

The unexpected link between people leaders and dog trainers

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When I consider the aspects of “guiding, managing and leading” and apply these to the principles of people leadership, dog training and dog ownership, bizarre as it may seem, I believe that there are many parallels to be found. I think this is important to write about in view of the title of the book.

It is the nature of dogs that allows us to draw these remarkable parallels and get down to the surprising similarity between people leadership and dog training. Just like people, dogs like to be led in an open honest way. Give them this respect, and like us, they will give you the results that a leader (or a dog owner) is looking for. Let me explain my perspective.

When leading people in a global business environment we often refer to the tasks facing the “normal person”. But what is a normal person? All people are different, and as humans we work hard to carve out our own identities based on our expectations, values and of course the input and guidance we receive from our leaders. Nevertheless, we could argue that normal people are those who tend to follow societal expectations, acknowledge usual and “accepted” interpretations of right and wrong and appear to be happy to follow strong leadership. Of course there are always exceptions to the rule, but let us at least agree that most of us are “normal” law abiding citizens that do not aim to go through life doing a bad job or question and disrupt socially accepted principles.

But is this the same with dogs? We could argue that dogs, if allowed to live and breed following their natural devices will also create their own identity. And dog trainers like to refer to “normal” dogs just like business leaders like to refer to “normal” people. For many professional dog breeders and trainers, including myself, I believe a normal dog is one that is reared and kept according to its genetic background. More to the point, respect this background in the same manner a leader should respect the follower, and the results will be far more successful than not.

Many dogs can be trained to fulfill specific tasks and become experts at doing it. Show dogs are trained to do just that – show off and look good. Hunting dogs are bred and trained to hunt and retrieve. This is the same with people. Train them in a specific task, and often they will learn how to master it. But they will never internalize and optimise these tasks if their heart is not in it. Rather the leader should lead with trust and passion. A leader who gives people the freedom and trust to follow their natural instinct will more often than not have a reasonably engaged workforce trying hard to do the right thing. And this is the same with dogs. Those that are *allowed* to follow their natural instinct will also lead a life displaying uncompromising and loyal honesty towards its owner.

I intentionally place the word “allowed” in the paragraph above in italics; most dog owners believe their dogs to be subordinate just like some business leaders may view their employees to be subordinate. And in thinking this, many dog owners proceed to educate and instruct their dog and expect an appropriate result or response in return.

This places the burden of “failure” automatically over to the dog if its behaviour is not what we expect it to be. Surely, if we as owners have told, taught and conditioned the dog again and again, it would have figured it out pretty quickly, right? The dog simply “has” to know! It should sit when told to sit. Lie down when told to lie down. This drill instructor regime is designed to condition the dog into absolute obedience. And the closest parallel we can find to this when we consider people leadership can be found in the armed forces. Regardless of external circumstances, mental state, headaches, backaches or other stress, military personnel are drilled into following orders.

The *top dog*, be they an army commander or dog owner in these examples, commands and expects the *underdog* to always promptly deliver that which has been methodically drummed into them. More often than not, the top dog believes these expectations to be justified and refuses to listen to reason; their superior attitude entitles them to occupy the moral high ground. Knowingly or unknowingly, people like control. In my view, self-awareness, critical questioning, personal motives and maybe even a touch of addiction for success and power – even if the latter is only power over the follower – are suppressed and emotion is often absent in this leadership & ownership style.

And a lack of emotion can create resentment amongst the followers – whether human or dogs. Followers do not respond well in the long term to direct, authoritative and dishonest leadership. Followers will cease to follow. People will leave and dogs will find a new owner.

To avoid this, leaders and dog owners or trainers alike should channel their energies not for personal gain, power or maintenance of position; rather they should use their creativity to be frank, approachable, understanding and prepared for open communication. This approach to “guiding, managing and leading” consists of four pillars which not only form a fundamental basis for people leadership and honest team work, but also are vital for safe, secure and successful dog training:

1. Definition of short term, middle term and long term targets combined with a stepped plan to achieve those targets.
2. Definition of participating personalities (human vs. dog; owner versus trainer; leader versus employee) and creation of SMART goals to adapt to the speed and capabilities of these personalities
3. Clear positioning based on the findings in point 2 to allow for the gradual preparation of handling security. This step is essential because the dog needs the security of his master to perceive him as authentic and to accept his signals and commands without confusion. People are no different; followers need to be able to trust their leader and have clarity in communication to be able to maximize personal performance.
4. Ongoing quality control: the attitude of the (dog) trainer towards his protégé has to be permanently monitored and when needed corrected to ensure that the targets are achieved and when deviation is apparent, corrective measures are taken. It is vital that while doing this the leader / trainer has the necessary motivation and self-awareness to maintain positive teamwork with the “performer” (the retrieving dog) and ensure emotions on both sides remain positive, rather than frustrated or annoyed.

Of course, a clear advantage that a dog trainer leader has over a business leader is that the dog cannot lie; the dog will not say one thing and do another; it will not busily follow your guidance whilst working to undo your good work behind your back. It is not interested in its own power, rather only a master that it can trust and bond with. In this respect the leader can learn from the led.

However, both dog trainers and business leaders do share a common responsibility to lead honestly and engage their followers. The better they achieve this, the faster a trusting connection between the *top dog* and the *underdog* will develop. Honesty leads to trust, trust leads to loyalty, loyalty leads to reliability and in the end a permanent bond between the leaders and followers – regardless of whether they have two or four legs.