, positive trainers provide choice to dogs and help teach dogs what to do. As with all industries, a clear philosophy and well defined terms are to help increase understanding and change behavior.

Key Concept Questions

- Provide one example of working "with" dogs as opposed to "lording over" dogs.

- Recall the description of a cue. Write how you could describe this term to a client:

- Does your dog respond to cues? Write down the cues that your dog knows.

- If a client tells you she needs to dominate her dog, what might you say to encourage her to choose to lead her dog instead?

- Can you think of a person in your life that you would consider a leader? What aspects of their leadership do you like? What aspects do you not like? Did this person use trust and/or fear?

- If your dog could speak English, write what you think he/she might say about your style of leadership.

- Are there any other terms or ideas are new to me? Write down any unfamiliar terms and their definitions in your learning journal. Be sure to review these before the module test.

Summary Question

- What is this lesson about? What was the 'take-home' for you? Take a few minutes to write your own summary of this lesson:

Synthesis Question

- Imagine someone asks you about your current VSA course. When dog training is mentioned, people will often make unconscious references to traditional training. What goals and terms would you use to succinctly describe the course's philosophy?

Lesson Summary

There are many dog training tools and techniques used today including those that dogs may find unpleasant or attempt to avoid. Such techniques, referred to as **aversive training methods & tools**, are incompatible with positive training tools and techniques. The degree to which something is considered "aversive" is in the eye of the beholder. Some dogs may find a stern look to be distressing. Aversive techniques include: forceful restraint, shaking, yanking, hanging, hitting, yelling, shocking, etc. Aversive equipment includes: shaker cans, ultrasonic devices, shock collars, prong collars, choke collars, citronella collars, spray bottles, etc. Such equipment and techniques can easily injure the dog's neck which protects the larynx, trachea, salivary glands, lymph nodes, and thyroid.

Punishment teaches the dog what not to do instead of what to do. Such techniques focus on control and suppression of the behavior rather than teaching an alternative behavior. Using punishment and aversive techniques comes with side effects such as: avoidance, the display of fearful and/or aggressive behaviors, damage to the human-animal bond, and undesired negative associations. These associations may be intended, or unintended. Research shows that using aversive techniques can increase the frequency of aggressive behaviors. Another side effect is that punishment is reinforcing to the punisher – it feels good to punish. When punishment falls outside the "Rules of Punishment", the learner may "shut down" and cease attempting to escape and experience what is called **learned helplessness**.

Key Concept Questions

- Recall the term 'aversive. Write how you could you define this term to another trainer in your area:

- Write down what you think the three mostly commonly used aversive tools in your area might be.

1.

2.

3.

- Using the same tools as above, describe why you think someone might use these tools.

1.

2.

3.

- Using the same tools as above, describe why these tools are physically harmful to the dog.

1.

2.

3.

- Using the same tools as above, describe the fallout that may result from the use of these tools.

1.

2.

3.

- Describe an experience with a human, dog, or other animal where you found punishment to be reinforcing for you.

- Do you think your dog has ever experienced learned helplessness? If so, describe the situation. Can you think of other situations in which dogs may experience learned helplessness even in their everyday lives?

Summary Question

- What is this lesson about? What was the 'take-home' for you? Take a few minutes to write your own summary of this lesson:

Synthesis Question

- Recall the three aversive tools you described above. As a positive trainer, what could you teach the dog to do in order to replace these tools with an alternative behavior?

1.

2.

3.

Lesson Summary
Since Dr. Mech's first mention of the 'alpha wolf of the pack' in his 1970 work, society has romanticized how dogs desire to increase their 'rank within the pack hierarchy' and take over the pack and our homes. Unfortunately, few people realize that 'pack theory' is not a theory at all, but a hypothesis that has since been rejected my Dr. Mech himself. Rather than fighting for rank, wolves mate to become the leader of the pack, or family. Scientists now refer to 'alphas' as 'breeding male/female'.

