

# THE D WORD

# DOMINANCE

Most people have heard by now from one source or another that dominance is either a myth, or debunked or old school, etc. But the truth is far more complex than these simple phrases let on.

*One of the biggest misconceptions we find ourselves faced with is the definition of “dominance.” Dogs are often described as being “dominant” which is an incorrect usage of the term. Dominance is not a personality trait. Dominance is “primarily a descriptive term for relationships between pairs of individuals.” and moreover, “the use of the expression ‘dominant dog’ is meaningless, since “dominance” can apply only to a relationship between individuals. (Bradshaw et al., 2009) Dominance comes into play in a relationship between members of the same species when one individual wants to have the first pick of available resources such as food, beds, toys, bones, etc. Even between dogs, however, it is not achieved through force or coercion but through one member of the relationship deferring to the other peacefully. In many households the status of one dog over another is fluid; in other words, one dog may be the first to take his pick of toys, but will defer to the other dog when it comes to choice of resting places. Dogs that use aggression to “get what they want” are not displaying dominance, but rather anxiety-based behaviors, which will only increase if they are faced with verbal and/or physical threats from their human owners. Basing one’s interaction with their dog on dominance is harmful to the dog-human relationship and leads to further stress, anxiety and aggression from the dog, as well as fear and antipathy of the owner. - APDT*

What this means is that dominance is not a personality trait, nor the root of behaviour problems. It is not applicable to owner/dog relationships or even cat/dog, mouse/cat, or any other unrelated species. If we try to look at behaviour problems with our “dominance” lenses on, we tend to see the problem from a very skewed perception. One where gaining control of your rank is the only solution.

For instance, we have heard dominance to be the root issue behind:

- jumping
- aggression
- growling
- barking
- resource guarding
- peeing/pooping in the house
- leash pulling
- getting up on furniture
- stealing your sandwich
- chasing the cat
- separation anxiety
- and many, many more

So what we see is that there are many different explanations for the word dominance. People often say “my dog is dominant” when they contact me. When I ask what that means, people have no good definition. When I ask them to describe the BEHAVIOUR however.....that is when we can get somewhere. There is a very popular saying in our field.

**IF THE ONLY TOOL YOU HAVE IN YOUR TOOLBOX IS A HAMMER...EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL**



As trainers, we look beyond the labels that people put onto a dogs behaviour to the behaviour itself. By assessing only observable behaviour (a real skill we spend a lot of time honing) we can get to the root, address it and modify it.

**Debunking the Alpha Dog Theory** - <https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/behavior/debunking-the-alpha-dog-theory/>

**Dominance in Dogs....Again** - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pets-and-their-people/201603/dominance-in-dogs-again>

Let's look at a few of these behaviours from a different lens.

Problem Behaviour	Why the dog really does it	Solution
<p><b>My dog jumps on me and guests in my house.</b></p> <p><b>Dominance solution</b> - Dog is trying to regain rank through height. Rank reduction techniques that often simulate some form of aggression such as kneeling in the chest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dog has been inadvertently reinforced for jumping.</li> <li>• dog wants to get close to our face like they do to greet other members of their canine family.</li> <li>• dog hasn't been trained in what to do instead.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teach dog to sit for attention and greetings.</li> <li>• teach dog to target an area they do not leave until arousal levels are lower and greetings can be appropriate.</li> <li>• put dog away until it calms down.</li> </ul>
<p><b>My dog pees in the house.</b></p> <p><b>Dominance solution</b> - Dog is marking their territory to solidify their rank within the pack. Punish the dog for peeing in the house.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• anxious/insecure dogs will mark to feel secure.</li> <li>• other dogs may have marked there before.</li> <li>• dog may have an underlying medical condition.</li> <li>• dog may be unneutered.</li> <li>• inconsistent or inappropriate housetraining efforts by owner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• get the dog a medical check up with urinalysis.</li> <li>• reduce anxiety through environmental enrichment and a reduction in punishment.</li> <li>• redouble efforts in housetraining.</li> <li>• management to avoid letting the dog rehearse soiling the house.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dog pulls on leash.</b></p> <p><b>Dominance solution</b> - Dog is walking out in front to assert their dominance. The leader always goes first. Sharp corrections for pulling.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to get to where they are going faster with their 4 legs vs our 2.</li> <li>• because they have never been taught to walk beside you.</li> <li>• exciting things are afoot and we need to go see and sniff and experience right now.</li> <li>• dog could be hypervigilant and worried.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teach dog that walking beside you is the most rewarding thing on earth.</li> <li>• teach dog that sniffs are allowed and so is exploration, but pulling is not.</li> <li>• condition the dog to ignore stimulus that encourages them to pull.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dog barks at you for attention.</b></p> <p><b>Dominance solution</b> - Dog is telling you what to do. Punish the dog in some way each time they bark.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication. Getting your attention has been unsuccessful in other ways and this one seems to do the trick.</li> <li>• Owners have reinforced the dog for barking inadvertently by giving them attention when they do.</li> <li>• Dog is bored and needs other outlets for energy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• when dog barks, ignore and leave the dog. Once the dog figures out that this isn't working for them, we have "extinction".</li> <li>• reward attention seeking in other ways. Politely sitting for instance.</li> <li>• Provide dog with multiple tasks and outlets everyday to avoid boredom.</li> </ul>

