



The Alpha Role

One of the greatest mistakes we make as humans is to place our “ways” upon our dogs. Humans and canines see things quite differently. Mainly, canines strive for pack structure and seek out an alpha leader. This is different than we see it as humans, so I ask you to open your mind. Humans see a dominant role, or a leader as something oppressive or totalitarian. Dogs however see this as a sense of security. When dogs have a leader they understand this leader’s job and respect it. It is rarely challenged once properly established and there is a great deal of comfort and security that the dog gets from having this firmly established in his life and in his pack.

A leader or alpha (two words that I’ll interchange often) role in the dog’s eyes has three characteristics:

- 1. Strength*
- 2. Fairness*
- 3. Indifference*

The leader is not a jerk, he is not needy, he is not unfair and he does not get overly emotional.

Strength: The leader leads with strength. That means if someone comes to challenge him, he will take the challenge immediately, he will show his strength through his actions and in everything he does. The leader’s role is to protect the pack and to maintain the respect of the pack. I suggest choosing your battles and sticking to your guns. Simply making everything a struggle for alpha is wrong and does nothing to bond you with your dog. Basically I look at it this way: I provide food, water, a place to live, medical care, toys, treats and a good life for my dog. If I ask my dog to listen to me on something, it’s not asking too much. I expect my dog to listen when I say NO. I don’t struggle with it, I ask for it and I know I will get it, because if I don’t, I will teach my dog that the battles I choose, are the battles I’ll win.

Fairness: One of the primary qualities a leader in the canine world exhibits is fairness. For example, the leader eats first... then allows the rest of the pack to eat. Once he is done, he does not try to remove food from lower ranking pack members. He does not put lower ranking pack members in a place to fail, he supports them and protects them. There are many unqualified trainers and behaviorists who use a method of temperament testing where they remove a dog's food while he is eating. This is not only unfair, but it is downright stupid. To take a dog's food away while he is eating and then fail the dog's temperament based on this has no indication on a dog's temperament whatsoever. I will address this at another time, however I use it as an example to stress dog leaders fairness over a human leader.

Indifference: Humans often fail on all three of the qualities they should exhibit as a leader, but the hardest one seems to be indifference. Here's a great example: You leave your home and when you come home, you run up to your dog and pet him, kiss him and tell him how much you missed him. When the canine leader returns, the entire pack runs up to greet *him*, but *he* remains indifferent. He does not run up to other dogs. He will often lie off to the side and wait for the lower ranking members to greet him. He will be indifferent to other pack member's actions, as he knows he is the leader. Watching the aloofness of a dog is a strong indication of their rank in the pack. It is lower ranking pack members that strive for affection or attention.

If you are looking to provide a sense of stability and security to your dog, there are several things you should establish right away. Remember, a dog's training can, and should take effect immediately. We do not slowly change a situation for a dog. If the new rule says, ***No furniture.*** It is immediate. We do not let them on the sofa for a ½ hour and then ask them to leave. New rules are put into place immediately and are not worked in gradually.

Let's start with this, if you are establishing yourself as your dog's leader, EVERYTHING belongs to you and YOU share it with your dog. This includes, food, toys, time, affection, furniture, etc. Allowing your dog to see that you are the leader will allow him to see himself as a lower ranking member of the pack that needs to be protected and he will look to his leader for guidance. One thing I like to use to teach structure is "I eat first." That means I eat, and when I am done, my dog eats. I put his food down, walk away and allow him to eat. *Leaders Lead.. SIMPLE... I use the leadership role as a method of teaching my dog what is right and wrong.* I believe that when a dog has a solid grasp on the concept of leadership, we can have a fun and harmonious life together.

The key thing to remember in getting your dog to see you as a leader is less emotion. As tempted as you are to cuddle and kiss your dog, you are not doing him any favors by doing this during this phase of training, at the end it's great, but being firm with your dog during the command phase will give more value to your praise at the end. Your dog will have some challenges when you are constantly cuddling and kissing him. This is not to say that a new dog gets no affection, rather he gets affection for things he has done. Affection is a form of reward that I use with my dogs every single day.

Giving a dog constant affection and never providing or demanding structure oftentimes will develop a strong dog that will protect you and probably make stupid choices in keeping other people and dogs away from you. YOU will become your dog's property and HE will make decisions on how to protect and keep you. These are decisions that will lead to his demise: Dogs that attack people, or other dogs are taken away from their owners and are killed. Once your dog gets to this level of dominance chances are you will lack the ability to deliver the proper level of correction necessary to regain control. So, it is better that you start the program out right and follow this advice to get your dog in line right from the beginning. Being indifferent to a dog is the single best thing you can do to building a strong bond with him. This is advice I give in my article on bringing a new dog home. It is pertinent to understand if you want a scared dog to come around. Trying to hug a dog that is scared is a recipe for disaster. Forcing a dog to be near you is also not recommended. Dogs form deep bonds, but it takes them time to trust. Dogs observe and then decide. See what it is that your dog is seeing, and see it through your dog's eyes.

This advice is given from the point of view of a dog, not a human. There are plenty of humans who will feel it to be mean, cruel or just wrong. And for those people there is no help, as they constantly try to make dogs into humans and therefore lack the compassion and understanding of what the dog needs. Selfishly trying to make a dog into a creature that he is not is abusive to the dog. If you truly love your dog, you will give him what HE needs, not what you think he needs. Trying to force human emotions on a dog is as cruel as handing him a can opener and a can of food and expecting him to open it because he is hungry. Dogs rely on us to take care of them and to provide for them. We are responsible for them and giving them a strong and fair role model is the single best thing you can do for your dog.

There are people who will tell you that dogs do NOT need structure and that they can be loved and coddled and they will be fine. These people feel they can cure all the ailments a dog may have with treats and sweet words and love. Unfortunately these people don't deal with the dogs that I deal with. 80% or more of the world's dogs are fine to be treated like that. However our municipal shelters are packed with the other 20%. The ones that bite, attack, become aggressive and eventually are killed due to human ignorance. I have no problem with trainers who use solely treat-based systems or a clicker if that works for them, I use treat training myself. I caution people that there are dogs that are extremely dominant and aggressive that will never, respond to this method of training. It is important to approach training in a completely positive based format. The dog should always be trained in a manner that is fair to him. All training should end on a positive note and the dog should understand what is expected of him and rewarded.

I've dealt with countless dogs that were in and out of the shelter, and have gone through many of this training and their behavior has only gotten worse.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice. Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:

<http://www.boundangels.org>

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