



Introduction to Leadership

By Jeff Coltenback

A good leader of any social group can be identified easily. They have an air of confidence about them that demands deference. They carry themselves in such a way that even an outsider of a particular group can identify its leader. Good leaders are generally fair, consistent, balanced and communicative. Good leaders do not impose unrealistic expectations upon their subordinates. They do not act irrationally or erratically. Their rules are firm and consistent throughout the population. They simply talk the talk and walk the walk. So it is with canines. Whether you believe in dogs as pack animals or not is irrelevant. It is indisputable that dogs are social mammals. Like social mammals, dogs require a structured family unit. There are rules and a governing hierarchy generally in place which is crucial to the survival of the family unit (pack). You just don't have herds or prides or flocks or packs just running amuck without direction from the decision makers of the group. And, all members know that their compliance contributes to the existence of the group.

Domestic dogs require leadership and stability as well. They thrive in situations where they have a purpose. Just take a look at a working dog or herding dog (guarding breeds, herding breeds) that are placed in a normal family environment and not given a job to do? Often times these dogs will eventually exhibit behavioral problems (from the human's point of view). Many hunting and raring breeds also can succumb to an under stimulated existence. These dogs were bred for a purpose. They were not bred to sit around a house all day or meander around a yard. They were bred for purpose. So, if we humans have a dog that requires something we cannot provide, it is our responsibility to be creative and offer other outlets to satisfy a dog's innate desire to perform a function. Excessive or obsessive behaviors like barking, digging, tail chasing, anxiety, etc can all likely be attributed to lack of stimulation or structure. It is the human leader's responsibility to satisfy these needs. Often times we do not have a herd of sheep that we can provide to our dog to manage. See where this is going? So, what can we do? How can possibly emulate the nature of a specific dog or breed? Answer: we can't. We can only do the best we can to offer some kind "job" or stimulation to our dogs; especially if behavioral problems exist.

You may have heard of the phrase "nothing in life is free"? Well, here is our attempt to implement this in the canine world. The following leadership tips are just a start. Quite simply, **GET THE DOGS WORKING SOMEHOW!!** Keeping dogs on their toes stimulates them mentally. Following the guidelines below will get the dog working for its owner. We, as trainers, often have an easier time implementing this because we know the positive effects this will have on our relationship with the dog. The tips below will help us achieve and maintain leadership over a dog by virtue of a variety of learning theories. Dogs will be more likely to seek guidance from the leader as to what is expected. The dog may eventually even offer behaviors because it knows that is what is required for the desired consequence (i.e. treat, toy, reward, etc).

Repetition comes into play as these daily practices are designed as exactly that: daily practices. Repetition combined with consistency promotes conditioning. We are conditioning; we are shaping; we are marking many behaviors. Here's the ironic thing about the following tips. We aren't just teaching these things to owners for the dog's sake. We are teaching them so they also become engrained in the owners. We want these practices to become habits for dog owners. You've heard the saying "Practice makes perfect", right? Well, I prefer this one: "repetition creates habit". Leadership and providing stimulation to our dogs has to be a habit. We can't just do it once in a while. It has to be an all day, every day routine. It's obvious why; as already mentioned. Here's the not so obvious...

