

Herding Cats

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(exact wording of last few lines is optional, at the discretion of the professor)

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Although cats have been domesticated since at least 1500 B.C., they are more like their wild relatives than like man's other best friend, the dog. Dogs started as pack animals and readily transferred their allegiance to humans. Cats, by contrast, are more self-reliant and solitary (Fox, 2003, p. 561).

Cats are very much like people; independent of mind and of spirit, they do what they want, not what others want them to do. "Cats, of course, won't allow themselves to be herded. They may, however, be coaxed, cajoled, persuaded, adored, and gently led" (Bennis, 1997, p. 7).

Lorie A. Johnson starts her webpage about teaching cats to do all manner of things, both individually and collectively, in this way:

The phrase is pretty familiar by now: "That is about as fun as herding cats". The phrase implies an impossible task, because everyone knows what impossibly individual creatures cats are, and getting them to do anything en masse is not something easily done. I beg to differ. Cats can be herded, directed, and made to do all sorts of interesting stuff, like synchronized dancing. What is required is an adjustment of perception by the person who wishes to do so, and a basic understanding of cat psychology.

Johnson goes on to describe ways in which willing humans can learn to enjoy their cats, and ways to eliminate obnoxious behavior while encouraging desirable behavior.

Those who train a variety of animals for work in movies and television may have experience working with cats. The U. S. Department of Labor description of an animal trainer's work suggests a job that requires much patience and endurance for even the smallest of achievements, with progress happening over the course of many weeks or months (2004-05, p. 380). Trainers often are the caretakers, as well, making the job perfect for an animal lover.

Karen Thomas, a trainer with Critters of the Cinema, says, “. . . cats want to make themselves happy,” (Zipp, 1999) so she recommends training a cat with edible treats. Treats can help you teach a cat to sit, come when called, bat a paw at objects, climb up to your shoulder, or any number of other behaviors, depending on the cat’s personality.

Perhaps the world’s most successful cat-training enterprise is The House of Cats, the world’s only cat theater, owned and operated by Yuri Kuklyachyov. Kuklyachyov and his family own and train 120 cats, of which up to 50 might appear in any one show. The cats “walk on tightropes, climb poles, dance to music, jump through hoops, push toy trains, balance balls on their noses and leapfrog over humans,” all in response to Kuklyachyov’s kindness and patience. He claims that when the cats learn to trust, they will do anything the trainer wants. The cat theater spends much of the year touring the globe, impressing audiences from Japan to the United States (Demourova, 2004).

Ordinary folks also can train cats to work in concert with each other, even if it can’t be called herding. W. Palmer (personal communication, November 3, 2003) reports that his wife has trained their two cats to come when called by using a variable-ratio treat-based reinforcement schedule. As soon as they hear her voice calling out in the neighborhood, the cats come trotting home. Training individual cats, it seems, can be done.

Training groups of cats is also possible, though less frequently accomplished. It is said that Cardinal Richelieu, prime minister of France from 1624 to 1642, adored cats and “liked to be escorted by a posse of cats as he moved about . . .” (Weigall, 1988, p. 24). Since cats are unlikely to move about in a posse without encouragement, we must assume that Richelieu kept treats handy.

More recently, Electronic Data Systems (EDS) aired a commercial during the 2000 Super Bowl that impressed and amused countless television viewers. Cowboys were actually herding

cats, thousands of cats, it seemed, though “about 60 cats were used, each with special skills such as running, swimming and sleeping” (LeSueur, 2000). The rest of the herd was created by computer enhancement. It was a wildly successful commercial for the company (EDS, 2000), perhaps because it tapped into some hidden, human fascinations with cats.

That seems to be at the heart of the human desire to herd, or train, cats. We are entranced by these creatures who are like small, tame versions of their tiger and lion cousins, and we feel privileged to share affectionate relationships with them. Because they typically pursue their own course of action, it enhances our bonds with cats when they seem to obey our commands.

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