

Leadership – Fact or Fiction?

by Ross McCarthy

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The issue of whether a dog should be described as dominant is yet again a hot topic in the dog world at present. Not particularly for pet owners, trainers and behaviour practitioners who observe dogs daily, but a tiny group of behaviour counsellors or academics who speculate that there is not such thing. It is a long and complex discussion, that there simply is not enough space for in this magazine, but I will describe some of the points.

Dog professionals are always seeking to further understand the dog, what makes it tick, its behaviour and of course to develop new methods of behaviour reformation and training. Those of us who own more than one dog and who observe their dogs interacting on a daily basis are left with no uncertainty that our domestic dogs are pack animals derived from the wolf.

Asserting Dominance

My own male German Shepherds display ritualised threats in many situations throughout the day, each and every day. The older, more dominant dog will growl and bare his teeth frequently at the younger dog. The younger dog is very deferential (so far) and therefore fights do not occur – an innate pack order is maintained. My elderly dog takes possession of the food bowls, the back of the car, his sleeping space, my attention, toys, old bits of wood and he also dominates the younger dog whenever he feels like it, with no obvious reason evident to the human onlooker. My younger dog clearly understands the rules of the house and knows where he stands in relation to the other dog. If for example, my older dog is laying by the back door, the younger dog will not pass him, but if the situation is reversed, the older dog will simply walk towards him and make him move out of the way. A clear example of dominance and deference in action and it maintains the peace. This is of course fact, not theory and I have observed this in hundreds of other dogs through my work.

Why the question of dominance

The problem is, that some questionable minor research is done, published and swallowed without question by some people.

Often this is misinterpreted and regurgitated to pet owners as fact causing confusion. Although I keep myself abreast of recent research and the opinions of others, I always base my knowledge on the dogs that I handle and deal with on a daily basis by observing their interactions within the family group which often contains adults, children and other animals. I

observe the dog behaviour patterns and how that dog interacts with each family member, other dogs, the family cat and visitors into the home.

There is no equality in dog society; you lead or you are led. This does not negate the fact that we can develop a trusting enjoyable relationship with our pet dogs. On the contrary, a dog that knows its position in the family pack is without doubt a happy and contented dog and moreover, a less anxious and more confident animal. We lead in most situations by default. We decide when the dog eats, goes for a walk and such like.

The word 'dominance' seems to be a contentious issue in the dog behavioural world. The word simply means "more important, strong or noticeable than anything else of the same type" and "the relative position of an individual in a social hierarchy".

People who wish to demote the word dominance, state that it now means when a dog wants to take over the family group – to lead in all situations and eventually to take over the world – the latter of course is written somewhat facetiously by people wishing to make a point or to perhaps make an issue where none exists. They prefix the argument with "new, modern" its no such thing, it is spin and reinvention to sell a prejudicial view.

A dominant dog has no desire to take over the family or to lead in all areas of life, just to protect its possessions and positions that it feels are important to him and in relation to his intrinsic pack rules. There is no malice, simply a normal innate drive lesser or greater in an individual dog or breed of dog.

When dogs interact with each other displaying ritualised aggression and dominance over each other which obviously they do, why would a dog not treat us in the same way? I am not suggesting that dogs view us as dogs, but what I am suggesting is that dogs have a complex blueprint of behaviours that prepare them for life in a pack and that they do not have the thought processes to accommodate other species behaviours. Dogs can only behave like dogs and we have to make the effort to work with and manipulate these behaviours to make the relationship work for our complex society.

I see many dogs of different breeds that one may describe as dominant. They are quite happy to ignore their owners and do as they like with whatever punishment their owners deliver being like water off a ducks back. They are pushy, in your face, in your way, causing mischief, attention seeking and demanding. They often mouth their owners, steal articles like

tea towels, socks etc, pull on clothes and generally dominate the lives of their owners for most of the time. Of course, the result is masses of attention on their terms.

Dominance is not aggression. I know some dominant people, always pushing for their own way, always deciding where their group of friends should meet and at what time, who will drive, dominating the conversation over dinner and not listening to the opinions of others, but believing their view is correct. They are not aggressive people, just dominant and somewhat forceful. One could describe them as natural leaders in certain circumstances.

Dominance Aggression

Most puppies from the outset accept people as leaders, a source of food, warmth, fun, support, protection etc and simply rarely challenge us and on the whole are quite deferential. However, there are many dogs that I see that show no hesitation in challenging owners over possession of an item or position in a bed, on a sofa and the like. This behaviour often begins during puppy-hood. It is not uncommon in my line of work to meet eight or nine week old puppies that display vocalised aggression, snapping and biting at their owners over what the puppy deems as another trying to get what it now has. This behaviour is innate – an instinctual drive to preserve resources. This is dominance aggression. The foundation is set, but it is how we handle these early challenges and general interaction that either compounds the problem and increases the aggression or eliminates it. Some of the current speculative ideas state that dominance aggression does not exist. The crux of the issue is that these same writers don't tell you what does exist in their view, but simply use jargon to disguise their lack of real knowledge. Recently people have been describing dominance aggression as 'control-complex aggression' – bizarre. It really is just down to semantics, the behaviour is the same. Some people may inform you that when a dog growls at a person – it's owner, it is simply because it has never been presented with a reason not to or has learnt that this is rewarding or more recently to avoid a perceived 'punishment'. Of course the use of aggression generally is rewarding if people recoil and that is what usually increases such displays at a rapid rate. There is a large learnt component in dominance aggression, but the dominance is innate. An intrinsic behaviour that ensures survival of the fittest.

