

Leadership, Obedience, and Working Dog Teams

By Deborah Palman

I have read many articles about leadership and obedience and their relationship to dog training. They all mention the same ideas about dog packs, dominance and submission, etc. Until the last few years, I didn't fully understand how important the leadership of the handler was to the performance of working dog teams. A recent training session with some narcotics detection teams helped me to understand more about how the handler's taking or not taking a leadership position affects the dog's performance. Being a proper leader allows a handler to get the most out of a working dog and makes working, training, and living with the dog easier and more productive. I hope that my explanation of the subject can help handlers to understand why leadership and some sort of obedience training are essential to any type of working dog team.

What is Leadership in a Dog Team?

Dogs are "hard wired" or genetically programmed to exist in a pack. They are social animals that live in groups and establish a hierarchy within the pack. There are dominant dogs that strive to be higher in the pack and submissive dogs that are happy where they end up. There are pack leaders that all the dogs respect because they act in a calm and confident manner, help to establish order, and lead the pack to "good things" like food, shelter, security, etc.

In a human-dog pack, or K-9 team, the dog seeks to establish ranking. Some submissive and/or "naturally obedient" dogs will automatically submit to the handler and be attentive to the handler's moods and actions. These dogs require a fair and careful leader who does not damage the dog's motivation by confusing or correcting the dog unfairly. Other working dogs, especially those bred to do apprehension or protection work, tend towards the dominant side. Dominance does not always mean "handler aggression" or a direct, aggressive expression of fighting with the handler; it also means that the dog manipulates the handler. Some of the "nicest" or "sweetest" dogs are dominant, "world-class" people manipulators who have learned to get their own way without an overt fight.

A working dog handler has to take the leadership position in the pack. If they do not, a dominant dog will push to be the leader, and sometimes even a submissive dog will feel he has to take the leadership position because the handler does not. Often the submissive dog doesn't want to be leader, but dogs quickly sense a leadership vacuum and try to fill it. Alarm barking is an example of a dog that lacks confidence taking a leadership position. In alarm barking, the dog notices something and barks to alert the handler or other dogs because the dog doesn't feel confident enough to handle the situation himself. The dog is being a leader by alerting the rest of the pack that a possible threat exists.

Why Obedience Training?

Traditional obedience training teaches the dog simple behaviors like sit, down, stay in one place, come, and heel. Teaching these behaviors allows the handler to communicate to the dog how the dog should behave. Teaching behaviors that can be easily assessed for correctness of performance teaches the dog that if he complies with the commands, he will get a reward, and if he does not comply, there will be consequences. Consequences are usually that a reward is withheld, a reward is removed, or discomfort is applied to the dog. The commands and the methods used to teach basic commands also create a line of communication between the dog and handler.

Unlike people, a dog cannot act different than it feels. So, if the dog complies with commands willingly and without extra help from the handler, the dog becomes submissive to the handler in that context. In other words, if the dog complies with the command exactly as he has been taught, the handler is the leader at that point. If the handler keeps enforcing these basic commands in training, at work, at home and in many contexts, the dog will become submissive to the handler because the dog will be “internally” programmed to be submissive by complying with the commands. The real power of this leadership relationship is that the dog will be submissive to the handler when the handler cannot readily see or measure the results, such as in scent work. Thus, the tracking dog who is submissive to his handler will “get back to work” when the handler tells him to, and, over time and with training, learn to continuously follow the track and ignore distractions because the dog will understand this is what the handler wants. The narcotics detector dog will not be distracted by animal scents when working because he has been trained that his handler is the leader and his leader doesn’t want him to sniff animals when he is looking for narcotics.

For patrol dogs, if they are programmed to follow the handler commands before they start apprehension training, apprehension “control work” becomes another obedience context with the bite equipment and decoy as the reward. Teams have problems with apprehension work when handlers think they are the leader but they are not. The handler is the leader when the dog complies nearly 100% with all commands in all contexts. Being the leader does not mean that the dog does good obedience on the training field but doesn’t listen around the house, or jumps out of the car without a command when told to stay there. To really get and keep control in apprehension work, the dog must be 100% compliant in other contexts, or the handler’s leadership is incomplete or eroding.

Not being a leader to a dominant dog undergoing apprehension training is doubly unfair to the dog. If the handler is not the clear leader, the dog tries to take leadership and this leads to control problems. The dog feels he must be the leader and takes over the fight with the decoy. Then handlers and trainers resort to more force and pain to try to gain control. This leads to the dog becoming hectic, stressed out and more confused, because he is only exercising his genetic predisposition to fill a leadership vacuum and is being punished for it. Soon the dog doesn’t know if he should bite or not bite, and may become frustrated with the handler for interfering in the process. Apprehension work, more than any other type of dog work has to be a team exercise with the handler taking the lead by allowing and supporting the dog’s fight with the decoy.

Establishing Communication and Leadership

Puppies and untrained dogs have to be managed carefully because handlers don't have a way to communicate with them. Training, informal and formal, establishes communication and leadership. The foundations of human-dog communication for training purposes are two signals, usually verbal. One signal tells the dog "what you JUST DID IS what I want" and one signal tells the dog "what you just did is NOT what I want." Like the "red light – green light" game kids play, these basic signals should guide the dog through training.

