

Leadership Skills

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In order to have a stable pack, whether human or non-human, that pack must be led by a stable and strong leader. In human world, a good leader is confident, assertive, knowledgeable, strict with boundaries, protective of his/her people, etc. It is those same qualities that make a strong leader in the world of canines. Although our dogs are certainly more domesticated than wolves, they are still very closely related. As humans and dog owners, we need to learn to be just that – DOG owners. Dogs are loyal to us humans, and we owe them for that. We owe them the benefit of meeting them halfway between the world of humans and that of dogs.

We humans are egocentric creatures, meaning that we think that all creatures see the world as we do. Fortunately and unfortunately for us, this just isn't the case. Dogs do not reason with other dogs the way that we humans do. They don't ask for what they want. They wait until it is given to them. Dogs learn by experience, by conditioning, and by following strong leaders.

Dogs are not born to be pack leaders, and for most dogs, they are simply not made for it. Being a leader requires just the right combination of traits and experience. Most dogs would prefer to depend on a stable leader, someone they can trust will lead them in the right direction. As humans, we might not want just one person controlling our lives, setting all of our boundaries, showing necessary discipline for crossing those boundaries, every day and all day. Dogs do. They don't need just one person specifically. They are more flexible than that BUT they do need to know that they can ALWAYS depend on someone, whether it is yourself, your children, your dog walker, the neighbor, or preferably all of the above. After a while, your dog will learn to generalize that leadership ability to humans overall, and they will gain a stronger trust for humans.

There are many ways to lead your dog(s). First and most importantly, be sure that you are consistent. Consistency equals dependency. Your dog will be more stable in knowing that he can depend on you every day, not just weekends and holidays, when you have more time. This will allow your dog to be able to fully give themselves up to your care.

There are more specific everyday things that you can also do. Breaking it down, from waking up to going to bed...

Feed breakfast/dinner on your schedule. Again, you may have unconsciously set a schedule for your dog to eat, depending on a routine. However, make sure that you are not feeding an excited dog. Make your dog work for his food. If you already do that, make him work three times as hard. If you tell your dog to lie down, and he goes through the motions, but is drooling and ready to pounce at any moment, that is not a calm dog who has done any work. Wait for him to give up to you. Also, if brave, occasionally mix the food up with your hands, so your scent is there. Consider having a snack before preparing his food, so he sees that you are enjoying your meal first. He who eats first is leader.

Own your walk. Walk your dog on your schedule, but do make it a daily routine, since exercise is the most important part of a dog's day. However, never leave for your walk when your dog is overly excited, not where he is jumping all over you or pulling you out the door. Make him wait and you go first. Do NOT let your dog lead your walk and tell you where to go. He should not be *pulling* ahead of you. Only give free time to sniff around on your permission – it should not be expected, but give it often as a break.

Own your space. Pack leaders protect their pack. If you have a dog who is commonly on alert and also playing the role of guard dog to the point beyond your control, he is doing so because he most likely doesn't believe you are capable. Of course, we all want dogs who can alert us to intruders. However, we should also be able to take over the situation once alerted. A few barks is ok – after all, they are dogs and it is instinctual. Once you have been alerted, take over the door or the window. Body block him and tell him “you've got it”. Walk into his space, backing him up physically, without touching him with your hands, since that would be rewarding. Be confident and be assertive. He who owns their own space is leader.

Invitation only. As a pack leader, everything is your space, until you invite the rest of the pack to join in with you. For example, if you are sitting on the couch, that space belongs to you until you invite your dog to enjoy it with you. Your dog should never just jump on to it, uninvited. Also, if your dog shows any dominant behavior while in your space, remove him from it if you feel safe enough to do so. If you don't feel safe, don't even consider inviting him into your space at this point. The same goes for toys. Those are your toys until you invite him to enjoy them. You should remove them when it's not time to play, and give them back to a calm dog who has worked for them, when it is time to play.

As you can see, being a pack leader is hard work, but your dog is worth it and deserves it. An unstable environment and pack will cause an unstable dog, often resulting in possession, aggression, fear, anxiety, obsession, etc. If a dog is not *being* led, he will feel the need to lead, because he knows no other way of life. Be your dogs leader, and your entire pack will have a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction, among many other positives.