

The Dominance Theory

By Norma Jeanne Laurette

There's a common belief among dog owners and trainers that dogs will challenge their owners in an attempt to rise in rank and lead the pack. This theory has been around for decades and although still popular, the most respected canine behaviour experts in the world now believe this concept to be incorrect.

Let me begin by saying that like most of you, from an early age I was taught the dominance theory as it pertains to our relationship with our dogs. The concept of "ranking" comes from the idea that a wolf will challenge another of similar rank, hopefully winning the challenge and gaining higher status, control over resources and eventually leading the pack. Many believe this has been passed down over thousands of years affecting the behaviour of domestic dogs and their interactions with people. ^{R1} In reality, only unacquainted wolves living in captivity behave in a manner that appears as though they are competing for status, but in actuality it's due to confined, artificially created territories and limited resources. ^{R7}

Wolf packs living in the wild are dominated by one alpha male and one alpha female breeding pair. ^{R9} As soon as they are old enough to mate, the cubs will leave the pack to find mates and raise families of their own. This would indicate that every wolf is an alpha wolf only when raising young.





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Many dog owners and trainers often use the dominance theory to explain a variety of unwanted canine behaviour. This concept is also used to justify all kinds of unpleasant tools and techniques designed to over-power a dog with the objective of intimidating it into subservience. This type of training works in the way that the dog avoids certain behaviours for fear of punishment. These techniques teach avoidance but do nothing to teach the dog what you want it to do or address the root cause of the problem. It's much like a doctor treating a brain tumor with pain killers as opposed to removing the tumor – the problem will not go away.

Unfortunately, this approach has cost many dogs their lives. Dominance-based training often causes fear, aggression and a myriad of other unwanted stress-induced behaviours that result in more punishment, suffering for the dog and often euthanasia. In one case, a trainer in Florida actually killed a dog while attempting to force it into submission. After muzzling the dog and sitting on it for over an hour, the dog lost consciousness and later had to be euthanized due to its injuries. R10

Within my first year of instructing dog training classes, I stopped using all punishment based tools and techniques because I quickly realized the potential for harm to a dog's emotional and psychological well being. It quickly became apparent that punishment was eroding our dogs trust and damaging its temperament. What we need is respect based on trust – not fear. Trust and respect are sides of the same coin and I feel that a dog's trust in its guardian must be protected at all cost. Remember, it takes years to earn someone's trust but only seconds to destroy it and the repercussions can be huge.

Although I was no longer teaching the use of aversive tools or techniques, I did continue to teach the dominance theory and the importance of leading the pack. This theory has since been challenged and as a result I renewed my research on the subject. What I found is that although we need to be good leaders in order to teach and protect our dogs, this leadership has nothing to do with dominance. According to dog trainer Greg Ceci, no one willingly follows a forceful or frightening leader. Respected leaders are benevolent leaders and do not lead by force, they lead by example. To quote Dwight D. Eisenhower – "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it."



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During the socialization period of development, a puppy is imprinted with recognition of its own species. As a result, dogs do not identify humans as canines because we smell and behave differently. ^{R2} According to John Fisher, because dogs do not perceive us as dogs they will not compete with us for rank. ^{R3} Along with alpha position comes the responsibility of providing for and protecting the pack and because we provide everything our dogs need it would be counter-productive for a dog to challenge us for alpha position. ^{R4}

According to Coppinger dogs became isolated from their wild ancestors long ago resulting in a new species, the *Canis Familiaris* or domestic dog. Although some wolf-like behaviour remain in the domestic dog, because they are a different species it's not realistic to assume all dog behaviour will be the same as those of the wolf. ^{R6} And if we choose to compare domestic dog behaviour to its natural ancestors, it would only make sense to compare it to the wild wolf, not wolves trying to survive in the face of human interference. ^{R5}

I no longer use the word dominance to describe any aspect of the dog/human relationship as it appears to be a human's misinterpretation of canine motivation. Another reason is because many believe it gives them license to intimidate, scare, hurt or otherwise coerce their dogs into doing what they want them to do, or stopping behaviours they don't like. My opinion is that treating anyone in this manner, animal or human is abusive.

I no longer use the words obedience or command in association with training either. According to Oxford Dictionary the word obedience means submissive to another's will, which is not the relationship I want with my dog. The word command has its negative connotations as well as its definition is to order or demand. Instead of "obedience" I use the word "training" and instead of "command" I use "cue" which is much more accurate because our goal is not to coerce our dogs but to teach them. Training should be a fun, instructive and positive experience for both the dog and its guardian, therefore I have chosen to remove all words from my training program that may be misinterpreted or imply the use of domination, fear or intimidation.



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Since dog training is about teaching our dogs to understand our cues and signals and willingly choose the correct response, the dog's ability to learn is one of the keys to success. It's been scientifically proven that intimidation, force and pain cause stress, fear and anxiety, and that stress, fear and anxiety inhibit ones ability to think, learn, remember, problem-solve and make choices. Because of this, negativity is clearly counter-productive to the learning process.

All unwanted canine behaviour is normal and can be explained by simple motivation and reinforcement, cause and effect. It's quite simple, like us, dogs want good things, and whatever works to get the dog what it wants is what it's going to do. If you saw a \$100 bill lying in the street would you not pick it up? Why then is a dog helping itself to your dinner dominant when dogs are scavengers by nature? It's not a dominant dog that takes your food it's a normal dog doing what comes naturally to its species. Challenges with our dogs are not about dominance, they're about resources and a strong survival instinct.

This is what I believe now; one of the few commonalities between dogs and humans is that some are more assertive than others. Dogs that are more assertive will try harder to control resources, be it attention, food, sleeping place, freedom, etc. Since a dog's human companion controls all the resources, the human is the most valuable resource of all which is why dogs try to control their humans. Dogs that are less assertive are quicker to relinquish the resource to a more assertive dog or human. Since it's about the resource, it stands to reason that if you can control what the dog values, you can control the dog. An assertive dog is more of a challenge to train, but it has nothing to do with dominance, and if you're consistent you can shape this dog into an amazing companion. All you have to do is follow two rules:

1. Ignore all demands – if you don't follow, the dog can't lead. (with the exception of your dog communicating health issues or its need to go outside)
2. Require the dog to earn everything of value by performing a previously taught cue proving that you control the resources.



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Although it may seem that we're splitting hairs over terminology, the main difference is this. According to Oxford Dictionary, the word dominance means in control over a group and the word assertive means to insist. An assertive dog challenges another dog or person to win resources, not to control the dog or person; therefore, the challenge has nothing to do with rank, it has to do with resources.

The bottom line is this: if we want dogs to behave in a manner that's unnatural to its species, we have to control the environment to prevent the natural, yet unwanted behaviour. It's not a "bad" dog that steals food – it's a normal dog. It's not a "good" dog that leaves our food alone – it's a trained dog. We have to teach new, incompatible behaviours to the ones we don't want and reinforce them because it's unfair to punish a dog for behaving like a dog.

Although dogs need guidance to become good companions, dominating them has proven to be counter-productive at the very least, and abusive at its worst. It's time for people to stop blaming and punishing dogs under the dominance umbrella. Once people realize that it's not only easier, but also more fun and productive to teach instead of punish, only then will the world become a more humane place for our beloved dogs. With so much information and so many positive and effective options available, there's no excuse.

**If I don't want someone doing it to me
I don't do it to anyone else, animal or human.**

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