

When 1 + 1 = 3

By Deborah Palman

Lately I have become fascinated with the impact of “pack drive” or the dominance/subordinate relationship between working dog handlers and their dogs. Time and time again, I see that the top levels of performance are only achieved when the dog feels the handler is the pack leader. I see many teams where the dog is easily motivated by toys or food, and the dog will work very hard for its reward, but the dog is still only working for the reward and not primarily for the handler. The dog values the handler as a way to get the reward, but the dog doesn't totally respect the handler as a leader. These teams pass certifications and work on the street, but they don't score the top points in competitions and are not as efficient or effective in actual work as teams with a true handler-dog pack ordered relationship.

What happens when the leader – pack follower relationship exists? It is easy to spot. The dog comes when called - immediately, not after one last pee on a tree or one last sniff of the ground. The dog doesn't eliminate while working. The dog is not distracted by scents or things going on. The dog knows what the handler wants and does it. The two seem to have mental telepathy when they work.

How do you achieve this type of relationship with a working dog? It is quite simple in theory but often hard to do in practice, as is all of dog training. First of all, the handler has to have resources the dog values. This is easy – food, water, play, toys, companionship are all resources. The handler has to control the resources and not allow the dog free access to them without the handler's permission. For example, the handler should be the one to feed the dog and take care of the dog. Each time the handler prepares to give the dog a resource and the dog is not actively working, the dog should be asked to perform a simple task, like a sit or down, or at least be well behaved and not jumping around or barking. The situation needs to be such that the handler dictates the dog's behavior when the resources are given, not the dog dictating that the handler give the dog the resources by acting cute, getting excited, barking, etc. This is a crucial point. If a handler is doing a training exercise like detection work, and the dog is deciding what behavior is the indication, like barking when it should be sitting quietly, the dog is in control of the situation, not the handler. If a patrol team is doing bite work and the dog is barking and rowdy and the handler lets the dog go to pursue the decoy, the dog is in charge of the situation, not the handler. A release to pursue the decoy is a resource the handler needs to control, not the dog.

Behavior control is done through obedience commands, so the ability to correctly teach and execute these commands is crucial to this process for most working dogs.

Many handlers dislike obedience work, but it is the foundation for communication with and control of the dog.

Performance Criteria

When working with obedience or any type of work, the handler has to have a clear idea of what behavior the dog should be performing at the time. If the dog knows a correct, quick sit and down, then that is what the handler needs to see before a reward is delivered. Once the dog really knows something, if the handler accepts an inferior performance, the handler is allowing the dog to control the situation and set the standard. The leader has to set the standard, not the dog.

A good example is executing the behavior on the first command without repeat commands, signals, or threats or reminders. If a dog does not sit or come on the first command, like in the PD1 trials, it has “flunked” the exercise and should not get a reward. The standard is one command for each behavior. Some handlers may use a body movement with the command, often a movement they are not even aware they are doing, and, since dogs are non-verbal communicators first and verbal last, they may be executing the behavior on the non-verbal cue instead of the verbal command. If this is happening, the dog may not perform the behavior on the verbal cue alone and act confused when the handler gives the verbal cue only. Reading the dog’s body language should tell the handler what is going on. If the dog acts confused, it probably is. If the dog acts like it is just ignoring the handler or testing him or her (they usually give little glances at the handler to gage the handler’s reaction, avoid looking at the handler or just look at the handler with a happy or sly expression), the dog probably is.

Performance criteria apply to all behaviors, including scent work. The handler has to gage the dog’s attitude. Is the dog trying to work? Or is the dog allowing himself to be distracted? Dogs have to learn to focus on the task and not let things distract them. This is particularly true with reactive dogs. They take extra training to learn to focus on the task at hand. It is the handler’s job to do this, to keep reminding the dog to stay on task while training. Once the dog is performing the behavior, often it is the handler’s presence that keeps reminding it to stay on task. I track with my dogs on lead, but it has been a goal of mine to do off lead tracking with my young dog at some point. So far my attempts have not succeeded, because my young dog still needs my physical presence or the attachment of the lead to remind her what she is supposed to be doing. When she tracks off lead too far ahead, she gets distracted and starts wandering, mentally and physically.

