

Dominance or Leadership with Dogs. Do We or Don't We?

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The dog training grapevine is abuzz with new talk about an old subject, dominance of the domestic dog, also known as our best friend. Just about everybody with a dog uses terms like “alpha” and believes that if they are not the “pack leader” then their dog will be out of control. People often excuse their dog’s rude behavior toward other dogs because “he’s alpha”. There has been a recent resurgence of using dominance as a cure for everything so we see more folks out trying to pin their dogs down in the park for, perhaps, not coming quickly enough or barking at another dog.

The dominance theme started over fifty years ago when ethologists were very focused on issues of how animals were socially organized in their natural environments and whether or not they had issues of status. Dog trainers, many of whom had been military dog handlers during WWII were quick to pick up these theories that are loosely based on observations of captive wild wolves. It seemed natural that dogs, being related to wolves, would behave exactly like them and it seemed so natural that, since dogs lived with people, people constituted the dog’s “pack.” And, thrill of thrills, the human got to be the “alpha.” It was thought, at the time, that if we just mirrored a wolf pack with our own dogs, all behavior and training problems would be solved. Dog owners were instructed to go to the mat with their dogs and always win, no matter how exhausting that might be and people dutifully did, pinning a mystified and frightened Bingo to the ground.

Using these theories put both trainers and the guardians of dogs into aggressive conflicts with each other. The humans deciding that they must have unquestioning, robot-like obedience from their dogs or the dogs would simply take over. The whole misguided movement resulted in the widespread use of abusive training techniques that people simply went along with. Because they knew no other way. There have always been the kind, the wise and the empathetic, who never fell for any of it because they simply knew they could get the dog’s cooperation in many gentle ways.

Some of this oversimplified thinking has survived into the present time but is being replaced with sensible, gentle, science-based training knowledge brought to us by behaviorists, such as B.F. Skinner. In the 1940’s and 1950’s he showed that learning in any species is enhanced by using rewards that are immediately meaningful to the animal. He learned that using positive rewards, such as tasty treats, go a lot further toward teaching the animal what we want than punishments for not doing something. This work did not reach the dog training world until the late 1970’s and early 1980’s when marine mammal and wildlife trainers such as Karen Pryor, Bob and Marion Bailey started to focus their attention on the training of domestic pets. They quickly focused alert trainers on a whole new set of possibilities. This is easy. It’s relaxed. Instead of barking out the command SIT, and then jerking on a choke chain if your dog doesn’t understand it, just show the dog, and when he’s successful, give him a tidbit. It makes you feel good, it

makes your dog feel good about you, and it gets the job done. The Bailey's called this being "patient like the chipmunks."

Educated trainers and behavior counselors of today know that there are many factors that influence behavior, not just one. And they recognize that, within any social species, there are issues of rank and dogs, in particular, have a many non-violent ways of determining who fits where. Mostly, dogs just want stuff, lots of stuff and we just need to show them how they can get it by behaving appropriately. Rough stuff, though, has too big a price. Instead of exhausting ourselves trying to win dominion over our pets, all we have to do is let the dogs find out how they can get what they want.

We humans became who we are today through a very different evolutionary path than dogs. To us, words should work. It's not until we start to see how dogs "talk" to each other that we discover a lot of very positive, life affirming ways to teach them. In fact, research has shown that dog's have evolved to a point that many of them are born able to understand much of non-verbal human communication.

Today's expert trainer looks for the least invasive way to give the dog information and works at eliminating or, at the very least, minimizing aversives. Today's trainer doesn't use dominating acts, pain or fear as the foundation of his or her training program. To do so would create a program that misses important aspects of both the dog's and the person's needs and creates unnecessary obstacles to learning and harmony.

And have you noticed, nobody talks about dominating cats?