

From the desk of Mogens Eliassen

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Standard obedience training: What is in it for the dog?

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Different dogs do different things for different reasons and at different times. If a trainer ignores this, *somebody* is bound for trouble - the dog first, the owner next.

What determines a dog's behavior

Dogs are intelligent and will choose behaviors that satisfy their most important need at the time. What those needs are changes with time and a thousand of other factors. In addition to obvious needs, like safety, food, water, etc., the entire scale of social needs is a very important factor for dogs. We often ignore this. An example: being able to please its pack leader is more important for a dog than eating, even if it is hungry - provided it *has* a pack leader...

Because you legally own this dog, or you have a professional degree as trainer, or 80 years of experience, - this means squat to the dog... Any dog will judge your leadership qualifications on *your behavior* and how it fits with the dog's natural gene-coded picture of what a good pack leader is supposed to look like and act like. If you fit the picture well, you can get this dog to do anything you want, provided you can communicate your wish. If you don't fit this picture very well, it really does not matter how much good advice you get from how many knowledgeable people - it won't work for you and your dog...

Pack leadership qualifications

The big question of course is "What exactly does this ideal pack leader look like and behave like?"

Looks are, fortunately, not important. But even then, the answer is very complex. It is like asking, "What are the features of a great boss?" The answer to that will vary from one person to another - but there ARE some well-researched common features that are taught by thousands of trainers and management consultants.

In people management, there is room for positive reinforcement (praise, salary etc.), as well as negative reinforcement (reprimands, terminating etc.). You cannot provide good leadership without using both. Whether they work or not has little to do with the specific method, but has a whole lot to do with the quality of the management structure of the company, its fundamental leadership, and

exactly how the specific method is applied in the specific situation, time after time. Good leaders have few problems. Few leaders are good. Using a few good tools does not make you good. But using just one single bad one definitely makes you bad...

The good leaders are those who stimulate the wanted behavior from their subordinates' side. They do not restrict themselves to either punishing bad behavior or rewarding wanted behavior, both of which are re-active, not pro-active. They *educate* by providing effective structure, supporting safe social environments, and organize meaningful activities for their subordinates. It is a lot about *initiative*.

Choosing relevant training activities

When you have done all this to your dog, it makes sense to discuss specific training methods. Mind you, this is not done by attending any standard obedience classes, and it is most certainly not done either by having someone else train your dog...

And also, you have to do this on the dog's terms. The activities you choose must make sense to it. You have to respect that you are, in fact, dealing with a domesticated wolf, whether or not you call it a "pet". Simply restricting the dog from following its nature will certainly not cut it. You have to instigate and promote and support behaviors that make sense for the dog – and that takes that you think beyond your own convenience when you decide what you want the dog to do and what not.

If you take a standard obedience program as your primary objective, you are already doomed to fail....

I wish more professional trainers would be able to get this across to impatient average dog owners who are all too quick to see the problems they experience as being related to the dog. Sure they are, but they originate in the owner's own incompetence and lack of understanding of the fact that a dog is a social animal that functions in a social context, not a programmable robot.

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