## The solution for all behaviours under a dominance lense is **PUNISHMENT FOR THE DOG**

In all of the above scenrios, the owner has not bothered to teach the dog what to do instead. Do you think it is fair to punish a dog for the owners lack of ability, education or training? When we look beyond the dominance lense we see that teaching our dogs what to do, reinforcing appropriate behaviours and providing them with enrichment, fulfillment and engagement will pretty much solve most problem behaviours. This is a broad overview and the techniques themselves will take some education and practice.

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# HOW DID WE GET HERE?!

In order for us to avoid the pitfalls of these charlatans peddling misinformation, we need to understand how we got here, and where these myths started. Much of this misunderstanding stems from the erroneous application of early studies of captive wolf packs to our understanding of the dynamics of our domestic dogs. There are two problems with extrapolating those wolf pack studies onto dogs:

1. Dogs and wolves are in fact quite different species with different hierarchical constructs.  
and
2. The results of those studies have since been disproved by the very scientists who conducted them.

Unfortunately, a popular reality TV show has captured people's attention and is talking about dogs as pack animals and again perpetuating the idea of using "calm-assertive energy" (read: fear and intimidation) to resolve issues with problem dogs. Like most "reality" TV shows there is very little that is real here. The methods and approach used on this show are contraindicated by science and behavioral experts and many consider them inhumane. Unfortunately, many viewers do not seem to understand that the show is edited but instead believe "miracles happen in 30 minutes." Even though each show contains a disclaimer; "please do not attempt any of these techniques on your own, consult with a professional," people do try these techniques at home and cause further harm to dogs that are already suffering. Even though behaviourist and animal welfare organizations around the world plead with National Geographic not to air this show, they did, with popular ratings....and detrimental consequences. For decades, this show has been the major source of misinformation, pitting humans against their dogs in an ongoing battle for rank and peace.

Incidentally, those wolf studies that studies CAPTIVE wolves, meant that often wolves were disabled, injured, or run off. Can you imagine what that would do to a wild wolf pack? What it does to their ability to hunt together effectively or even breed? Wild wolves consist of familial wolves. There is no doubt who the "alphas" are. They are the mating pair. Once the offspring are old enough, they will generally go off and have a pack of their own. In Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs, biologist L. D. Mech notes "... in natural wolf packs, the alpha male or female are merely the breeding animals, the parents of the pack, and dominance contests with other wolves are rare, if they exist at all. During my 13 summers observing the Ellesmere Island pack, I saw none."

The study of wild dogs however, shows a much different picture. Dogs have a "social" hierarchy. They come together in times of plentiful resources to hunt, scavenge and mate, but for the most part, do not form packs at all. Evolutionary biologist Dr. Raymond Coppinger states: "I don't think a dog knows what people are talking about when they exhibit this "alpha wolf" behavior. Dogs do not understand such behaviors because the village dogs didn't have a pack structure; they were semi solitary animals." "In fact, contrary to popular belief, dogs around the world do not (or only rarely) exhibit 'pack' behavior."

Not only does the above mentioned show have it wrong from a behavioural standpoint, but a ethological one as well.

### Further Reading:

[https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dominance\\_Position\\_Statement-download.pdf](https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dominance_Position_Statement-download.pdf)

[https://www.wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/267alphastatus\\_english.pdf](https://www.wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/267alphastatus_english.pdf)