Recently I watched a team at a tracking certification test. This dog usually does quite well in tracking with the exception that he tends to be distracted by dog urine. The

test started in a place where other dogs were walked, and the team recently had worked on, but not fixed, the dog urine distraction problem. The dog would not start the track, but kept sniffing dog pee, lapping water in puddles and doing almost anything but track. All the time the dog was doing this, he was stealing little glances at his handler to see what the handler was going to do. I know that this team has leadership problem because I train them, and it was now extending to this tracking test. The dog was testing the handler to see if the handler would make him track. The handler was also stressed out, and when the leader is stressed, the dog will not accept his or her leadership as readily. Fortunately, the handler did not get angry, and although he was frustrated by the dog, he kept insisting that it track and telling it “no” for sniffing dog pee. Finally, faced with the handler’s persistence, the dog got started on the track and eventually completed it, although much slower than he should have.

Leadership Qualities

The dog values the same leadership qualities that we do. Think of what qualities you would like to see in a good supervisor. Good leaders (and police officers) know that they have to control their emotions. If a leader or officer gets angry or emotional, they instantly lose the respect of those around them. Subordinates move away and reject the information the emotional leader projects. Dogs are even more sensitive to emotions. They are expert readers of body language, so they know with a glance where their handler’s emotions are at. They smell emotions and physiological states, so it doesn’t matter how well you can act, the dog will know instantly where the handler is mentally and emotionally. This is why handlers who get so up tight at competitions and certifications have problems. They have to learn to control their emotions before they can control the dog.

Controlling emotions means giving commands in a clear but not loud or angry tone of voice. Once the voice escalates, the dog rejects the handler’s leadership. It may do the command, but the respect for the handler is eroded, and the dog may be frightened or want to avoid the handler.

Good leaders are also fair and consistent. Good leaders communicate well, teaching and training when appropriate, penalizing and rewarding when needed.

Consequences

When giving commands, handlers have to be prepared to deliver consequences for non-behavior. Handlers should pick their battles in training and not give commands

if they don't have the time to enforce consequences. For example, if you have to get somewhere with your dog in training and don't have time to formally have the dog heel properly, just hook the dog on a lead and walk or run informally. Don't try to heel if you don't have the time to do it correctly. Use a leash and just get there.

Old school correction training used physical punishment or negative reinforcement for training. While I believe that physical corrections have a place in training, I've found that they should be measured and used in limited circumstances, more to get the dog's attention than to make the dog do something. To enforce commands, I use a "do-over" or "penalty work" as consequences for the dog not trying hard enough or failing commands it should be doing. A do-over is just that – the dog does the exercise over and over until it gets it right without any help.

Non-performance, performing at a poor level or simply not paying attention is marked by a word that means "what you just did is not what I want and you will not get a reward for it." I use "no." After the no, the dog is commanded again and given a second chance. If the dog doesn't work properly again, the dog is given "penalty work" like doggie pushups (sit, down, sit, down, sit, down, etc.) until the dog does them perfectly without any back talk. If the dog isn't performing the pushups correctly, I may give the dog some collar pops to communicate "pay attention" and try harder. Usually, faced with boring work, annoying collar pops and the realization that the fun or reward won't come until the he complies, the dog will start performing the pushups correctly, then go on to do the original task correctly.

Convincing the dog that the reward will not come without a proper performance, and that non-performance will result in more boring work or minor discomfort creates an "attitude adjustment" in the dog. Usually, the dog will give a "calming signal" like a yawn or lip lick, when its mental state shifts to obedience. When you see this, you can stop your penalty work and try the first exercise again.

