



Dominance and Leadership with Dogs

By Nancy Frensley, CAP2, CPDT
Behavior & Training Manager
Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society

The dog training grapevine is abuzz with new talk about an old subject: dominance and the domestic dog. Many people with dogs use terms like “alpha” and believes that if they are not the “pack leaders” then their dogs will be out of control. People often excuse their dogs' rude behavior toward other dogs by saying, “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 for barking at another dog.

The dominance theme arose over fifty years ago when ethologists were very focused on issues of how animals were socially organized in their natural environments and on whether they had issues of status. Dog trainers, many of whom had been military dog handlers during World War II, were quick to pick up these theories, which are loosely based on observations of captive wild wolves. It seemed natural that dogs, being related to wolves, would behave exactly like them, and that since dogs live with people, people constituted the dogs' “pack.” Thrill of thrills, the humans got to be the “alphas.” 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 pet owners into aggressive conflicts with the dogs they were trying to reach. The humans decided 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 dogs' cooperation in many gentle ways.

Some of this oversimplified thinking has survived into the present, but it 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 animal 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 do 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 and 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 you 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 Baileys 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. They recognize that, within any social species, there are issues of rank, and that 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 handling, 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 dogs 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, aversive methods. 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 dogs' and the humans' needs and creates unnecessary obstacles to learning and harmony.

And have you noticed, nobody talks about dominating cats?