

I'd Rather Dance With My Dog Than Be it's Drill Sargent!

By Dee Ganley CPDT

Wouldn't it be more fun to dance with your dog than to shout orders all the time? Who is leading any way? Well, you are, or you should be. But please don't start "alpha rolling" your dog to show him who is the boss. Contrary to what you'll hear from a lot of trainers, not only is it unnecessary to "dominate" your dog physically for him or her to know you're the leader, but it can be downright dangerous.

Dogs usually perceive scruff shakes, the so-called "alpha rolls," and other physical discipline as attacks, and dogs naturally respond to attacks by defending themselves or by shutting down. A very submissive dog may cower instead of challenging you (but why are you disciplining/challenging a submissive dog in the first place?). And worse, physical confrontation does not build a cooperative relationship, it will ultimately undermine it.

A pushier, more confident dog may well fight back when disciplined physically, which can lead to a dangerous escalation in punishment: you punish the dog, he growls; you punish harder, he bites; you punish harder, he really lunges at you. The end result may well be a dog that doesn't trust you and you now have a constant battle of wills. In my experience, most aggression problems with dogs are owner induced, usually by inappropriate punishment – which breaks rather than strengthens the human-canine bond.

And it's simply not necessary. Dogs don't respect leaders who physically dominate them, but rather those who provide access to what they want. **Providing reinforcement for "good" behavior is the best way to build the dog handler relationship.** For most dogs, the reinforcers they respond to are food, toys, or the opportunity to go outside, to play, to continue on the agility course and to go for car rides or walks the list goes on and on. You control the dog's access to all these things, so you hold the leadership position. How you use that position is up to you.

How does controlling access to going for a walk give you the tools to train good behavior? When you are taking your dog outside, ask him to sit at the door, open the door slightly. If he gets up, just say, "Excuse me" in a quiet voice as you step in front of your dog and move him away from it. Pretend that you are the goalie blocking the door goal, don't let the dog through the door and move him back away from it with your body. Close the door if you think its necessary. Wait until he looks up at you wondering what's up! Now try again. Remember no force, no loud voice, no anger, no emotion – just calmly blocking your dog's attempt to go out the door. It's your choice if the dog charges out or walks out calmly at your side.

So wait a few seconds and while the dog is looking at you reach for the door to start out again. If your dog tries to charge the door, just repeat your goalie action of blocking him. Most dogs figure out in one session that the door opening doesn't give them permission to just charge outside. When your dog just sits as you start to open the door, you can let him hold position till you have walked through the door or let the dog out its your choice. You've not only taught the dog to wait at the doorway – you've also proven yourself worth listening too and a good leader! Plus the dog is looking at you for direction. What more can we ask for?

Any time you are spending time with your dog using food and other types of positive reinforcement, you are establishing your leadership and building a positive relationship. For the first few weeks

reduce your dog's meals so he or she is hungry (not starving) when you train. Use lots of food in training, and make sure the dog does something for every morsel. Now he is earning his food, which challenges his mind and encourages good behavior at the same time! The dog will welcome this change! **Dogs are hunters, not grazers, and hunters must work hard for each and every meal; getting free food is simply not natural for them.** Doing something for their food will give your dog an increased interest in food, an increased desire to perform behaviors for you, and an increased respect for you as the provider of what it wants and needs. Just asking for a sit before putting down the food bowl at each meal can enhance your leadership role and your relationship.

And what about all those "rules" of training, like "don't let the dog sleep on your bed, "never let the dog win at tug-of-war," and "never let the dog train you"? Well, like most "rules" there's a little truth to all of them, but only a little. At our house, all four dogs sleep on a couch or chair - and, yes, some times sleeps on our bed. But their comfort reward does not come until they are housetrained, are capable of sleeping through the night, are no longer chewing everything in sight, and have learned, through short learning sessions, to get on and off when asked. It's not just their couch - it's for all of us to use. This usually means that puppies in our house sleep in their crates next to the bed until they are between 8 months - 1-1/2 years of age. Likewise, we play tug-of-war with all of the dogs - its one of their favorite games. But we didn't do it until they had learned, to drop toys on cue with food as a reinforcer. Sometimes we let them win and sometimes we ask them to drop the toy - either way, they have fun. When we are done the toy gets picked up and put away till the next time or at least most of the time 😊.

Finally, I can't imagine anything better than letting a dog train you! My clicker-trained dogs have actually learned something about training by being trained, and I'm happy to let them train me too. Turnabout is fair play. Obviously, I pick and choose which of their "cues" I will respond to. When I don't respond, they stop trying to make me do that particular behavior and try something else. All of my dogs love to "make" Kevin (my husband) give them a biscuit first thing in the morning and in the evenings. He thinks they "loove him" - I haven't told him anything differently. But we all know what the dog wants really, don't we? And all the dogs can "make" me take them outside for agility practice by leaping around my feet and running to the door. I've usually said something like "Hey want to go play?" They all jump off the couch and run around me in circles - sometimes voicing their pure joy in having special time with me whether as a group or individually.

In the final analysis, it's much more productive to look at dog training through the metaphor of dancing rather than that of domination. When two people dance, one must lead and the other must follow, if both try to lead, they'll fall on their faces! But the best dancers show complete harmony and teamwork, not dominance and submission. And this is what I strive to achieve with my dogs -. Building on the relationship between handler and canine. This is for me is what we are looking for, the harmony and joy of teamwork. For me "every interaction is a teaching learning opportunity."