That is not to say that dominance within a group of canids does not exist. Dominant behavior is an observable and measurable canine behavior like any other. Such behavior is situational, individual, and resource related. For example, if a shepherd approaches his terrier housemates while eating out of a bowl, the terrier might cover the bowl and growl. As a result, the shepherd might turn his head and walk away, allowing his housemate to eat his food alone. The terrier displayed dominant behaviors (covering the food bowl and growling), and the shepherd displayed submissive behaviors (turning his head, and walking away). These behaviors are situational (behaviors are elicited by the proximity of the dogs), resource related (terrier prefers access to food bowl), and individual (perhaps the shepherd does not display this behaviors).

Key Concept Questions

- Recall the term 'dominance'. Write how you could describe this concept to a client:

- Have you ever incorrectly labeled your dog's behavior as 'dominant' or referred to your dog as an 'alpha'? If not, has someone else ever described their dog/dog's behavior in this way? Describe how this behavior is not observable, measurable, individual, situational, or resource related.

- You are watching two dogs interact. Dog A walks up to Dog B who is eating kibble from a bowl. Dog B snarls and Dog A walks away. Describe the following scenario, and determine whether the dogs were being dominant, submissive, or mislabeled.

What is the situation? Is it observable and measureable?

Who are the individuals?

What is the resource?

- You are watching two dogs interact. Dog C runs up to Dog D who is sleeping on the floor. Dog C pounces on Dog D who bites Dog C on the leg, drawing blood. Describe the following scenario, and determine whether the dogs were being dominant, submissive, or mislabeled.

> What is the situation? Is it observable and measureable?
>
> Who are the individuals?
>
> What is the resource?

- Recall the difference between a scientific theory and a hypothesis. Can you think of something else you've heard of referred to as a 'theory' when it was really a 'hypothesis'?

- Reflect on the words listed on slide 23. Which terms resonate the most with you?

Summary Question

- What is this lesson about? What was the 'take-home' for you? Take a few minutes to write your own summary of this lesson:

Synthesis Question

- You walk into a client's home and notice that they are using a pinch collar. After asking why they've chosen this piece of equipment, the client tells you that he bought it because it mimics the instinctual bite that alpha wolf mothers give to their young when correcting them. How could you discuss the fallout of using an aversive tool and address the alpha myth?

Lesson Summary

There are many common myths that lead to misunderstanding about dogs and the effectiveness of positive training. As a dog trainer, it is important to know these myths and how to counteract them myths with facts. Human constructs like 'alpha', 'stealing', 'stubborn', 'red-zone dogs', and 'dominant individuals' often distract clients from understanding the consequences that drive behavior. By helping clients focus on measurable and observable behavior, we can help them focus on what we can change and how they can help their dog. Understanding how a dog's mind works, canine communication, and positive training can help build and maintain the relationship dog owners seek

Key Concept Questions

- Why is positive training effective with all dogs?

- As trainers, how can we help clients avoid canine obesity despite using food as a reinforcer?

- Compare and contrast the use of treats as bribes and treats as reinforcers?

- Have you ever taught a person to perform a task without correcting them? If so, how could you translate your process into dog training? If not, if you had a do-over, how could you teach it?

- Describe a scenario when a client might consider their dog to be dominant or stubborn:

- Recall a situation in which you did something because you loved or cared for someone. Did you get anything out of the situation? What percentage of your daily tasks come without positive consequences?

- Are there any other terms or ideas are new to me? Write down any unfamiliar terms and their definitions in your learning journal. Be sure to review these before the module test.

Summary Question

- What is this lesson about? What was the 'take-home' for you? Take a few minutes to write your own summary of this lesson:

Synthesis Question

- You are sitting at a dinner party and the person next to you mentions that her dog is stubborn, but is the alpha of the house. She says that the dog only listens when she has a treat in her hand, but that she doesn't buy into using treats when training. She asks your opinion. What might you say?

Lesson Summary

Now that you have become familiar with the Four Pillars of Positive Training, the fallout of using aversive methods, and the myths of 'pack theory', it's time to apply this knowledge to training. Throughout the course, you will use the Four Pillars to guide you on your training journey and decide what tools and techniques you would like to add to your training toolkit. Whether you use treats, toys, clicker training, or any positive training tool or method, you will expand your training toolkit at VSA.