Dogs communicate non-verbally. They are genetically programmed to follow non-verbal signals before they notice verbal signals. The verbal "Yes!" and "No" signals need to be taught, and they need to be used consistently. The handler has to train himself to use these signals exclusively and be aware of how non-verbal signals (hand in the pocket to retrieve a ball, toys appearing, food treats being produced, etc.) affect training communication. Other non-verbal signals include facial expressions, body carriage, muscles stiffness, immobility, etc. Handlers need to be aware of what they are doing. This is why trainers who observe training are important to the team's learning process.

"Yes!" is established by pairing a reward with the signal. "No" can be taught by either making the reward or opportunity go away after "No," or by pairing the "No" with physical punishment. Making the reward go away or negative reinforcement is the best way to teach "No" and enforce commands because it doesn't involve physical pain or struggle. The handler has to convince the dog he is the one from whom all good things come, and that he controls all the good things and can take them away at any time if the dog does not comply.

Doggie "Good Things"

Handlers have control of many things they don't realize are valuable to dogs. If the dog is on lead, the handler controls where the dog goes and whether the dog has access to or gets closer or farther away from things the dog values. Doors and gates control access to good things. Doggie good things include obvious things like meals, treats, toys, apprehensions and play with the handler. Doggie good things also include less obvious things like a bush to urinate on, access to the outdoors, access to the indoors or a new place to explore, access to place to sleep, access to where meals are served, access to a car, access to another dog playmate, petting, the opportunity to train, etc. If handlers spend time watching their dogs, they will see what the dog values and wants. All these activities can then become a reward for compliance with an obedience command.

This is why basic obedience trainers stress that dogs need to learn to sit at the door to be let outside, wait in a crate or car before being allowed to get out, etc. It is not just to avoid accidents when the dog rushes by, but to impress on the dog that the handler is the leader. Each time the dog pushes by, or barks, pushes and rages at a door to be let out, the dog is taking the leadership position and, if the handler lets the dog out, the handler is being submissive to the dog. Asking for a simple sit or stay teaches the dog the command with a ready reward that can be produced (the dog is let out) or denied (the door remains shut or is closed before the dog can get out) according to the dog's actions.

Getting the dog's compliance at the gate or door reinforces the handler's leadership in that context. Reinforcing the handler's leadership in many contexts eventually causes the dog to accept the handler's leadership in all contexts.

All dogs push their handlers for good things. They stare at the dog food bowl on the counter. They nudge their handlers when they want petting. They drop the ball on the floor or in the handler's lap when they want to play. If the handler always responds to these actions automatically without awareness of what the dog is doing, they are allowing the dog to be a leader. All they need to do to turn the situation into a leadership-enforcing situation is to ask the dog to do something for the meal, petting, or play. It can be as simple and quick as a sit, or a whole obedience routine. If the dog does not comply, the dog doesn't get what he wants. If the dog solicits again, the handler asks for a sit again. Eventually the dog will sit to get what he wants when he realizes he won't get it without complying. Handlers have to be aware of how the dog manipulates them and out-manipulate the dog.

What is Compliance?

In training, the dog gets a reward for compliance with the handler's commands. Exactly what is "compliance" depends on the dog's level of training. A beginning dog would get a reward for just sitting on command. An intermediate dog would have to show a faster sit and sit properly. An advanced dog might do a number of fast, correct sits to get a reward, and or sit fast and properly in the presence of strong distractions. What the handler expects of the dog depends on the context.

One rule of leadership is that the handler has to have some criteria or expectation that is consistent with the dog's level of training and stick to those criteria. If the handler knows the dog knows the command and rewards a lesser level of performance when the dog isn't really trying, then the dog starts to take over leadership. Dominant dogs will test their handlers. You can almost see them thinking "I won't sit today and I will see what he does about it." If no consequences result, the dog will think, "I don't always have to sit," and handler leadership will erode. The handler must always have criteria and must always resort to some sort of consequence if the dog does not comply. At the very least, the handler needs to give the "No" signal to put the dog on notice that the handler is aware of the refusal, even if the handler can't address the situation right then.

Being submissive to the handler also means that the dog has to be attentive to the handler. The dog has to pay attention. Paying attention has to be taught and enforced. If the dog is not paying attention, he is not trying hard enough to comply. Handlers should withhold rewards when their dogs don't try hard enough to comply even if the dog executes the command half-heartedly.

Smart, dominant, and motivated dogs will also try to beat the handler at their own game. They will "anticipate commands" and do them before the handler gives the command. Or they will do them with their own special variations. During the learning of a command, it is normal and even desirable for a dog to anticipate a command, because it is an indication of learning and thus should not be punished. However, once the dog "knows" he is supposed to wait for commands and still executes behaviors before commands are given, the handler has to take action and withhold rewards or give a physical punishment for anticipation. I often see dominant dogs doing behaviors before

the command and the handler accepts the behavior because it was what the handler thought he wanted anyway. However, this has to be stopped because the handler is not being the leader if the dog is anticipating. The same situation exists when dogs bark (without a command to bark) at their handlers to get the handler to give a reward, give a command, or allow access to something that is under the handler's control.

