

Take me to your Leader !

The concept of leadership is sadly mistaken by lots of people. Unfortunately it's seems to be interpreted as to bully or boss around whomever or whatever you're trying to lead.

Dominance has also become a dirty word through misuse...

All dominance means is "the disposition of an individual to assert control in dealing with others", while leadership means "an act or instance of leading; guidance; direction" not an awful lot between them really. So how do we apply dominance and leadership with our dog ?

Well, we, the human, have control over all the things that the dog values in life... food, water, the den (home), toys, beds etc., this automatically makes us an important member of the group, the leader if you like. However, the human, being human and a sucker for anthropomorphising everything we come across from walls to dogs, puts human emotions on the dog and not only treats the dog like a human in a fur coat but is inconsistent with it. The dog is allowed to sit on the sofa at the same level as the human, but maybe only when it's clean and dry. Treats are fed by the human as and when but for no apparent reason as far as the dog can make out (no doubt it gave the human "that look").

The dog, like every other animal on the planet has a "what's in it for me attitude" and begins to test its boundaries by taking a bit of control for itself. The dog is not reprimanded (no doubt it has perfected "the look") so it takes even more liberties and the human not only allows it, they actively encourage it allowing the dog to pull on the lead, jump up other humans and onto furniture. The dog is now totally confused.

It only knows (being a dog after all and not a human in a fur coat) that there should be a strong leader in its pack and, with all these privileges being afforded to them by the human it must be them. Not many dogs will want this status for themselves, they are far happier if the human sorts out the day to day what to do when and for how long and with whom nonsense. All that the dog wants to know is where it stands within the pack. From a failure on the owner's part to be a responsible leader, the dog is forced into taking the role for itself, resulting in a seriously confused and probably stressed out dog with behavioural problems.

We need to stop putting our story on to everything and be the leader that our dog not only wants us to be but needs us to be. Dogs know how to be dogs and can play, 'smooch', get up close and personal while sleeping and still know the order in life... it's us humans that put a spanner in the works by 'feeling' - "I can't tell pooch off he won't love me anymore" or "if I don't let him on the settee he'll stop coming to say hello" or "I can't tell him not to do that because he looks so sad" a lot of it is fear of rejection by their dog if they reinforce boundaries, so they don't.

... a dog knows the dog will still 'love' them even as they are reprimanding them - all you have to do is watch a dog overstep the line in play; they might get a sharp growl or even a nip and they'll be straight back in there 2 seconds later but showing less exuberance and more restraint. They live in the moment and don't worry about what others think, they respond instinctively - a bit like grandma smacking the back of your hand when you reach for something you're not allowed... they're old enough and wise enough to know that a tingling hand won't stop you from loving them, just stop you from doing the action again (well in front of them anyway).

For me, with dogs, it's about self respect... I'm not going to allow my dogs to jump all over me and hurt me and nick my food and mess up my place. I expect them to be respectful of my body and personal space and if they're not I do something about it - doesn't mean I don't love them and they don't love me, it just means I have boundaries and they know it... when you have boundaries you don't need to tell your dog what it can and can't do all the time, you just need to remind them occasionally (like the dog overstepping the line in play).

An excerpt from Lez Graham's upcoming book "The Pet Gundog"