As a professional dog trainer, you will use the Four Pillars to focus on teaching behaviors that you want, reinforcing behaviors that you like, and redirecting behaviors that you do not like. Using this **Formula for Success**, you will be able to help clients solve issues and focus on using positive training. By identifying the problem behavior and the goal behavior, you can help bridge the gap between client and dog needs and wants using the **VSA Training Objectives**. These objectives will help clarify the process for both you and your clients.

Like with any profession, dog trainers need a roadmap to help them stay on track. The **VSA Training Roadmap** will help you 1) identify the problem, 2) develop training objectives, 3) create & implement a management place, 4) create & implement a training plan, and 5) evaluate the solution. Each step of the roadmap is important when helping clients achieve their goals.

Key Concept Questions

- Recall the VSA Training Objectives. If you want to stop a dog from jumping up on people, what could be the goal behavior?

- Recall the Formula for Success. If you want to stop a dog from jumping up on people, how might you teach the dog what you want?

- Recall the Formula for Success. If you want to stop a dog from jumping up on people, how might you reinforce what you want?

- Recall the Formula for Success. If you want to stop a dog from jumping up on people, how might you redirect what you don't want?

- Consider slide 17 with the list of several tools in the VSA training toolkit. Are you familiar with any of these terms? Which of the tools and techniques have you tried in the past?

- Are there any other terms or ideas are new to me? Write down any unfamiliar terms and their definitions in your learning journal. Be sure to review these before the module test.

Summary Question

- What is this lesson about? What was the 'take-home' for you? Take a few minutes to write your own summary of this lesson:

Synthesis Question

- Reflect on the Four Pillars of Positive Training. Which pillar resonates the most with you and your training style? What kind of trainer do you want to be? Are you more interested in how to train behaviors, what's going on inside the dog's mind, or are you more concerned about providing immediate solutions for the family? All of these concepts are important to consider as a professional dog trainer, but we can still have our preferences and favorites. What are you most excited to learn about during the course? What do you foresee to be your strengths? What about your weaknesses? What would you most like to improve as far as your knowledge? What about your skills?

Module Summary

Positive training, though not a scientific term, is a positively-minded sense of training where trainers focus on what to teach the dog instead of punishing "bad" behavior. In order to use positive training, trainers follow the Four Pillars: 1) use positive reinforcement, 2) avoid the use of intimidation, physical punishment, or fear, 3) understand the misconceptions of dominance theory, and 4) learn about the canine experience from the dog's point of view. Positive trainers teach dogs what clients want, reinforce what they like, and redirect what they don't. By setting goals and focusing on what both the client and the dog need and want, trainers can help clients achieve their goals and live more harmoniously with their dog.

By avoiding tools and techniques that the dog may find aversive (such as invisible fences, shaker/spray cans, prong, choke, and shock collars, etc.), clients can develop a relationship with their dog based on trust rather than fear. Using such aversive methods and tools can have the potential for serious fallout, exacerbating stress, anxiety, and aggressive behavior. Not only are there harmful training tools and techniques, but there are other training philosophies that are detrimental to dogs as well. The hypothesis that dogs dominate humans in order to achieve a higher rank is not only inaccurate, but can harm our relationship with dogs. The so called 'pack theory' is not a theory at all, but a hypothesis that has since been rejected. Researchers argue whether domesticated dogs organize themselves into packs at all or if they live semi-solitarily. Labeling individuals as dominant does little to change the situation; instead, understanding dominance in domestic dogs can help clients make a difference. Dominance behaviors are situational, individual, and resource related. An individual displaying dominant behavior in one specific situation toward another individual does not mean that the same behaviors will occur under different conditions.