Physical Punishment and Manipulation

Compliance with a command also means that the dog does the command without help from the handler. This means that the dog does the behavior correctly after the first command. Not after a repeat command, not with extra handler body language, not with any more movement from the handler. Luring with a toy or treat is help. Physical manipulation (pushing or pulling the dog into position) or physical corrections are also "help." When the dog is being physically manipulated, it is not complying; it is being placed in the position by the handler.

For example, a dog is in a sit position and the handler commands the dog to down. The dog stays in the sit, looking at the handler. The handler gives the "no" signal and goes to the dog, pulling the dog's collar until the dog is down. The dog has not complied with the command. To complete the training, the whole exercise needs to be repeated again from the start until the dog goes into the down promptly on command without any physical pulling or manipulation. Too many handlers think that the dog has complied if they correct or threaten their dog into position after the command and go on with the exercise. The dog has not complied, and chances are he will refuse again in the future.

I prefer teaching dogs with rewards and the withholding or withdrawing of the reward as a consequence rather than physical punishment. Using rewards produces a dog that wants to work and actively problem solves rather than a dog that has to work and can be confused and fearful. However, there are times when physical corrections and/or manipulation need to be used on reward-trained dogs. Training by withholding rewards requires patience and strategy.

Handlers tend to be impatient, however. They want the dog to comply and learn the commands on their schedule rather than on the dog's. Handlers should never underestimate the power of saying "no," doing nothing and staying still and silent when the dog does not comply. Handlers tend to want to act on the dog when the dog isn't complying, and all the while they are acting on the dog, through coaching, urging or pushing, pulling or correcting, the dog is thinking, "This might be a little uncomfortable, but look what I got my handler to do." Often times, if the handler just waits and does nothing, the dog will realize that the handler will out wait the dog and the dog will have to change instead of the handler.

Dog Management

Dogs "out waiting" handlers brings up the subject of time. Handlers only have so many hours they can train their dogs, only so much time to feed and care for them. Dogs spend 24 hours, 7 days a week observing their handlers and trying to figure out how to get the good stuff. This puts handlers at a severe disadvantage if they are not aware of what is going on.

Handlers need to manage their dogs to prevent the dog from getting too much good stuff on their own and/or getting into trouble because the handler cannot be there to be the leader. This is why dogs that are kenneled outside the house often perform better as working dogs. When they are in a secure kennel, they are not busy trying to gain leadership and the handler doesn't have to constantly spend his time guarding against the dog eroding the handler's leadership. Kennel dogs also don't have unlimited access to good stuff so they value the good stuff the handler has even more. Handlers who are successful while still keeping their dogs in a house know how to establish and keep their leadership position and have control of their dog's access to good stuff.

Once a handler becomes a true leader for the dog, the handler doesn't have to insist on trading behaviors for every thing the dog wants. The dog will automatically start asking for permission as he has been trained, and every day life will become easier and more reinforcing for the dog and handler.

Relationship, Relationship, Relationship

A common analogy used to describe dog-human relationships is the analogy of a bank account. Handlers need to put more money or rewards into the account than they take out, and the more money they put in, the more interest it earns in the future. If dog training were that simple, more people would be successful and we probably wouldn't need dog trainers.

I have come to see leadership as the missing factor in the dog-human relationship account description. Handlers have to provide rewards and motivation for work, but handlers also have to provide leadership to be successful. Every dog is different, and every handler has to train and work their dog differently to get the best results. This is where true teamwork and leadership show their worth.

For example, I see some detector dogs that are high drive, willing workers but reactive, a little nervous, and easily distracted by noises, people, and movement as they work. Left to work by themselves without direction, either off lead or ahead of the handler on lead, they will stop working and focus on the distractions. Any time the dog is ahead physically of the handler, the dog usually thinks he is in the leadership position. A reactive dog at the end of a lead ahead of the handler thinks he has to be the leader and give attention to possible threats. Take the same reactive dog and have the handler make a point of ignoring the distractions and leading the search by giving the dog constant direction by staying ahead of or even with the dog and pointing out where to search, and the dog is relieved of his perceived leadership "responsibility" to notice the distractions. The handler's leadership makes the dog work in spite of the distractions. Over time, the dog will learn that distractions are the handler's responsibility, not his.

Another example is a detector dog that is attracted to other dog scents when he works. This is a matter of the dog taking the leadership position and deciding that he will not work on command but do his own thing and sniff dog scents instead of work. This dog needs a comprehensive training program to establish the handler as leader and to teach the dog that sniffing dog scents while working is not permissible.

I have heard it repeated again and again that the relationship between a dog and his handler is crucial to the success and performance of a working dog team. I am convinced this is an absolute truth. Weaker dogs are made strong by an encouraging and

confident handler. Willful dogs are made compliant by a fair and consistent handler. Leadership by the handler is a critical part of the team relationship and must be established before any effective work can be done. The better the handler leads and trains, the better the working dog team will be.