

The Rules of Leadership

(Read these carefully, there will be a quiz -- 😊)

We have recognized for quite awhile that the reason people and dogs get along so well is that we are both “pack” animals – we feel happy and safe when living in a family group. Sadly, when we first began to study wolf packs thinking that this study would give us insight into our dogs, we observed the “pecking order” present in every pack, and some trainers concluded that we needed to “dominate” our dogs. As a result, several absurd and even cruel techniques such as the “alpha role” were adopted by a small group of trainers. Fortunately, more study has revealed that although dogs do, indeed, want a self-confident leader, humans can easily establish themselves as leaders by following a set of simple rules (rules that come from careful observation of dog “culture”). These rules give our dogs a clear message: “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” The result is a content, confident, and well-behaved companion.

1. **Make sure that the dog does not sleep in your chair or on your bed, but you can sit or stand in its place.** This seems silly but no pack leader would allow his space to be claimed by a subordinate. I know, some of us love to have the cuddly pup in bed with us, but it needs to be on your terms. If you must have your pup on the bed, make it clear that you get in bed first and then invite the dog to join you. One of my dogs particularly enjoys my chair, but anytime I walk toward it, she gets down.
2. **Make your dog move if it is in your way, do not walk around the dog.** Again, you would be deferring to him if you walked around him or tried to step over him. There are plenty of people in rehab because they stepped over a dog and it jumped up. Walk toward your dog until you are crowding him. If he doesn’t immediately pop up and move, tell him to move and then walk right through the space. This also teaches the small dog to not get under your feet.
3. **Feeding time is a calm, quiet event CONTROLLED BY YOU. Teach your puppy to sit and stay as you place his food on the floor. When it is clear that the pup is waiting calmly for your permission, gently release him to his food using the same release word you use for all stays. If you have four dogs, you should be able to put them all on a stay, place their dishes in front of each dog, stand up, take a relaxed breath, praise them for waiting, and gently release them to their food.**
4. **Do not allow the dog to push past you down the hallway of your house or enter a room before you.** The leader is always first and should be followed into the room. If you have a big pushy dog, block his attempt, tell him “back” and “wait” and you go through first. This will not take long if you establish this early on and are consistent.
5. **Make sure that all games are controlled by you.** This means we control when the play begins and when it stops. If you enter into strength games, make sure you have taught the dog to relinquish the tug on your command and not to try to take the toy back. *We will practice this in class.* Once the toy has been released, it is yours until you initiate the game again. This goes for any size dog.
6. **Steps are the same as the hallway. You occupy the top step so that the dog comes up to you.** He must follow you up the stairs. Your dog should not occupy space where he is above your head. Since we live in Florida, this is not an issue for many of us.

7. **When going in and out of exterior doors the dog should wait for permission, follow you, and definitely not push past you.** If the dog places its head under the doorknob when you place your hand on it, it is intending to push through the door first. I will hit the door with my hand or slam the door in its face when it tries to push through the first crack of light that appears (be careful not to hurt its nose). It will quickly learn to stay back a pace. You can also use your “wait” command here. Practice every time the dog goes out or in. A good “wait” can save your dog’s life.
8. **Do not pet the dog for no reason.** This means that when it is pushing your hand or demanding affection, don’t comply. Wait until it settles and then call the dog to you or ask it to do something; then, reward it with petting and affection. We should make the dog earn all its privileges, stroking, eating, being let out, etc. All demands should be met by an instruction to “sit,” “down,” or “stay,” just something simple to ensure that if the dog wants something from us, he has to earn it first.
9. **Do not love on the dog for no reason.** This is unsolicited attention and a subordinate dog does this to the leader. If you just can’t bear it, call him to you, ask for a behavior (sit/stay, down/stay, etc.), praise and *then give him some love.*
10. **Meet all attempts at body dominance with a calm but firm “Get off” or “NO.”** Some of these are attempts to mouth arms, hands, or any part of the body, clothing, or leash. Also blocking, leaning, pushing with any part of the body, jumping up on you uninvited and crawling up on top of you. Puppies often begin this behavior when they are getting over excited. This is time for a “time out” in the crate—NOT punishment, just a time to settle down. This is a time to be calm, speak in a low voice, and be clear. *Nothing good comes to a dog who is mouthing you.*
11. **You greet all people and their dogs first.** This is simple; the leader greets first and decides who is friend or foe. You also have the time to evaluate the situation. Make greeting people as they come into your home a calm experience. You may have to warn your guests ahead of time to ignore the dog and to keep it “on the down low.” Friends want to fuss over our dogs as they would over our children. Ask them ahead of time to please help you in your training by following your instructions. Dogs naturally show excitement as the strangers enter their territory. Since it is your territory, not theirs, you decide the energy of the greeting. All visitors must focus their attention on you and ignore the dog. This gives the shy dog a chance to sniff the visitor without threat. It also lowers the status of the dominant dog, as the visitor defers to you, not your dog. Btw, the one exception to this rule is the very young puppy (8-12 weeks) where socialization is just beginning. Allow/encourage a young pup to greet strangers first.

These simple procedures enforce values that the canine mind can understand. They establish us as leaders and initiators of all activities and not the other way around.

Please note that effective leaders are never gruff, stern, or unpleasant. Truly effective leaders are calm, confident, and cheerful. Think through ahead of time how to implement these rules. If the dog immediately jumps on the bed and doesn’t want to get off (mine could become deaf and REALLY heavy), put a lead on him, cheerfully ask him to get down, and if he refuses, use the

lead to calmly and smoothly pull him off. If he insists on getting back up, maybe he needs to stay in the crate at night.

By the way, the crate is always a good choice for some time out if he's over excited or you need a break or some time to think. The crate should never be used as punishment, however.

Whenever he goes into the crate, make it a positive. Cookies or special treats always follow entry into the crate. You may be feeling mad and upset (the over excited puppy just *drew blood*), but act cheerful, move quickly to the crate promising a cookie, and be sure that cookie always appears. I keep a cookie jar on top of every crate (and near every door). By putting him in the crate, you've stopped the unwanted behavior, you and he both get a chance to settle down, and you get a chance to think – to plan what you will do next.

*** According to the Monks of New Skete, famous trainers of GSD's, the best place for your dog's crate, especially if he sleeps in it at night, is your bedroom. For a dog, your bedroom is a "scent feast." All night, as the dog sleeps, he is taking in your scent, feeling calm, safe, and happy.