The myth of 'alpha' dogs is one of many misunderstandings in the dog training world. Stubbornness, bribery, red-zone dogs, obedience out of respect, and correcting 'bad' behavior are among some of the other myths harming the human-animal relationship. What can explain most of these myths is a miscommunication between organisms, a lack of understanding, and applying human constructs to non-human animals. By following the Four Pillars, trainers can help clients set training objectives, follow the VSA Training Roadmap, and utilize the tools in their training toolkit to help achieve the desired human-animal bond. Kindness is powerful!

Key Terms

Positive training - uses positive reinforcement; avoids the use of intimidation, physical punishment, or fear; understands the misconceptions of dominance theory; recognizes the canine experience from the dog's point of view.

Aversive training – 'aversive' is in the eye of the beholder; however, any training tool or technique that uses pain, fear, or intimidation is considered to be aversive training.

Cue – a request, or an opportunity, to perform a behavior. A word or action attached to a specific behavior the dog has learned so that we can elicit the behavior again

Dominance (or dominance behavior) - a quantitative and quantifiable behavior displayed by an individual with the function of gaining or maintaining temporary access to a particular resource on a particular occasion, versus a particular opponent, without either party incurring injury

Punishment – any stimulus that decreases the likelihood that a behavior will be performed again. Trainer attempting to use punishment should follow the eight rules of punishment.

Learned helplessness - Learned helplessness is when an animal is subjected to so much correction/punishment that they effectively give up or 'shut down.'

❓ Module Problem & Solution

During a consultation you ask a client what equipment they are using to walk with their dog. The client walks you over to their closet and pulls out a prong collar and a well-worn leash.

Here are VSA's suggested answers to the questions asked at the beginning of this module. There are probably a variety of appropriate answers, so these are just a recommendation.

- Why might this client use a prong collar? What function does it serve for them?

The client probably chose this collar because they were annoyed and/or worried that their dog pulled while walking on leash. Prong, or pinch, collars are often sold at stores as "training collars" and the instructions are often hidden in a small tag. Clients may also use prong/pinch collars because they feel that they have more control over the dog's behavior. Over the years, we have found that many clients rely on the collar, and worry that their dog will be reactive and possibly dangerous without it. It sounds like this prong/leash combination has been used for a long time since the leash is worn. It is possible that this equipment has served its function, and that it is reinforcing the client to use the equipment. Clients may use the collar as negative reinforcement – to increase the behavior of walking near their side – as the dog may choose to walk in this manner to avoid the prongs when pulling. The client may also use this collar to "communicate" when the dog is doing something displeasing to the client, resulting in a "correction". The client would pull up or back on the collar when a dog is performing an 'undesirable' behavior which would be an example of positive punishment.

- What function does this collar serve for the dog?

This collar may serve many functions for the client as well as the dog. For the dog it could be a cue that a walk is coming including a multitude of stimuli. If the client uses the prong collar for all outings, it is possible that the dog displays loose, wiggly behavior in anticipation of the collar's use. Prong collars may or may not prevent the dog from pulling on leash. Some dog's pulling behavior decreases to avoid the prong, whereas other dogs may pull through the collar to get to desired stimuli. In a few cases, the dog may still be positively reinforced when pulling to get to a stimulus despite the

collar. In the case of positive punishment, the collar serves as a warning cue that any 'bad behavior' may be punished using discomfort/pain.

- When and how might you approach the conversation about the use of this equipment and its fallout?

It may be helpful to identify a specific time during a consultation to address equipment. Rather than waiting for the conversation to come up organically, allocating time to the subject may be the best lead in to a potentially charged discussion. Clients may feel a sort of attachment to the equipment they've purchased/used, so the conversation should be handled with care. Keeping the conversation short, fact-based, and empathetic is probably the best approach. One example would be: "I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about training equipment. While I think that our greatest training tool is our creative mind, certain tools can help us keep our dog happy and healthy. I recommend walking with a harness because it can keep your dog safe and comfortable on walks". If the client asks why you do not recommend the prong collar, you might say, "While prong collars can be effective, I like to focus on an equally if not more effective strategy of showing my dog what I would like him to do and ensuring he's on board as a teammate".

- What would you recommend instead?

