

## What does “Leadership” mean to a dog?

Of all the things you can do to create a happy, harmonious relationship with your dog, establishing yourself as his leader is the most important. It’s also the kindest thing you can do for your dog, and the thing he wants and needs most from you.

Being your dog’s leader is as much a state of mind as it is anything else. This state of mind is easy to get into when you know that your dog is happiest and healthiest when you “lead” him, and then when you know specific things you can do to communicate your leadership role. Communicating leadership to our dog is much like communicating leadership to our children through things like curfews, TV limits, and junk food quotas. The difference is, our children often act “unhappy” with our limits...but we know better than to let that outweigh our convictions about what’s best for our kids. Dogs, on the other hand, don’t get “unhappy” with limits. They expect them, take them in stride, and are actually comforted by them. They expect to be told what to do and where to do it. Without this leadership, dogs get confused, and then may start behaving “badly” – exhibiting those unwanted behaviors like jumping up on people, bolting out the front door, pulling on the leash, and barking or chewing “inappropriately”.

So, what can you do to assure your dog that you’re in charge, and he can happily go about his business of being a pet dog in a pack of humans?

## General Duties of the Leader

1. Establish the rules
2. Enforce the rules
3. Maintain social order (leader chooses who is in the pack, and what authority each does or does not have)

Sounds like common sense, right? Well, it is. Once you understand how your dog perceives leadership, and the specific things that communicate leadership, it will become second nature to you. And if you’re clever about it, you can use Leadership Exercises to get a well-behaved dog (one that doesn’t shoot out of the front door or scramble out of the car or beg at the table). A general concept to keep in mind: *putting a behavior that the dog wants to do on hold until you say OK is a very good way to be the alpha and keep the dog well behaved.*

## Specific Things That Show Dogs Who Is the Leader

There are a variety of small things you can do that *assert your leadership in a non-traumatic way*. Below is a list of Leadership Exercises that should be implemented *as soon as your dog comes to live with you*. If you’ve fallen behind a bit, don’t worry. One beautiful thing about dogs is that they live in the moment – they don’t yearn for yesterday or carry around baggage about what used to be.

You can rest assured that your dog, unlike your kid, isn't thinking "Jeez, I liked her so much better when she didn't make me sit for my dinner!"

These exercises outline specific privileges that a good leader would either expect or assume.

1. **Leaders are in charge of food** – what's eaten, where it's eaten, and the behavior required to get it. Obviously, food is an extremely valuable resource to a dog, and they expect it to be treated as such. Therefore, your dog fully expects that there will be limits and requirements surrounding him getting his dinner. Dogs are not natural "grazers" – they are wired to eat what's put in front of them because in their natural world, the supply of food is not limitless and a lot of work goes into getting it. That's why you shouldn't "free feed" your dog (leaving a bowl of food around for them to eat whenever they want). A 24-hour buffet goes against a dog's natural behavior. It's also important your dog know that his food comes from you, the leader. They don't attach any value to the fact that you're the one who goes to the store, buys the food, and lugs it home. This is why I recommend 'scenting' your dog's food by using your hands to mix it up with a little warm water (the liquid also enhances the aroma and makes the dry kibble tastier for your dog). And most important, *your dog must behave in a certain way to earn the privilege of eating*. Require your dog to sit before you put the bowl down<sup>1</sup> or sit/stay in front of a bowl<sup>2</sup> until you release them to eat.
2. **Leaders set the pace and the direction on a walk**. Walking is a primal need for all dogs – even the teeny guys that don't require much exercise – and the "all-business walk" is a great training tool and relationship builder. Don't allow your dog to sniff or mark whenever he wants. A proper walk means he is keeping pace with you and he's moving forward *without* pulling on the leash. I guarantee that you'll see your dog get into a natural rhythm shortly into an "all-business walk". It's mentally and physically healthy for them to focus on moving forward. Then, when you decide it's O.K., your dog can have a little time to sniff the flowers, respond to some pee-mail, or run off-leash back to the house.
3. **Leaders go through doorways (or up stairways) first**. Use your body to block your dog from going through doorways (especially those in and out of the house and into your bedroom) before you. In the beginning of your leadership training, pause at the threshold and have them wait behind you until you OK them through. It may seem cumbersome at first, but you won't have to go through the motions very long before your dog just gets that you go first and it is unacceptable for him to shove past you.
4. **Leaders do not beg for attention or give it immediately to followers**. This is one of the most important rules and, because it can be

