

Leader is *not* a 4-letter word!

Melanie Schlaginhaufen

Assuming a leadership role is a very *good* thing, because dogs require a protective pack leader in order to feel secure. Leader is not a dirty word; in fact, it has six letters, not four. Here are seven important leadership concepts to keep in mind while building a strong relationship with your dog.

1. Dogs are genetically programmed by their creator to discern the most competent individual in the pack, and to defer leadership to that individual. Perhaps God hard-wired this into our dogs for their own safety, because just like a human toddler, if they are not under protective leadership they could easily be in harm's way.
2. If a dog does not discern that a human (or humans) in the family is capable of strong leadership, then they may begin to follow another dog in the family, who comes across to them as the pack leader, or they may step into a role of leadership themselves.
3. The most important concept in understanding how dogs perceive leadership is: *Leaders act, followers react. I repeat, leaders act, followers react.* Take a look at your daily life with your dog—are you initiating things, and your dog is responding, or is your dog “acting” and you are reacting (whether positively or negatively?)
4. *Leaders can make you move.* If your dog is in your way, you should *not* step over him. Any dog should quickly respond to a light tap of the foot (if they are laying down in the hallway, for example) and move to let you pass by. Think of



- how it is when the boss walks down the hallway at work---the waters part!
5. *Leaders control the most valued resources*—this means that toys should be in a toy box, or up in a basket in an area the dog cannot reach. Communicate to the dogs that the toys are *yours* and

you are allowing the dog to play with them, by giving him only one at a time, and asking him to perform a simple obedience exercise (such as “down”) before giving it to him when he needs something to play with or chew on. Valued resources also include things such as the best resting spots. If you allow your dog on the furniture (I do), then the dog should immediately respond to commands such as “move” or “off”.



6. *Leaders project calm, assertive (not aggressive) energy.* The leader wannabe is the one in a dog pack who is always engaging in aggressive displays. The leader can control other dogs with just a “look” or a simple body movement or a lift of their lip. If you are unfamiliar with the concept of portraying this calm type of leadership, please watch “*The Dog Whisperer*” on television each week—Cesar Millan is excellent at projecting this type of energy.
7. *Leaders can enforce the rules.* This can be something as simple as sitting politely while a stranger is petting your dog, or it can be something as difficult for a pup as obeying a “no counter surfing rule”.

The photo above shows my friend Pam Gaynor and me working with her plush coated German Shepherd “Elka”. Dogs such as Shepherds should be well aware of human leadership. Because Pam has always been in a leadership role with Elka, she has been able to do Therapy Dog work in nursing homes and hospitals, as well as enjoy various types of dog training classes with her.

Keep in mind that being under the umbrella of calm, confident pack leadership is necessary for a dog to feel safe and secure. It is not just dogs displaying dominance behaviors that need to be convinced of the human leadership in the household. Fearful dogs have as much need, perhaps an even greater need, to understand that you are in charge, so that they can learn to relax and feel secure. One last, but very important thing to understand about the leadership role we must assume for our dogs’ protection—*leaders control territory*. This concept is so important that we have a separate section devoted to it in our *Beyond Whispering* training booklet. See the *Beyond Whispering* section of our website for more information.

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