

Leadership and Behavior

By Susan Carney

Behavior problems come in many forms and all of them drive dog owners crazy; Excessive barking, jumping, “aggression” towards strangers or other dogs, barking and lunging at other dogs (on a walk) and tearing things up when alone (separation anxiety).

Unbelievably, all of these are normal dog behaviors that have a very clear meaning to our dog(s). The ways in which dog’s communication, culture and needs are very different from humans is something worth taking a closer look at for more understanding.

A look at canine culture: On their own, without any human intervention, dogs choose to live in packs. Within that pack there is always a leader or lead pair. The leaders set the rules, provide protection, provide food and lead the hunt. They get to do whatever they want and are the only ones to dole out punishment for those that break the rules. Believe me there are rules.

When you take a dog into your home, the pack mentality and need for a leader does not change. Dogs are genetically wired to look for and follow a leader or, if need be, become the leader. If for some reason your dog feels that the leadership role in your pack is vacant, s/he will take on the role...every dog will, even the most, timid, shy or reluctant.

Obviously (I hope) the need for a human to be the leader is clear. A dog as the leader of your home would deal with situations and conflicts as a dog does, and that would not be good.

A leader of the pack will protect the pack, protect the home front, provide food, and lead the hunt. However, if you have not noticed, this is not done like humans do it...you will never see a dog sitting down at the kitchen table, asking politely and discussing the situation! Canine leaders lead by their actions and reactions, rather than word. This is where barking, lunging, growling, pulling and bad behaviors come in to play.

A look at canine communication: Whether or not a dog feels the need to take over as leader depends on you. What signals are you communicating to your dog? Is your dog getting a message that you are not meaning to send. Think about it. Dogs are 80% visual and only 20% verbal. They communicate primarily through body language. Dogs spend their entire day reading our body language to determine what is going on. That is why they know when you are leaving and when it is time to eat.

Leaders generally act the same way every day without fail, reinforcing their leadership through their actions. However, if the leader is not consistent or allows something on Wednesday that s/he did not allow on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, well, that is not consistent. Think, what message is that sending to the other dogs?

The message is clear; this leader is not good at their job. Inconsistency in your dog’s eyes equals doubt in leadership. Doubt in leadership for a dog that is “genetically wired” to have a leader means they or some other dog must take over.



Taking over means providing protection, providing food and leading the hunt, warding off strangers and getting what you want when you want it.

- Do you lavish affections when every your dog wants it?
- Do you respond to all requests for play (requests from your dog)?
- Do you allow your dog to run past you through doors?
- How do you handle barking, lunging and growling? Most people kneel down and pet their dog, draw them closer and say NO, NO, NO. Hmmmmm? What does that mean to a dog?

So why are some dogs worse than others? Some dogs are born leaders (what we call dominant.) They are comfortable in the role, bossy by nature and do not usually bark or growl a lot because again, they have the confidence they can deal with the situation.

Some dogs do not want to be leaders at all! They are nervous, reluctant and would rather someone else "do the job." Reluctance and fear of the position of leader is where bad behavior starts to show. Behaviors like fear based aggression, pacing and protecting the home, biting the mail carrier and lunging at other dogs. These are all signs of a dog that is trying to be a leader (because s/he feels they must) but does not really want to be.

Think of how you might feel if all of a sudden you were asked to get in the pilot seat of a jet plane and fly it to rescue its crew from behind enemy lines. Could you do it? Would you have the skills? Yikes! I wonder if you would stress out, panic or be able to do it at all. Would you be working beyond your means? In addition, might you even yell at someone or get angry if things did not go well...stress! I guarantee you that is what dogs go through.

In almost every case of bad behavior like the ones listed above, you the owner, can "change the leadership" role you play in your dogs life *and* change your dog's behavior very quickly.

The exercises below are the same behaviors you would see demonstrated by the leader in a wolf pack. The same behaviors used to establish and maintain leadership. The secret is doing them everyday, clearing up any doubt about who the leader is, ultimately taking the responsibility, stress, and worry out of your dog's head. This is not about dominating your dog. This is about creating comfort and a stress free life thus keeping your dog safe and preventing behavior problems.

He who eats first is King!

If you simply place food in your dog's bowl a few times a day, stop. Pick up your dog's bowl and "provide and prepare" his/her food. Even if it is just a bowl of dry food, you are better off picking up the bowl and filling it. While you do this, grab a cracker and eat it slowly. Leaders eat their share first, so instantly you have provided food and taken your share – setting you up, in your dog's eyes, as a leader. You will find timid dogs that pick all day will eat faster, and pushy dogs will become less pushy and demanding.

If your dog nibbles all day it is time to provide the food for a scheduled amount of time (½ an hour.) If your dog does not eat the food, you have provided within ½ an hour; pick it up and



provide food at the next feeding. Your dog will get the message that food is only available for a certain amount of time, and you, thus showing your control over the food and your leadership, provide it.

Me First!

Do not allow your dog to run or rush through any doorways first. He who goes first is the leader. Making them wait places you in a leadership role.

How: Approach a door or get ready to get out of your car. Open the door and use your body to block your dog, and then wait for him/her to step back or SIT. You can say, "Sit" or "Wait," but try to avoid saying, "NO." Once you get a SIT or a few steps backwards, begin to move out the door again. Use your body to block and shut the door if s/he gets up or moves forward. Do not let your dog through the door until s/he has waited for you to go first. Use the word 'OK' to release your dog and let him/her go through the door and always reward them for a job well done. Be sure to use praise too. Everyone likes feedback for a job well done.

By invitation only!

Each day when you first lay eyes on your dog: in the morning when you get up, coming home from work or returning from getting the mail. Ignore your dog for 3-5 minutes.

A leader establishes his/her personal space as a means of respect, and only when other dogs are invited in for attention, are they given attention. Making your dog wait for an invitation sends a very clear signal that you are the leader. For persistent dogs, you will have to ignore them until they give up trying to get your attention. Once they do, count to 20 and then you can invite them over for a sit and a good butt scratch.

Likewise, every time you leave and then return you must once again ignore your dog. If you think about it, when a dog leaves its pack to go off on a hunt, or to "case" their territory, there is a 50/50 chance that they might not come back; they could be killed, injured or simply not return. This changes the pack hierarchy...leaving the question to be asked again and again, every time you leave and come back: "Who is the leader, is it still you or are you hurt....then is it me?"

Also, when you are sitting on the couch watching TV and your dog comes over and flicks your hand with his/ her nose or puts their head on your lap, you should ignore them. This is an attempt to solicit affection. Something that (if you are the leader) they should ask permission for or wait to be invited. Simply ignore them or stand up and use your body to push them out of your immediate space. Once your dog moves on you can again count to 20 and then invite them over for a game or a good butt scratch.

This is probably the hardest thing to do but if you remind yourself that it is not love your dog is seeking, but confirmation of leadership, and then you should be able to do it. Be strong!

Do not walk around!

Avoid walking around your dog if s/he is lying in your path around the house. Shuffle your feet, make a noise or simply say, "excuse me," and walk straight through to where you are heading. Do not worry about waking your dog up. Chances are if you are close enough to check if they are



sleeping, they are awake...waiting to see what you will do. Respecting *your* space, again, sends a very clear leadership message to your dog.

You will find that behavior such as barking and lunging at strangers and dogs, at the door or at the mail carrier, not getting along with other dogs, nipping kids or even separation anxiety will go away, sometimes it might take a few weeks, but they will go away. Of course, you *must* be consistent. Try them, and call if you need help putting these exercises into action. 603-772-2921 Ext. 112