Many behaviour advisors now refer to dominance or 'pack theory' as being outdated along with dominance reduction programmes being unkind and when applied – causing the dog stress. They are wrong and these people produce no evidence to support these fatuous claims, it is simply read and regurgitated and that is what is dangerous and confusing for good pet

owners who want the best for their dog. More bizarrely, they offer no alternative programme that we can see works, which is the Achilles-heel of their argument.

Dominance Reduction Programmes

If one brings up a puppy with fair leadership, correct socialisation, rules, control, obedience training to a high standard, mental stimulation and correct exercise there is likely to be few problems when the dog develops into adulthood. However, these dogs are not the type of dogs that Frontline Behaviour Practitioners deal with. We deal with dogs that have not had such a good start and whose aggression is well embedded and has resulted in serious attacks on people. Even when there is a history of many bites upon an owner when I deploy a dominance reduction programme (leadership plan), the results are quite amazing. This of course is in conjunction with other re-training advice. I do not believe that a leadership programme is a 'cure all', but the results do speak for themselves. In my experience, the leadership programme has the opposite of causing stress, dogs become calmer, more malleable to training, listen to their owners more and are more content with life. That information is not taken from a book or a theory, that's as it happens weekly in my office and from the words of the owners who are the final judges and who of course want contentment and happiness for their dogs.

In general within ten days of placing a dog on a leadership programme, in most cases the main conflict, trauma, and distress of the dog and owner had been dramatically reduced or in about half of the cases actually removed. Thereafter, relationships were so improved within a few months and further education and training could commence to get a good all-round result.

What causes real stress for dogs is confusion and conflict. I have seen so many people that are made to feel like failures because they are unable to follow bizarre behavioural advice that operates on a misguided system which begins with empty words like kind, gentle, reward bordering on mystical wishful thinking and time. Dogs that have bitten people do not have time – they need to quickly be brought under control to remain in that home and not another statistic in the dog rescue home or on the vets euthanasia list. Clients need advice, training and methods that work and show results and combine training knowledge and behaviour. That's what I describe as kind.

A leadership programme is simply looking at the dogs innate drives and adjusting its routines accordingly. For example, when a dog seeks and receives attention endlessly, this is removed so that attention is given at the owners behest and not the dogs. No less attention, just a reallocation. We

always link the attention to good behaviour. Many people implement this type of training – because it works. They simply do not have it under the heading of dominance, but attention control. Same issue; different words.

I do not advocate that all dog owners follow a dominance reduction programme, but when a dogs behaviour is seriously aberrant, I will do all I can to ensure that the dog stops biting people, stays alive and living with his family, safely and has an improved quality of life.

An example

Only last week, a rescued dog was presented to me by her third owner and if I could not solve the dogs' problems quickly, she was being returned to the rescue home to be euthanased.

The very responsible and patient owner was critically torn between the love of her little dog and her lifestyle being compromised to such an extent that her husband could not go in to the kitchen without being attacked and virtually all visitors had ceased – this little dog has attacked and bitten over 150 times in the six months that her current owner had her.

The dog was already sleeping on the woman's bed and the couch from where it had launched attacks on visitors and stopped her husband going near her. In one week, having put the dog on an intelligent leadership programme, all of the aggression had ceased. The owner was ecstatic with the result and her words were that this dog had never been so happy, relaxed and content – fact, not theory.

Conclusion

What we are talking about overall is a word game. We all need to make sure that we create a fair, balanced, communicative and symbiotic relationship with our dogs. Dogs are opportunists and extremely adaptive – they are not trying to take over the world, just take opportunities as they are presented to them. We must respect our dogs and give them the best quality of life we possibly can. Dogs need to be happy and controlled. Dogs are not people, they are dogs and to treat a dog like a dog is the kindest thing one can do. Allow your dogs to live in a consistent world with black and white rules, plenty of love, praise and attention, but always to encourage the positive behaviour. Dogs are very special and they deserve proper understanding and care – not mythical ideals.

Whether or not you feel dominance exists, it is only a word with a number of interpretations. Call it bullish, call it over-confident, superior, arrogant, overriding or even 'control-complex' if you must. It makes no difference which words we use to describe the same thing. Rather than be 'blinded by pseudo science' and some academics who wish to confuse you with jargon to promote their own vague ideas, just make your own mind up by

observing your own dogs and those that you meet. Thankfully the more we study and understand the dog the more our knowledge grows and the more training methods evolve and change. Dogs are what they always have been and that won't alter – their ancestry can not be changed. It is us who change through knowledge, not the dogs.

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