

LEADERSHIP

Why is leadership important?

Dogs are social animals that live in a pack, or family. When you bring a dog into your family you become their pack. Even if you are a single person with one dog, you are a pack.

It is extremely important for a dog to know where he stands in the pack structure. Confusion about leadership roles can lead to undesirable, and possibly even dangerous, behavior. Dogs do not understand the concept of equality – someone has to be in charge.

Some dogs fit easily into the lower levels of the 'pecking order' and don't challenge authority. Others are natural born leaders and social climbers – always testing to see how high they can climb. These are not 'bad' dogs – they are programmed to be leaders and are following their natural instincts. If there is a void, they will fill it. This can become a problem to an unsuspecting family – all might be well as long as the dog rules the household and the people "obey" the dog. But if someone challenges the dog, watch out!

Leadership is important even for shy unassuming dogs. A lack of consistent leadership is stressful to a dog. The leader of the pack communicates a sense of safety and trust. A benevolent leader makes it clear to the dog that things are under control – that the leader will make decisions for the pack and keep them secure.

Leadership – how to attain it.

First of all, let me tell you how NOT to attain leadership. Physical confrontational methods can be dangerous. The "old fashioned" way was to dominate the animal by doing scruff shakes and alpha rolls. This might work for one member of the family but not for 'weaker' members of the pack. The dog might learn not to challenge one person but might retaliate against other family members. Physical methods can result in fear-based problems and damage to your relationship with your dog.

On the other hand, non-confrontational methods can actually enhance your relationship with your dog.

To become a good leader, you need to gain your dog's trust. In order to do this, your dog will need to know what to expect from you every time it behaves a certain way. Dogs who live in families never knowing what to expect can become basket cases.

- Leaders control the resources – including attention. This does not mean that you cannot give your dog lots of attention and other good stuff – it just means that you will do it on your terms and ask the dog to do something for you first. Read my article "Say Please".
- Leaders control the food. Free choice feeding, when the bowl is left down all the time, is not a good idea if your dog is a type A personality. Your dog is more likely to respect and listen to someone who controls the food. Asking for a sit before you put the bowl down will help establish leadership. Later on, when your dog knows a sit-stay, use that. You give permission to eat – a very powerful thing.

- Leaders are in control when walking on leash, and decide which way to go. Obedience class will help with this.
- Leaders control space. Space is an important resource to dogs. Teach your dog to wait at the door instead of barging through. Also teach your dog to move out of your way as you walk about the house and yard. Read my article on “Yielding”.
- Leaders control resting places. This means that if that if your dog sleeps with you, at least make sure you give permission for your dog to get on the bed, and that your dog will get off the bed if you say so. If your dog is not willing to do these things, it is better to have him or her sleep in a crate. To move your dog off the bed without a fight, use a ‘house leash’.
- Leaders can handle the dog’s body anywhere, whether for grooming or petting. If your dog objects to being handled, ask your obedience instructor to help you by using positive means. It is not necessary to use force.
- Leaders control greetings. If you have a very pushy dog, this may mean you need to ignore your dog for a few minutes when coming home, until the dog calms down. Think of it this way: the dog is demanding attention and saying “Yo human! Pet me NOW!” Wait until the dog calms enough to respond to a sit cue, then pet only while the dog is sitting.
- Leaders are consistent and fair. Have some rules and stick to them. Everyone in the family must agree and abide by the rules. Don’t be wishy-washy.
- Leaders control the games. If your dog is the pushy demanding type, put toys away and bring them out when you decide to play. You decide when to stop playing. Make sure you gain control of the toy, even if you need to trade a treat for the toy. Many dogs love to play roughly – but rough games involving hands are not a good idea.
- Leaders communicate without words. Your dog is constantly reading your body posture and motions. So stand tall, and move in a confident manner. It helps to think positively too!