

Leadership Basics

A simple guide to regaining your dog's respect in pleasant, non-confrontational ways.

by Suzanne Clothier

There are three basic aspects to leadership:

- Control of or undisputed access to resources
- Proactive intervention
- Ability to control, direct or inhibit the behavior of others

Behaving like a leader means that you must demonstrate 'to the dog's satisfaction!' that your behavior is that of a higher status animal. Each dog will have different criteria for what constitutes adequate leadership skills on your part. And his expectations may change considerably as he grows & matures, requiring that you also make shifts in your approach.

Directing, Controlling & Inhibiting Behavior

From the dog's perspective, only someone they respect has the right to control, direct or inhibit another dog's behavior. Turned around the other way, this means that if you can't control, direct or inhibit your dog's behavior (especially at critical or highly exciting times), your dog is making it quite clear that he does not consider you higher status, in other words, he doesn't respect you, a clear sign that your leadership is inadequate for that dog (though it may be quite adequate for another dog with a different personality.)

Your dog will grant you precisely the respect you have earned. No more, no less. And he will adjust that constantly. If you begin to act in sloppy ways, he'll downgrade the respect. Clean up your act, and he'll respond accordingly. You are not voted leader for life in the world of dogs, you earn the dog's respect daily. The more intelligent, confident and ambitious the dog, the more likely he is to quickly notice tiny shifts in your behavior on any given day, and to test you and the rules regularly. This is why when changes occur in our lives, which result in changes in our behavior (as simple as being rushed for time to moving, changing jobs, or other bigger life shifts) prompt new behavior from the dog - he's testing to see what the changes mean for him.

Basic training is important to help the dog understand that you can control and direct his behavior, something you will also be teaching him through your resource control actions. But you must earn the respect and the right to control the dog's behavior. If you do not have control of the dog in non-stressful times - like meals or playing ball or even walking (pulling?) down the street - I guarantee you he's not going to listen to you when something he thinks important happens (like a cat dashing across your path or a jogger going by or another dog

appearing on the street, the person at the door, etc.)

Practice self-control with your dog frequently, as well as basic obedience in every place you can think of, and with you in every possible position. Act like a leader, earn the respect!

Proactive Intervention

Good leaders are watchful, protective and quick to act to defend. When you are with your dog, really be with him, and watching his responses to the world around him. Plan ahead how you will handle situations you know may be troublesome. Be someone he can rely on no matter what. If it helps, think of him as a guest at a party or family gathering who is unsure of what may be the polite or appropriate thing to say or do. If you were helping such a guest, how would you do this? By paying close attention, anticipating situations where help may be needed, and avoiding those situations that he couldn't handle.

How do you know if your leadership is adequate for any given dog?

If you can control or have access to ANY resource without the dog challenging your right to it AND the dog allows you to control, direct or inhibit his behavior in highly exciting or critical moments (quiet times with just you & the dog do NOT count; controlling the dog when a cat dashes past or someone knocks on the door or when guests comes DO count) AND Your dog trusts that you will step in if necessary to protect him from other dogs or people, and is willing to defer to you on these occasions.

If there are weak points in any of these areas, you may need to make some changes in your leadership style. One easy, non-confrontational way to gain your dog's respect is through resource control.

Regaining Resource Control

What Matters To Your Dog? Make a written list of the top 5-10 resources for your dog. This may be food, treats, toys, attention, play, special resting places, walks, car rides, etc. Hopefully you are on the list! Don't waste your time or the dog's by trying to control resources that don't mean much to the dog.

What Can You Ask From Your Dog? Make a list of EVERY behavior your dog knows - whether formal commands or tricks. From this list, you will draw your 'request' of one or more behaviors which must be completed promptly, on one quiet command and executed exactly before you

will provide the resource. For access to any resource, insist that your dog 'give' you something before you provide the resource.

A sit or down is a basic starting point; however, as the dog's skills allow, make the dog work harder. Put 2 or 3 behaviors together; do not be predictable! Too many folks stay with a simple sit or down, never progressing to much more demanding requests as the dog's skills allow. Remember how your mom got all excited when you were finally able to write your name? Well, it's good to remember that these days folks take that for granted and expect much more from you. Asking a truly intelligent dog to merely sit is like asking Bill Gates for \$100 - it's not exactly requiring him to give something meaningful.

Making the request meaningful relative to the dog's skills will sharpen him up - he must really concentrate and pay attention to you. Ask for any and all skills the dog has, and all the tricks he knows, and mix them up in an unexpected order.

The goal is the dog's complete attentive cooperation, not a habituated response that requires no thought from the dog. No Grading on the Curve. Set your baseline for acceptable responses and hold tight. If you want the dog to sit within 2 seconds, then accept NO responses that are slower. Being consistent is an important part of leadership. Smart dogs will push you hard to see if you'll accept less or slower responses - that's what got you both into this situation in the first place! Consistency Counts! Be relentless. Your dog views you as his leader 24 hours a day. He cannot and will not understand your annoying boss, your in-law problems or your IRS woes as the reasons for your inconsistency. He believes what you say - every time!

Too Bad. If the dog offers a wrong or slow response, you can repeat the command, try again, or even gently remind/help him, you can offer verbal praise & encouragement BUT do not provide the desired resource till he gets it absolutely right. If the dog blows you off, quietly turn away and make the resource unavailable. This may mean putting the food bowl in the refrigerator and walking away for a few minutes before nicely asking again. It may mean walking away from the door you would have opened if the dog had played by the rules. It may mean ending the game of fetch. Try again in a few minutes to see if the dog is more willing to cooperate, but be sure YOU are the one who chooses to start again, not the dog pushing you to it.

Stay Cool. No need to be harsh, angry or confrontational. Simply draw a direct line from the dog's behavior to the consequence. If you do this, this happens. For example, you ask the dog to lie down before throwing his ball, and he refuses. Oh well - game is over; you pocket the ball and walk away for a bit (maybe just 5-15 seconds; maybe much longer; all depends on the situation and the dog's behavior.) Take home message for the dog: If you do not cooperate, I

don't play.

Earn Your Oscar! When necessary, be dramatic in your responses - acting shocked or deeply disappointed with the wrong response from the dog, sweetly encouraging if he's almost right, and dramatic in your withdrawal should he really blow it. Often, handlers offer such "mushy" information that the dog has a hard time telling the difference between what's right and what's wrong. Harsh or angry is not necessary; but clearly delighted or disappointed can help the dog figure things out.

Educate The Dog The more your dog knows, the more ways he has to cooperate with you. Polish up his current skills, and keep adding new ones; more & more tricks, for example, gives your dog more ways to be right and earn what he wants. Training is communication, and communication is critical to healthy relationships. Besides, it's just plain fun!

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