Bad habits likely already exist in both dog and owner. So, we may not only be counter-conditioning a dog. We may also have to do some human counter conditioning. The biggest challenge is this. Bad habits form more EASILY than good habits. Good habits require far more effort and consciousness. And, guess whose job it is to sell to a dog owner? You got it! It's our job as trainers to "sell" this approach to dog owners. You will often get resistance from dog owners: "oh that sounds like work"; or, "does he have to earn everything"; or, one of my favorites – "but she's just so adorable". Oh yea... Well you're little, adorable Boston terrier is biting people!! All kidding aside, we have to do our best to instill these practices to our clients to help them become good leaders. I often sell it this way. I ask the client: "Hey, did you brush your teeth today?" (Hopefully they say yes – lol). I then go on to ask: "Did you think about it?" The answer is always "no". I elaborate and tell them that it is because brushing their teeth is a habit that they just do out of routine. There is no effort involved. There's no thinking either. It is a habit; a good habit! So are the leaderships in this PDF. At first yes, much like reminding a little boy to brush his teeth before bed can be a little annoying; so can the start of practicing leadership. Before long, it will become a habit; a good habit. Fortunately, for us as trainers, most people will at least try these things for a week or two. In most cases, many problem behaviors will begin to decrease in either, or both, frequency and intensity. Once the owners see the positive results of what will eventually be easy, they will wonder why they didn't do it sooner. If they didn't implement these easy practices, it will also tell you how willing they are to provide leadership and structure to their dog's lives. They will get out of it what they put into it.

One final note: the following tips are especially helpful for pack imbalances for multi dog households. If dogs are non-compliant or even fighting, it is possible that they are doing so because of lack of consistent leadership. The tips below will automatically cause the human to treat the subordinates (dogs) exactly the same. There are two possible outcomes in a hierarchy relationship. For dog owners, it is this. Either they are working for their dogs, or their dogs are working for them. The latter is our goal! Take a read through the tips. They are written exactly how I give them to my clients. Feel free to keep these and use to give to your clients. You can give me credit if you want. But, knowing that these will be passed along to help someone is payment enough for me!

Leadership tips for avoiding or alleviating minor behavior problems

Written by Jeff Coltenback

1. Leaders initiate. No matter what the interaction, it is best to assume that leaders initiate. For instance, if the dog come to you and nudges your hand, and you pet the dog, the dog just initiated that interaction. Consequently, you potentially submitted to your dog. This rule goes for many things. Another example is the dog that brings you a toy and you then accept the initiation of play and engage in play. You just submitted to your dog. The dog is controlling social interactions. Leaders initiate. The correct response to this is to ignore the dog under these and similar scenarios. You should initiate all interactions with your dog and ignore all of your dog's attempts at controlling you (ignore also means no eye contact).
2. Resource Control is crucial in keeping your dog working for you. Either your dog is working for you, or you are working for your dog. All resources should be controlled by you, the leader. Food, treats, affection, play time, going for walks, toys, etc are all resources that the dog should earn by performing obedience and other commands for. For instance, before you leash your dog to walk, make him or her sit. Before you feed or offer a treat, make them sit. If they catch on and start offering sits, this is good. However, always go a step further and make them do something. If they are already sitting, make them down, etc.
3. All day long you are doing 2 things. You are either rewarding or correcting behaviors. Good or bad, you are shaping your dog. So, be sure to reward only good behaviors. We often make the mistake of inadvertently rewarding bad behaviors. If the dog jumps on us, it may be acceptable at times and then not acceptable other times. This is not effective in training. A behavior is either acceptable or it isn't. Not all dogs require such consistency. But, it is better to err on the side of caution and just never reward bad behavior. The same holds true for good behavior. Always acknowledge, positively, good behavior.
4. Have multiple training sessions with your dog every day for the rest of his or her life. Have about 3 sessions every day for at least 2-3 minutes per session. Doing these quick hits throughout the day keeps your dog working for you. I recommend 1 session that is treat-based (use treats as the reward). Use another session for verbal and physical praise only. Then use the other session for a quick game of play using a favorite toy. Have your pet perform obedience commands so they work for different resources during each session. Of course, feel free to extend the sessions if your dog is up for extra work. If so, a play session would be most appropriate so you can exercise the dog as well.
5. Walk your dog, not just around the block either. Your dog has an innate desire to travel. Walking satisfies one of the dog's most instinctive needs. It also gives you the opportunity to take control of the walk and further take control of your dog. Your dog wants a leader. Leading your dog on a walk is another great tool at your disposal.

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Disclaimer: The suggestions above are not intended to replace professional or veterinary care. Always seek the counsel and services of your veterinarian or pet professional for your pet's needs.