

Reconsidering the Dominance Model in Dog Training



History of the Hierarchy

A linear hierarchy, where the social structure revolves around priority access to resources, was first described in chickens, resulting in the term “pecking order.” In the 30’s and 40’s a couple of short-term studies of wolf packs were performed and these referred to conflict resolution between members in terms of dominance. One animal was presumed to physically roll another over and pin him or her on the ground to assert rank.

What was not known at that time is that appeasement gestures, which inhibit or cut-off aggression in another animal, are willingly offered by the subordinate animal, not forced by the superior. There is not one documented case of a wolf (or a dog) rolling over or pinning another animal on the ground. Nor is there one case of a mother wolf or dog “scruff-shaking” puppies.

In spite of the flimsy evidence, the concept of dominance was very catchy and trickled down over the years into the dog training culture. Scores of books and methods sprung up that admonished owners to be “leader of the pack” and warned of the misbehavior that would ensue if the dog was allowed to assume the “alpha” position.

The one long-term study on dogs found their social organization to be much more subtle. However, the dominance concept continued to spread. Training methods that relied heavily on aversives such as pain and startle, to motivate the dog used dominance rhetoric to justify the harsh techniques – one needed to put the dog “in his place.”

Think Leverage, Not Dominance

In the last ten years or so, training methods have begun to be more strongly influenced by animal learning theory – operant and Pavlovian conditioning – with a resulting move toward fewer and fewer aversives. The increased and more sophisticated use of rewards allowed trainers and counselors to solve problems and install obedience more efficiently than before and without confrontations of any sort.

A more useful way to think about modifying dog behavior is in terms of *leverage*, rather than dominance. Paying attention to and taking control of what the dog wants – attention, walks, food, access to the yard, access to other dogs and smells on the ground, door opening services, play etc. – and providing them for desired rather than undesired behavior, will achieve a well-trained dog as well as positive associations with both the training process and trainer.

