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BOARD:
Sally Hensen, Noren Walzer, Marie Zaman (membership)
LEKC meets on the 4th Wednesday of the month @ The Lady Lake Library W. Guava St.
Website: www.lekcdogclub.org



Leadership and Pack Structure with Dogs

Establishing leadership and pack structure is probably the single most important thing to do when you own a dog. Whether it's your long time family pet, a new puppy, or one you rescued, you will want to start off with this basic foundation. Dogs without leadership and structure can start to display signs of dominance, show aggressive behavior, become fearful, and have separation anxiety. If you notice that your dog shows behaviors like these, you may need to step back and re-evaluate where you stand as a leader. Great leadership and structure may not completely fix or "cure" the unwanted behaviors in your dog, but it will certainly make a great impact.

What is leadership?

At some point in our lives we have been given specific rules to follow; for example: curfews, bedtimes, manners, etc. These were all tools to help pave the way of how we live. The same guidelines are used with our dogs. Dogs need to understand who to look up to for guidance. A good example of this is when you give your dog a command or tell him/her to do something. Does he or she do what you ask every time? If so, that's awesome! However, I will be willing to bet at one point he or she will not do what you ask. This is where many dog owners fail because they don't always follow through with a command or task. Whenever we let our dogs get away with not doing what we ask, they don't see us as a strong leader, and overtime notice that every task does not have to be done 100%. This is why we must follow through with simple commands, big or small, and take the necessary time to ensure they understand us. Small tasks go a long way in displaying leadership with our furry friends.

What is pack structure?

If you have ever seen a pack of 20 wolves on a wildlife show, or even a small pack of dogs roaming together at an off-leash park, there is rank between each pack. Picture a totem pole with the higher importance being at the top and the less important working its way to the bottom. It's through structure and leadership that each member of the pack knows his/her place. Dogs don't have to be mean to each other some groups of dogs it can be fluid. Dogs have their own way of showing structure; for example: mounting (humping), biting legs, and barking are just a few. These are signs of dominance; however, through this dominate behavior is how they determine rank. You are probably thinking now, how can I show my dog his "rank" within my home? No matter the size of the household, your dog would never "rank" above any family member. A very small cue that dogs pick up on, but most dog owners ignore, is letting your dog go out the door first and having him/her go inside before you enter. It may not seem like much, but the dog views the home as "mine" and not a shared environment. Once you start to reverse these roles, the dog begins to see that the home is not "mine", but instead is your "den" that you allow him/her to live in. This is just one simple example of giving structure to your dog's environment. Some trainers disagree on pack structure with a pet dog. However, any experienced trainers agree that clear structure, rules and consistency make a well-adjusted and happy dog (and

owner). As you can imagine, thinking of yourself as a fair, balanced and consistent (pack) leader will help you be clearer and more structured with your dog.

Now that you have a better understanding of what leadership and pack structure is, you can see how they go hand and hand. It is never too early or late in a dog's life to start giving them this foundation. *Dogs need structure and a good leader, and without this they may act out in various behaviors and be left trying to determine who is in charge.* So the next time your dog chews up the couch or runs for the neighbor take a step back and think as a leader what you could be doing to help him/her see you differently. Being a leader does not mean being mean, or dominant but rather provide consistent rules and direction. Remember with any kind of training and leadership, commitment on your part is going to play the biggest role for success. (SWK)

Quotable Quotes:

“I want the world to be better because I was here.” Will Smith

“I can't believe God put us on this earth to be ordinary.” Lou Holtz

“I get by with a little bit of help from my friends” Ringo Starr

*If the world keeps getting smaller every day, why does the cost of a stamp keep going up?

*“There is no such thing as a little freedom. Either you are all free, or you are not free” Walter Cronkite

*“I've never seen a smiling face that was not beautiful” Anonyms

“As you get older three things happen. The first is your memory goes, and I can't remember the other two” Norman Wisdom

“When you go into court you are putting your fate into the hands of twelve people who weren't smart enough to get out of jury duty.” Norm Crosby

“It is what you think, not what you achieve, that makes you happy.” Debasish Mridha

*Coffee News



BRAGS:



Johnny did well his first time in Rally Master. He scored a 97 in both Trials and placed 3rd in each as well! He was very good all and all. IPOC did a good job of distancing, and all other protocols.

Ellen



Counter Productive

How to prevent your dog from helping himself to any unattended food or food-like items he finds on kitchen counters, dining from tables, and other accessible locations. (Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA)

One of the hardest canine behaviors for some dog owners to understand (or forgive) is counter-surfing-when your dog helps himself to some edible item that you or another household human left unattended. The behavior isn't just limited to counters; some dogs help themselves to any food left on tables, desks, coffee tables, or any other unguarded surface. Some dogs specialize in finding any food you have hidden in your car!

Counter Surveillance

Smart dog owners understand that canids are naturally “Opportunistic eaters”- they are generally programmed to eat food when they see or find it. Of course, that doesn't mean we should just let them help themselves to anything in the house that they can find! Dogs are genetically programmed to do a *lot* of things we don't just let them do.

However, it does mean that we have to scrupulously manage our dog's environment, in hopes that they never learn the joy of counter-surfing in the first place, but also so that if they already have, we can reprogram the learning (i.e., modify the behavior.)

