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Letting Go of the Dominance Paradigm

Some Thoughts on Letting Go of the Dominance Paradigm in Training Dogs

*“You’ve got to show your dogs whose boss. To be a good dog trainer, the owner must be **Alpha**. The problem with your dog is that he’s too dominant.”*

If you read dog-training books or hang around with dog people, you are bound to come across statements like these. Somehow, people have decided that being the “top wolf” to your dog is going to make him a better pet or solve training problems. If you could just put the dog “in his place” he would be obedient and listen to your “commands.”

I have found that using the dominance paradigm in training dogs is counter-productive.

Let me elaborate some of my thoughts:

1. **Comparing assertive behavior of adult breeding wolves to dog training is ludicrous.** “Alpha” wolves (now called “breeders” by most wolf biologists) do not train other members of the pack. Current wolf studies have also shown that they are not always the leading animals when wolves travel, nor do they always lead in hunting or eat first when a kill is made.
2. **Even “wolf people” stay away from the wolf paradigm when dealing with human socialized wolves.** Many years ago, when I became a wolf educator, most of us dealing with socialized wolves believed that we needed to act like wolves to interact with them. From the time the wolves were pups, we handled the “social climbing” animals with vigilance, aware that we must be “dominant” for them to remain “submissive.”

Unfortunately, this method of handling wolves backfired on many of those who used it. When humans attempted to interact with these socialized wolves in this way, the wolves were more apt to challenge and hurt the humans when they reached sexual maturity.



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At Wolf Park, a wolf education and research facility in Battle Ground, Indiana, the staff has learned that careful non-confrontational behavioral shaping methods work best in dealing with the wolves. The staff does not attempt to act like wolves when interacting with them.

3. **The dominance paradigm assumes that a socially repressed dog will be an “obedient” dog.** Dogs learn by exploring their environment and repeating behaviors that are rewarding to them. Good trainers manage their dogs to prevent them from practicing unwanted behavior and to reward behavior that they want to foster. They do not attempt to suppress behavior through intimidation or force.
4. **Dogs that are pushed around by their owners who are attempting to show them “who’s boss” are more apt to redirect aggression to other humans and dogs.** If someone has been picking on you, you're more apt to take out your frustration on someone else.
5. **Often a dog’s body postures and behavior are labeled “dominant” when, in fact, the animal is really fearful or defensive.** Sadly, if a fearful or defensive dog is “corrected” by a misinformed trainer who is concerned about the dominance issue, the result will most likely be a dog that becomes even more fearful and defensive.
6. **Working with a dog using the dominance paradigm sets up the owner and the dog for a confrontational rather than cooperative relationship.** Good trainers don't let themselves get into “power struggles” with their dogs.
7. **Diagnosing behavioral problems within the dominance paradigm leads to enacting policies with the dog that are useless and not apt to deal with the real training issues that need to be addressed.**

I am surprised that the dominance paradigm continues to flourish despite all the information that disputes its use. Last year, when we began working with Kaddi, the African village dog my daughter gifted us, many of her less desirable behaviors could have been characterized as dominance related to those who choose to think in that mindset. Her gut reaction to any fearful situation was to charge, snarling with tail and hackles raised. She was an ardent resource guarder who seemed to go out of her way to try to stare down our other dogs. I don't know how many misguided dog people told me she was a “dominant bitch” and I should be correcting her and lowering her social status. I chose to prove them wrong. I suspected that Kaddi was

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just fearful in many situations so I continued a careful socialization program. For many months, she was hand fed, kibble by kibble practicing eye contact and other operant behaviors. We intervened by luring her away from stare-downs with our dogs and rewarding her for choosing alternate behavior. She is doing wonderfully in all respects. She is very lucky that we chose to train rather than dominate her, and so are we.

by Beth Duman