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<sup>1</sup> Puppies 10 weeks – 6 months of age

<sup>2</sup> Dogs over 6 months of age

- so subtle, one of the easiest to mess up. Too much attention or attention at the wrong time can result in a demanding, annoying dog that constantly nudges your arm for a pet or brings you a tennis ball for a throw – and then doesn't take the hint to move on. Unconstructive attention can also give a dog an inflated sense of his role in the pack. So, by **IGNORING** (no talking, no touching, no eye contact) your dog at certain times, such as when you first walk in the door or the room, you're actually speaking volumes. You're saying quite clearly that you will pay attention when you're good and ready, and when doggy has settled down and is behaving in a way deserving of it. *Don't think you're hurting your dog's "feelings"—remember, they're happiest and healthiest when they have a strong leader, and strong leaders show affection and attention only under certain circumstances.*
5. **Leaders say when play begins and when it ends.** You must initiate play with your dog, not the other way around. Although it's tempting to respond to your dog's demands (and no mistaking, it's a demand) to play when he brings you a toy or to give him some lovin' when he barks for it, you must ignore him until he's moved onto something else, then invite him over for play and affection.
  6. **Leaders do not let their personal space be invaded.** Your dog mustn't be allowed to crowd you while you're trying to watch TV or get underfoot while you're trying to cook dinner. He must be *invited* to visit you on the couch or for a snuggle up on the bed. And if you're busy hugging on someone else in your "pack" (like your spouse or your kid), he is not allowed to interrupt. We've all seen those dogs whose owners say "he's just jealous" as he tries to get between owners and their objects of affection. It's not jealousy. It's a sense of entitlement and the dog's desire to assert status.
  7. **Leaders assign resting spots for other pack members.** Dogs should learn to sleep comfortably in a crate in the beginning stages of training, and have a bed or "place" where they are told to go to get out of the way.
  8. **Leaders are confident, and stay calm and in control.** If you show anxiety, your dog will interpret that as a reason to be fearful, shy, aggressive, or obnoxious. And if you show extreme excitement, your dog will read that as a great excuse to jump around and be unruly. If you have an excitable dog, greet him calmly. If your dog isn't particularly well-behaved (yet!) on leash, pay special attention to remaining calm and in control in the face of what is usually a trigger for your dog.
  9. **Leaders do not offer "free" treats.** Your dog must earn everything he holds dear; food, affection, a ball toss. Feel free to reward your dog for lying quietly in his bed and chewing a toy.
  10. **Leaders assume the higher ground** (e.g. beds, couches, chairs, etc.). Teach your dog that he is not entitled to climb up on furniture unless he is invited. And no piece of furniture (including his own bed) is *his*, meaning that if you ask him to get down, he should do so willingly.

11. **Leaders never change their direction** or step over the dog. Your dog must not be allowed to get underfoot and in the way.

Please be aware that as your leadership status becomes apparent in your dog's behavior, you can slowly introduce or return his privileges. It isn't very often that you will have to completely maintain the strict code of behavior that is laid out in the Leadership Exercises. If you return only 1 or 2 privileges at a time you can determine if that privilege causes the dog's behavior to regress. For example, if the dog reverts back to an unacceptable behavior because you let him sleep on the bed, then you would immediately remove that privilege. There are some dogs that can't handle certain privileges, like sleeping on the bed, without causing them to behave badly. By only allowing privileges that don't affect the dog's good behavior you can give the dog a great deal of freedom in his life while still being a good leader.