

Introduction to Decision Making

By Jeff Coltenback

Decision making is defined as “the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities”. “Cognitive process” are the key words here. Cognition is defined as “the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.” Let me ask you this? How many people do you know that make decisions and don’t qualify as decision makers? They just make decisions or do things on the fly without regard for the consequences. They put absolutely no thought or effort into their decision making process. They have no process. There are good decision makers and bad decision makers. Well, dogs can fall into the same pitfalls as we humans can.

Dogs, too, can be bad decision makers. Dogs have a much better excuse than we do though. We force them to live in our crazy world. If we don’t show them rules or make decisions for them they will ultimately take it upon themselves to make decisions. And, canines making decisions in a human world can often lead to negative results. Here’s the weird thing about it. Dogs, generally, are very good decisions makers. They are extremely intuitive. They trust their instincts. However, those instinct-based decisions often conflict with the human environment. This is where leadership is also essential for dog owners. Aside from being good leaders over their dogs, humans also need to be decision makers as well. Dog, left to their own devices, will make dog-based decisions. WE humans need to teach them and “advise” during all social situations. We need to be their “**DECISION MAKERS**”. Not only will we be taking a huge burden off of their shoulders, we will be shaping them into canines that coexist peacefully in the human world. The more responsibility we take away from dogs, the happier they will. They are more likely to be the dogs we want. They have no stress of leadership to deal with. That’s why there’s only one Alpha pair in a pack. It’s not just survival of the physically fittest. It is also survival of the mentally fittest. Not all are created to be leaders. Not all decision makers are good ones. In every single social situation we need to make decisions EVERY TIME. Here’s an example. If we are walking with a dog that has a tendency to jump on people in a friendly, excited way we simply take that decision away from the dog. How? This is where obedience and conditioning come into play. We can proactively lead the dog slightly off the path and begin to command the dog or lure the dog into behaviors with treats. As the dog is focusing on us and our commands (and probably treats too), the passerby does so without incident. Now, if the passerby wishes to stop and say hello (provided the dog is friendly), make sure the dog earns the right to say hello in an appropriate manner; sitting nicely. Another example is the dog that gets overly excited with visitors in the house. Same rules apply. Be proactive in your approach and create a behavior that becomes a conditioned response as opposed to a poor decision.

Now, I don't want to get too detailed about this right now because you have an assignment on decision making in a little bit. But, I did want to offer a high level view of decision making. You may recall in the leadership PDF I mention how either the dog is working for the human or vice versa, yes? Well, the same applies here. Either the human is making decisions or the dog is. It's always best if the leaders/humans make the decisions; that is, of course, if the human is a good decision maker. Here are some scenarios where making good, sound decisions for your dog will put them in a position to succeed (although I will not offer how 😊).

- During walks when you may encounter stimuli
- When visitors come over
- During any dog-human encounter
- During dog-dog encounters
- At feeding time
- During training or behavior modification
- During play
- While designating rules for any situation.
- Entering a car or the house; or exiting
- Going to the Veterinarian.
- Going to high traffic social events with your dog
- Dog parks
- How they act on walks (i.e. picking up garbage or food on the ground)
- How about this? EVERY FACET of their life!

Make good, sound, consistent decisions for the dog. Consistency in your behavior will promote consistency in the dog's behavior!



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