When you hear about leadership in the context of dog training, what comes to mind for many people are terms like alpha and dominance. Past training techniques to achieve ‘leadership’ included mostly physical confrontations with the dog including harsh corrections and things like ‘alpha rolls’ to force submission. In truth, leadership and dominance are in no way synonymous. The best leaders do not resort to fear, force or coercion to gain compliance. When you think about the characteristics of a good leader, the terms that often come to mind are things like trust and respect, good communication, a teacher and a motivator. These are the same characteristics that will make you a great leader to your dog.

Unfortunately many people are told that simple things their dogs do every day are signs that their dog is trying to exert dominance over them. Here are some common dog activities that people misconstrue as dominant behavior:

- Jumping on people
- Barking to get a treat
- Jumping on the bed or couch
- Pawing to get your attention
- Stealing food off the counter
- Pulling on the leash during walks

These activities most often do not indicate dominant behavior but rather the dog has learned these (obnoxious) behaviors will provide him with what he wants. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior states that “Most undesirable behaviors in our pets are not related to priority access to resources; rather, they are due to accidental rewarding of the undesirable behavior.” In other words, stealing food off the counter isn’t a way to tell you the food belongs to them; it’s just a fast way to get a good snack! Dogs are opportunistic and they will do what works. If jumping on people gets them attention, they will jump on people. They are not exerting dominance, they are doing what works.

So, what do you do if your dog has figured out the best way to get access to his resources is by being a bit pushy: barking, pawing, jumping, etc? The best thing to do is to turn the tables so that his undesirable behavior is no longer rewarded, and only good behaviors are reinforced. Many people have to change the way they think and interact with their dog when they embark on a true leadership program. After all, it’s very easy to ignore a well behaved dog, and almost impossible to ignore a jumpy/barky dog! Start by teaching your dog some simple tasks like sit and down. Now when your dog wants something, like play, ask him to sit to ‘earn’ the play. If barking at you leads to you ignoring him, but sitting earns him a long game of fetch, the sit will happen instead of the barking.

By consistently ignoring undesirable behaviors, and reinforcing calm and polite actions, you will have a dog who understands being well-mannered is the best way to get the things he craves like attention, play, and food.