

Follow the Leader

Ever wonder why you're having problems trying to change some of your dog's behavior? Maybe he thinks he is in charge of making the rules of the family, his pack. Dogs are social animals, follow social structure and want to know their place in their pack. Some dogs may find a lack of leadership in certain areas and decide to assume the role and expect you to follow his lead.

Here are a few things you might want to try to establish yourself as the Benevolent Leader. Your relationship with your dog is not a democracy, but it shouldn't be a dictatorship either. Try a few of these suggestions that will help you become a more effective leader. You do not need to do all of these exercises all the time, but keep them in mind. Depending on your dog's personality, some may help more than others to improve his undesirable traits:

- **Health Issues can become Behavior Issues:** Schedule regular visits to your Vet. If there are unhealthy situations with your dog, they can escalate and create behavioral problems. A healthy dog is a happy dog.
- **Pay Attention:** The Leader has the attention of the rest of the pack. Your dog does not have to stare at you at all times, but every time you communicate with him, you should establish eye contact. **Watch Me** exercises are very useful. Every time you heel with your dog, ask him to **watch** before you take that first step. He should be paying attention to **your** moves, not the other way around. It is important to let your dog know when the exercise is finished. Praise and release him.
- **Be Dependable:** Your dog depends on you for food, water and healthy living conditions; don't disappoint him! Make sure you provide for his needs. Water should be available at all times (except for small puppies, where you can control the water intake), food should be provided at specific times, not at random intervals, or free feeding all the time.
- **Leader Eats First:** Feed your dog after you have fed yourself and your family. **DO NOT** let your dog beg food while you and your family are eating. When you have prepared his food, require him to sit (see "**Say Please**" article on the DTCCDC website) and hand feed him a few bites before giving it to him. If he has displayed sign of being possessive of his food, read "Resource Guarding" discussion in Week 2 (Home Training Issues).
- **No freebies, earn the treats:** Treats and praise should be earned. If your dog wants a treat or petting, he should do something to earn it. Make him sit, down, stand, wait, or any exercise you are working on at the time.
- **Follow my lead:** The Leader goes ahead of the pack. Tell your dog to **Wait** until you tell him it's ok to step through a door, gate or car door (read Gate and Car Manners article online).
- **It's MY house:** Leaders set the territory and control it. When you are walking around the house, your dog should yield the way to you. If he is blocking your path, make sure he moves

out of your way (you may want to introduce a command like **Move**). On occasion, and at YOUR discretion, it's also a good idea to step over him.

- **I Mean It:** When you give your dog a command, mean it. When you tell your dog to Sit, that means Sit. If he appears to be confused, guide him through the exercise, but do not allow him to ignore the command or fail to obey.
- **I Win:** When you play games with your dog, it should be under your rules. Leaders set the rules of the games, decide when it starts and when it ends. Playing tug is always fun, and it's a great stress reliever and exercise. However, if your dog is always winning the game, it's time to find a new game. Occasionally, it's ok to let your dog win, but only when he knows it's on YOUR terms. It is also a good idea to make sure your dog sees you put the toy away when the game is over, or even teach him to put his own toys away. This will show your dog who controls the game and all good things.
- **My Bed, My Rules:** Canine families usually sleep together, but it's not a good idea to share the bed with a possessive dog. If you're going to let your dog sleep in your bed, remember it's under YOUR rules. You should make him "**Say Please**" before being invited on the bed. If they become territorial, bed buddy privileges should be temporarily terminated. If you let him back on the bed and the problems continue, the dog must not be allowed back on the bed until he learns to follow the rules.
- **Muzzle Control:** Putting your hand over your dog's muzzle is a naturally dominant gesture, and it's a gentle way to establish leadership. Your dog should accept the gentle handling, no biting or mouthing.
- **Yeah, that's the spot:** A gentle belly rub is always fun, but it's also a very easy way to establish gentle dominance. When you scratch your pup's tummy, you're also teaching him a calm way to be submissive, and this will also give you a great chance to bond. Let's face it, what dog doesn't like his belly rubbed?
- **I feel pretty:** The Leader should be allowed to groom the dog. Get him used to handling, touching, brushing and washing. Have a family member to help you distract him with a treat or toy, while you brush him. Make it fun, your vet and groomer will thank you.
- **Down is good:** Teach your dog to down on command, and have him stay in that position for extended periods of time (read Long Sit and Long Down article online). Down is a submissive position. Take this slow but be consistent and determined. Be gentle, generous with your praise, and show your appreciation. Your dog will be a little calmer.
- **Teach him What's Right:** Train your dog, don't complain about bad behavior. By teaching him the house rules, your dog will learn to be a better behaved member of your family. Once your dog learns the rules, he'll be happier when he's doing what you want.
- **Make it Fun and Fair:** Every time you teach your dog something new, make it fun and exciting for both you and him. Just because **You Are The Benevolent Leader**, doesn't mean you can't have a fun experience with your dog. Always be fair and kind, but be consistent. Years of well learned behavior start with very small steps.

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