I would recommend a harness that fits the dog comfortably and show the client how to teach their dog to walk in a manner that suits both the dog and the client. It may help to use a Positively No-Pull harness to manage pulling while simultaneously working on walking politely in a less-distracting environment.

End of Module Practice Test

1. Positive training is a scientific term.
   a. True
   b. False
2. As positive dog trainers, we focus on (select all that apply):
   a. Positively reinforcing bad behavior
   b. Working in alignment with the dog's cognitive style
   c. Building a bond with the dog
3. Positive training teaches the dog that good things come from the trainer/guardian.
   a. True
   b. False
4. Match the term with its description
   a. Cue   c. "If you do not do this behavior, bad things will follow."
   b. Command   d. "If you do this behavior, good things will follow."
5. Leadership is about guidance and collaboration, not control.
   a. True
   b. False
6. Positive dog trainers focus on relationships built on _____.
   a. Trust
   b. Fear
   c. Dominance
   d. Punishment
7. When the dog learns to work with the trainer to avoid these bad consequences, the trainer is probably building a relationship built on_____.
   a. Praise
   b. Fear
   c. Respect
   d. Dominance
8. Unconfident dogs are more likely to be emotionally unstable and therefore more susceptible to:
   a. Calming behaviors such as closing eyes, deep breathing, loose body posture
   b. Happiness based behaviors such as a circle wag, wiggly body posture, erratic movement
   c. Stress based behaviors such as fear, phobias, and aggression
   d. Dominance based behaviors such as jumping up, barking, humping, and peeing
9. In the 1972 study by Watson & Ramey, the babies who were given choice experienced:
   a. Negative reactions
   b. Positive reactions
10. Criticizing learner's mistakes in a harsh way is the only way they will learn.
    a. True
    b. False

11. Aversive techniques and equipment are _____ with positive training
    a. Incompatible
    b. Compatible
12. Which of the following training tools are considered to be aversive? (Select all that apply).
    a. Shock collars
    b. Prong collars
    c. Invisible fences
    d. Treats
13. The degree to which a tool is considered aversive it determined by the trainer.
    a. True
    b. False
14. The majority of research suggests that aversive training can decrease aggressive behavior in domestic dogs.
    a. True
    b. False
15. Possible fallout from the use of aversive methods includes: (Select all that apply).
    a. Dog may begin to avoid the person administering the aversive stimulus
    b. Dog may become aggressive and lash out at the person
    c. Dog associates humans with pain and discomfort
    d. Damage to the relationship and the human-animal bond
16. Punishment can be reinforcing to the punisher.
    a. True
    b. False
17. According to a 1967 study by Seligman and Maier, 75% of the dogs subjected to inescapable shock failed to attempt to escape. These dogs are said to be experiencing:
    a. "They're fine"
    b. Stubbornness
    c. Dominance
    d. Learned helplessness
18. Dominant behavior is situational, group, and resource related.
    a. True
    b. False
19. Determine whether the dogs first mentioned in the following scenarios are displaying dominant, submissive, or mislabeled/other behaviors:
    a. In the dog park, a Beagle walks away from a Shepherd who stiffens and stares as the Beagle approaches the Shepherd's person.
    b. A Collie eyes, stalks, chases, bites, and kills a pigeon that flies into the Collie's yard.
    c. A Chihuahua chewing a rope toy growls as another Chihuahua approaches the toy.
20. Positive training will not work with difficult dogs.
    a. True
    b. False

End of Module Practice Test Answer Key

1. b
2. b, c
3. a
4. ad, bc
5. a
6. a
7. b
8. c
9. b
10. b
11. a
12. a, b, c
13. b
14. b
15. a, b, c, d
16. a
17. d
18. a
19. a: submissive, b:mislabeled (predatory), c:dominant
20. b

Additional Resources

- *Train Your Dog Positively* by Victoria Stilwell
- *Dominance in Dogs: Fact or Fiction* by Barry Eaton
- *The Evolution of Canine Social Behavior* by Roger Abrantes
- *The Culture Clash* by Jean Donaldson