



Who's Winning?

Living with the Dominance Theory without Losing Control

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“If I let my dog do that, aren’t I letting him win?” When asked that question my first thought is, “Winning what?” It seems that somewhere along the line dog training has become a perceived battle of wills, a conflict over dominance.

For dog trainers, great frustration lies in the public’s acceptance of the idea that we need to be dominant over our dogs. The buy-in is tempting because the concept appears to be the magic pill that will solve all canine behavior problems in 30 minutes or less.

Positive trainers needn’t lose our cool in an environment where the concept of dominance is conveniently packaged as the answer to all behavior problems. People don’t want extensive lectures from us on learning theory or how to enhance their relationship with their dog; they simply want him to stop chewing the furniture.

A modern trainers’ challenge is to overcome the quick-fix syndrome, to educate our clients, and help them achieve their training goals. I’d like to think we could do it with scientifically proven methods, the same kindness toward our fellow trainers as we show to our dogs, and a healthy dose of fun. With each new client, with each discussion about dominance, I keep these challenges and objectives in mind.

“Alpha” and “dominance” are trendy words used on popular TV shows, books, and in some dog training philosophies. The words are used to describe leadership status in the relationship we have with our dogs. I think we’ve gotten it wrong. The words infer that a struggle has taken place and that the leader fought his way to the top position. Actually, the leader just gets to make the rules and set the boundaries.

While dogs may have descended from wolves, they are not wolves. Much of the information used in dominance based dog training comes from the observation of captive wolves. Wolves in captivity do not behave the same as they would in the wild, e.g. captive wolves live in forced packs. In the wild, wolves do not live in packs but in family units. The parents became the natural leaders by mating and producing offspring.

Likewise, living with dogs should be more like parenting than having to dominate. Remember how Mom could simply give you *the look* and you knew exactly what to do?

“Alpha” can be defined as: *Priority access to limited, critical resources*. That’s fancy talk for, “I’ve got the cookies, that’s why”. Many believe that the alpha dog always eats first or goes through doors first. I don’t believe that I have to eat first. Until my dog grows opposable thumbs and can work the can opener, I’m in charge. I’m the one who provides the critical resource (food) in exchange for polite behavior (sitting quietly).

What makes the dominance theory problematic to the general dog-loving public is that many of the behaviors we are trying to modify, such as excessive barking or failure to come when called have nothing to do with critical resources. These behaviors are occurring because the dog is getting reinforced for them in some manner. Positive training methods look objectively at the facts of the undesirable behavior. Knowing that dogs do what works for them, we ask what the payoff for the behavior is, stop the payoff, (the reinforcement), and then train a preferred behavior. No conflict. Problem solved.

I am not here to say that dogs don’t form hierarchies. I am here to say that dominance is not synonymous with leadership. Dominance is better described as a state, not a trait. It is a relationship and it is contextual. In a human paradigm, the boss may prevail over her employees at work, but those same employees make the rules for their children at home. Moreover, canine behaviors perceived to be displays of dominance are not always clearly defined in all situations. For instance, a dog that has priority access to a preferred sleeping area, may care nothing about having his favorite toy taken from him.

From sleeping on the bed, to a dog’s unwillingness to be patted on the head, the dominance theory has been used as a broad brush to paint a simple explanation for most dog behavior. Dog training seen through the filter of the dominance theory, can result in some ridiculous ideas.

Even a dog’s obsession with chasing a laser light has been attributed to the idea that the dog wants to dominate the light! How did we get *that* idea from observing wolf pack behavior?

In addition to explaining away undesirable canine behavior, the dominance theory is often a justification for physical punishment. I don’t use aggression with my dog, because I don’t want him to use aggression with me. To peacefully establish my place at the top of the hierarchy I use benevolent, force-free, compassionate methods based in science. This makes me the type of leader my dog wants to follow.

Positive does not mean permissive. Dogs need boundaries and we are obliged to teach them how to live within those boundaries. A benevolent leader has the ability to draw out good behavior from a dog and maintain it with proper reinforcement. Others wait for undesirable behaviors to occur and then punish them. Both methods are effective.

However, the positive leader augments the dog/owner relationship; the leader using punishment can impede it.

A dog that is trained using positive methods will enthusiastically offer behaviors to discover which ones work for him. A dog that has been continually punished in this quest may become afraid of the trainer and shut down. Shutting down is often mistaken for submission; in reality, the dog has given up. A worst-case scenario for punishing a dog is that the dog will decide to fight back. Sadly, this can fuel the dominance theory fires by “proving” that the dog is using aggression to achieve dominance.

It's okay to be the leader. However, we must remember that being the leader is not about conflict or punishment. Leadership is about the ability to influence others to behave in a desirable manner. Leadership is about trust and compassion. Let's not wait for our dogs to make a “mistake” and then correct them. Let's teach our dogs acceptable, polite behavior and reward them for it. Everyone is happier. *Everyone* wins.