Management is pretty simple. It just means never leaving unattended food anywhere your dog can get it. Alternatively, you can restrain or put your dog away (closed in another room, behind a baby gate, tethered, or crated) if you must leave food out.

If you do this starting from puppyhood, so your dog *never* gets an opportunity to abscond with the deli tray or butter dish on the counter, there's a good chance he won't decide to leap onto counters when he reaches adulthood.

Still, it's not a good idea to take good behavior for granted, or frequently present your dog with unnecessarily hard-to-ignore temptations.

Our two dogs have never counter-surfed; they are both small (under 35 pounds) and have reasonably good house manners, so we trust that our food is safe on the kitchen counter or dining room table (even though they are bot quite capable of jumping that high, if they wanted to). I wouldn't dream, however, of leaving food on our table and walking out of the room; there's no point in tempting fate!

If you choose to manage your dog, rather than keeping the counters reliably free of food, make good use of our usual list of management tools to prevent your dog from having access to food on counters and tables: Doors, baby gates, crates, exercise pens, leashes, tethers, and (last but not least, as if it has the best chance of failure due to human error) direct supervision.

Not Guilty

Some dogs seem incorrigible about helping themselves to any food they can find in the house – and some humans get *hopping* mad about it. “I’ve punished him many times for this,” they say. “He knows he’s not supposed to do it. He only does it when I’m not in the room, and he always looks guilty afterward. So clearly he knows better!”

The thing is, he really doesn’t know better. What he does know is that bad things happen (you get angry, or perhaps even a little violent) if he takes food off the counter when you are there. However, nothing bad happens if he takes yummy stuff off the counter when you aren’t there, so it’s okay – and safe- to do it then.

Generally, by the time you discover his latest transgression and punish him for it (we don’t recommend this), the punishment is too far removed from his action, he won’t associate the punishment with his taking the food. All he really knows is that sometimes you are grumpy when you enter the kitchen (or wherever the food has been.)

So what about the guilty look? If your dog doesn’t know he did a bad thing, why does he look guilty?

In 2009, dog cognition scientist Alexandra Horowitz, PH.D., author of *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know* (Scribner, 2009) and *Being a Dog: Following the Dog Into a World of Smell* (Scribner, 2016), tried to answer that question with a study, “Disambiguating the ‘Guilty Look.’”

Horowitz set up a situation where the owner would put a treat where their dog could reach it, tell the dog to leave it alone, and leave the room. When the owner returned, Horowitz sometimes reported to the owner that the dog had eaten the treat even if he hadn’t (the researchers removed the food from the plate). In these instances, the owners most frequently described their dogs as looking guilty, even though, unbeknownst to them, the dog had not taken the treat. Additionally, if the owner’s scolded the dogs, the dogs frequently looked “guilty” – whether they had eaten the treat or not. In fact, Horowitz also found that when scolded, the most exaggerated guilty looks were frequently offered by the dogs who had not eaten the treat!

The behavior and expression that owners often think is an indication of guilt – a hunched, lowered posture, ears back, eyes averted, sometimes accompanied by a submissive grin – is actually *appeasement behavior*; it indicates that the dog is fearful. It means he has read your body language, understands that you are upset, and is trying to appease you so you don’t take it out on him.

If your dog’s counter-surfing and your anger about it is separated in time by more than several seconds, he has no idea why you are angry, but he doesn’t want your wrath descending on him. Even if you aren’t overly angry, he can tell when you are upset about something, so he offers body language intended to deflect your emotions.

Counter Intelligence: Modification

My own unproven and untested theory, based on anecdotal evidence alone, is that the truly dedicated counter-surfers tend to be smart, confident dogs with resilient personalities. Some are truly masters of the art of taking food – practically from under your very nose, without you ever noticing. You have to admire ninja skills like that! You might even be in the kitchen with your dog and think you’re doing a good job of managing, but you turn your back for a second and oops! The holiday ham has been swiped from the counter.

There is certainly value in modifying counter-surfing behavior, especially if you have one of those expert surfers, or if management won’t be consistent in your household; perhaps you care for an elderly parent with dementia, or have distracted, spontaneous children roaming your home. When scrupulous management isn’t possible, by all means, use behavior modification!

Here are some useful training tools you can teach your counter-surfing canine:

Mat training. Teach your dog that her place in the kitchen is on her mat, conveniently placed in the corner. Cue her to go to her mat as needed, and then watch her to start going to her mat on her own, without a cue. When this happens, be sure to reinforce her happily and generously!

Work to increase the duration of time that you want her to stay on the mat, until she will stay there happily for long periods, with long pauses between reinforcers. Continue to reinforce her on her mat in the kitchen (or wherever food is present) to keep the behavior strong.

Walk Away. The “Leave it” cue tells your dog not to eat whatever she is coveting; in contrast, the “Walk Away” moves her promptly away from the food that she’s eyeing on the counter or table. In many cases, this is more effective, because it tells the dog what to do (and reinforces her for doing it) instead of just telling her what not to do.

Being able to teach your dog to move away from something when asked is an invaluable tool, both for your dog’s safety and for your sanity. It has become one of my favorite behaviors to teach and use.