

Leadership vs. Dominance: Who Leads Your Human-Canine Pack?

Back in the early days of animal behavior, the idea that dominant animals ruled the pack with an iron paw (and teeth!) became firmly entrenched. However, the idea that the winner of the fight was the leader probably represents a human belief firmly entrenched in sports and politics which we imposed on animals rather than vice versa. Aside from the fact that the heavy-pawed approach didn't hold true once scientists began studying animals for longer periods of time, few owners who considered their dogs more like family members felt comfortable appropriating these force-based techniques for their own use.

TO TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DOMINANCE AND LEADERSHIP, TAKE THE FOLLOWING QUIZ:

Two dogs, Salt and Pepper, meet each other for the first time. They sniff each other out and, because dogs need a stable pack structure in order to feel comfortable, Salt decides he should be leader of their pack of two. He puts his front paws on Pepper's shoulders, but Pepper refuses to go down and a fight ensues. Finally, Salt pins Pepper to the ground. **Which dog is the leader?**

Although we can say that Salt is the more dominant dog, we can't say anything about his leadership skills until the two dogs meet again. If when they do, Salt only needs to look at Pepper and Pepper immediately displays subordinate body language, then Salt can claim the leadership title. However, if Pepper doesn't back down and two dogs fight again, and even if Salt wins that and every other fight, Salt hasn't proven his leadership.

Thus the mark of a true leader is the ability to control without force. And, in fact, wild animals who rely on brute force to maintain their status typically get eliminated from the gene pool because this approach requires so much energy.

Within the human-canine pack, our dogs look to us to provide leadership. If we don't, they'll fill the void here, too. When pets lacking confidence find themselves in this position, we can appreciate why they become intolerant of visitors or other changes in the household, or become frantic when their human subordinates go off and leave them, or thunder assaults them from above.

How do you know if your dog recognizes you as leader? Think about the different ways you interact with your pet: Leaders initiate, followers react. **How much time do you spend reacting to your dog?** For example, every time Salt barks, his owner jumps up and takes him out. He then bolts through the door in front of her. When she comes home from work, he leaps up and carries on until she pays attention to him. He leans against her, licks, nudges, and paws her when she reads or watches television, and won't stop until she pets him or tells him to stop.



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But if she tells him to stop these canine leadership displays and he does, doesn't that mean she's the leader? Not if the behavior persists. If Salt repeats the negative behavior, her commands simply become part of the process that reaffirms his leadership status, not hers.

What can owners do to put themselves back in charge? First, ignore pushy behaviors. Second, don't do anything for the dog until he does something for you first; if Salt wants attention, he must sit or hold a down for five minutes first. That display earns him a pat and a simple, "Good dog," not a gushing, treat-punctuated outpouring that most dogs equate with human subordination rather than leadership. Three, set the dog up to choose to do the right thing rather than become involved in power struggles after the pushy behavior occurs. Four, only give a command once; repeating it merely teaches the dog not to obey.

Practically all dogs will cede the leadership position and all the negative fear-based behaviors that go with it if their owners consistently relate to them as leaders long enough for the animals to internalize this change in the pack structure. After all, dogs weren't designed to police up a pack of humans who live in complex environments and come and go as they please. However, assuming this role often requires that humans change beliefs about their relationships with their dogs. Owners who choose to believe that force works or that pushy canine behaviors communicate love can never function as true leaders in their human-canine packs. Under those circumstances, we can only hope that the dog lives in an environment where this doesn't lead to avoidable canine behavioral and medical problems.

Want your dog to recognize you as leader? Then act like a true leader first.