

LEADERSHIP VERSUS DOMINANCE

What really matters when it comes to training dogs?

By Kerry Vinson, B.A.



I'm sure you've heard the term *alpha wolf*, as it is somewhat ingrained in our culture as referring to the leader of a wolf pack. Over the years, the term *alpha* has been adapted to describe the "top dog" in a group of canines. Likewise, the concept of the "dominant dog" has also become a popular moniker for the most assertive animal in the group.

Unbeknownst (apparently) to many dog owners is that both of these terms have recently fallen out of favour in some circles of the dog world. I say "apparently" because during a seminar on dog behaviour I conducted last month at St. Lawrence College in Kingston, Ontario, I asked how many of the attendees were aware of this. None of the 30 people present had heard about this piece of information.

So, I've decided to write this article to in-

form readers of this magazine as to what's going on in this regard. As for the concept of the *alpha wolf*, it seems that much of the new way of thinking about pack behaviour has emanated from the writings of L. David Mech, a senior research scientist for the U.S. Geological Survey and the founder and vice-chair of the International Wolf Center. In a 2008 article, Dr. Mech writes, "rather than viewing a wolf pack as a group of animals organized with a 'top dog' that fought its way to the top, or a male-female pair of such aggressive wolves, science has come to understand that most wolf packs are merely family groups formed exactly the same way as human families are formed." These groups function as a cooperative unit, rather than competing amongst themselves for resources by trying to dominate each other.

Likewise, over the years the term "dominant dog" has evolved from the *alpha* concept and is interpreted in some quarters as a dog that must be physically dominated in order to maintain control of its behaviour. This has resulted in a long line of dog trainers who use this philosophy as their main methodology. But, is physical domination really the most effective way to modify the behaviour of a dog who has exhibited what is commonly referred to a "dominant tendencies?"

Certainly not, according to the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB). In a recent position statement on the "Use of Dominance Theory in the Behavior Modification of Animals," the AVSAB clearly does not recommend techniques that "advocate dominance hierarchy theory and the subsequent confrontational

training that follows from it." Their position statement goes on to assert that "overall, the use of dominance theory to understand human-animal interactions leads to an antagonistic relationship between owners and their pets."

Furthermore, the AVSAB explains how leadership differs from dominance and is preferable to it when attained through positive means. The last quote that I will reference from the position statement is that "leadership is established when a pet owner can consistently set clear limits for behavior and effectively communicate the rules by immediately rewarding the correct behaviors and preventing access to or removing the rewards for undesirable behaviors before those undesirable behaviors are reinforced."

On a personal level, I'm really pleased that such authorities on animal behaviour are publicly promoting this concept. It has been part of my personal philosophy for the last several years to advocate positive leadership techniques to dog owners, and discourage physical force and punishment-based methods as inappropriate means to foster the human-animal bond. Indeed, especially when attempting to modify the behaviour of an aggressive dog, such methods can be counter-productive and actually exacerbate aggressive behaviour in the long run.

Hopefully, by emphasizing the concept of leadership over dominance and making dog owners aware of the difference, problem behaviours of many dogs will be managed more successfully. This will result in fewer dogs being given up to shelters, more successful adoptions of such dogs, and a reduction in the large numbers of dogs who are unnecessarily euthanized due to their undesirable behaviour. In other words, a win-win situation for all involved. 🐾

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