If a dog has been running the team for some time, the first few sets of doggie pushups that are used for attitude adjustments may take considerable time. With my male dog, I think it took about 8 minutes of pushups the first time I used them. He would refuse the commands, then after about 5 minutes he went up and down, but he would give this "back talk" bark each time he popped up into a sit. I knew this was back talk, so he kept going until he did them correctly and silently with the right attitude. This set of pushups was being done because he was searching a building for cadaver with an inappropriate, hectic manner and blowing by hides because of his craziness. The pushups did adjust his attitude and solved the hectic work problem.

Other alternative consequences include putting the dog back in the car (this assumes that the dog thinks the training activity is fun), putting the dog in a down for a

time out, putting the dog in a down or sit and turning your back to ignore the dog, or tying the dog out and letting him watch another dog work and get rewards. The point is that you “call the dog’s bluff” when he doesn’t perform properly.

Each detection exercise should start with a test of what the dog’s mental state is. This can be done by asking for a simple obedience command like sit. If the dog doesn’t sit immediately, his attention is not on the handler, he may be distracted and he is not in the proper cooperative training mood. The dog needs to do something as an attitude adjustment before he starts. The best searches will happen when the handler and dog are a team, not when the dog is working on his own.

Water on Stone

Brenda Aloff uses the expression of “Water on Stone” to describe how handlers have to be with their dogs. Dogs have all the time in the world to try to “outlast” their human owners. They know humans are always in a hurry, so if they can take advantage of this and misbehave when they think the human doesn’t have time to address the misbehavior. Handlers tend to have limited training time and rush things, allowing the dog to get away with lesser performances or bad behavior rather than taking the time to address the issue. To be a good leader, you HAVE to address each issue, preferably as they come up in training. To not correct mistakes when they arise creates more problems down the road by telling the dog it can get away with misbehavior. Addressing mistakes immediately is best way to train and really the only way to be fair to the dog and convince the dog that it must behave ALL the time.

The do-over, more boring work as a consequence and withholding rewards are facets of the water on stone idea, with the dog being the stone and the handler the water. Patience and the ability to wait for the dog to make a decision is not something that law enforcement officers usually excel in, but it is essential to good dog training. Water eventually will wear away the stone.

Once the dog does accept the handler’s leadership and a good pack relationship exists, a magic transformation seems to take place. The dog comes when called. I know I wondered if someone had switched “look a like” dogs with me when I finally achieved this with my dog. All the minor problems I had been having with work went away, almost seemingly overnight. It was a little embarrassing to find out that all the things I was “helping” the dog with were things he really knew how to do and just chose not to do them. I can still catch him with things now and then when he doesn’t do something right and I say “no” and he immediately executes the correct behavior. This tells me he knew all along what to do but just chose not to do it. In this case, a do-over

has to follow as a penalty. Never reward something if the dog has to do it with a “no” as a reminder.

Dogs have different genetic levels of dominance. Some literally are stones and take a great deal of training to establish submission. Others are born to be naturally obedient and are easier to train. But all will test the leadership of the handler one way or another, and the handler has to recognize this as a test and respond accordingly.

Pack Drive and Scent Work

The greatest benefit I saw after my dog’s “attitude adjustment” was in tracking. After being pretty good in tracking, suddenly my dog was excellent. He didn’t chase animals or dog scents while on track. He stopped scent marking on track and during evidence and cadaver searches. He was trying hard to do the best job he could without being distracted or getting so excited he couldn’t think. Adjusting the pack relationship enhanced all our work.

Sometimes I hear detector dog handlers say that they avoid obedience work because it hurts the dog’s scent work. You can avoid formal “obedience” if you want, but you still must install yourself as pack leader to have the best product. Even bloodhound handlers who don’t do obedience have consequences for non-performance, like putting the dog back in the car or kennel and not feeding the dog. The dog’s respect for the handler must be created during training, or the dog will not work for the handler.