

Bridger and Me

John Lubans Jr.

This is a dog story. If you bear with me, you may gain some insights into how you lead and how you follow. Are you an assertive pack leader or are you a submissive follower?

Bridger, my daughter's nine-month-old Labrador, recently spent some quality time with me. The dog needed a place to stay while my daughter was away for three weeks of training. I've not had a dog for decades, but I'd seen a few of Cesar Millan's *Dog Whisperer* shows, so I knew to be *au courant* with dog management, I'd need to do more for Bridger than feed her and let her sleep.¹ Cesar's mantra for healthy dogs is: exercise, discipline, and affection. This struck me as wise, so I steeled myself for an hour-long early morning walk and to behave in a way that the dog was not confused about who the pack leader was—me. That was the plan.

It is tempting for anyone who followed the weekly adventures of those canine savants, Lassie and Rin Tin Tin, to think of dogs as more than dogs. We are drawn to dogs, and they to us. Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* is great adventure literature with universal insights, but to try to extract leadership concepts from my mundane daily walks and other routine dog-human interactions, may be a stretch.² Of course, sometimes it is the ordinary that brings clarity to a concept.

Reservations aside, including Cesar's admonition in every televised episode that dogs are not children, it is easy to anthropomorphize our canine friends. For example, in my management class lecture on staff performance appraisal, I use an airline ad—an upward evaluation of a human by Baxter, a dog, suggesting his owner's performance would improve if he more often took Baxter to the dog park. And, along this line, I can dream up the next best-selling management book, *Dog-ness: Instilling the Way of the Pack into Gen-X Work Teams*.

Well, how did it work out between Bridger and me? (See photo 1.)

According to Cesar, "In the animal world, there are two positions: the leader and the follower. Perhaps we humans are at more complicated, gradated levels, but now and then



Photo 1. Bridger about to take flight after a squirrel, devil take the hindmost. (Photo used with permission, John Lubans Jr., 2008.)

it seems our behaviors in the work place throw us back into a kinship with the pack. Something very similar to the barn yard's pecking order is easily discernible in the workplace."³

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* went so far as to suggest man's inherent savagery was only kept under wraps by enforced societal norms.⁴ Remove the norms and we revert to a dog-eat-dog existence. That analogy is unfair to the canine clan, because once a top dog is established, followers pretty much line up. It is only we cunning humans, like Golding's boys and Shakespeare's villains, who consumed with ambition, seek to undermine leaders. I may not agree with Golding's dismal assessment of the human condition, but I do know we need to make conscious efforts not to become like his wild boys. I also am certain that leading or following is not a fixed role. While I wish I could say definitely that I was the pack leader to Bridger, on reflection I am not all that sure. There were times when the pack leader role was up for grabs, and there were times when it seemed nobody was in charge.

Was that bad? Cesar says not to confuse the dog about who's boss. "This can cause aggression, anxiety, fear, obsessions, or phobias. . . ."⁵ Hmmm, just like my last library job. Only kidding! (Sorta!)



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I don't know how on target Cesar is about pack leader/submissive follower relationships. There's a bit of California-new-age-dog-psychology speak that creeps into his language. His voice is more certain about disciplining for specific behaviors like Bridger's lunging on the leash. That behavior made our initial walks high stress and less than pleasant.

Other dog owners offered me advice, more than enough to confuse me. The least effective advice—a canine version of the “keep 'em guessing” workplace strategy—was for me to halt the dog, turn, and head the other way. Then, after a few steps, I'd stop and turn around again, thereby confusing the dog as to the goal toward which it was pulling me; hence the lunging would decrease. I tried it and it worked for several yards, and then Bridger would single-mindedly revert to rushing headlong.

The disciplinary tactic that worked was a mix of Cesar's prescription to be a calm and assertive leader (let your posture show you are in charge, shorten the leash, keep the dog alongside, and so on) and a friend's suggestion; reward Bridger for the walk behaviors I wanted. So, whenever Bridger walked alongside of me at a steady pace, she would get a pebble of dog food. Very quickly, she lunged less and accommodated my slower pace.

After my weeks with Bridger, I scored something like a B+ on the Dog Whisperer's leadership quiz. While declaring me “Pack Leader” and entitling me to buy Cesar's Pack Leader sweatshirt and cap, the virtual Dog Whisperer hedged: “Congratulations! You are well on your way to having a balanced, calm-submissive dog, if you don't already have one. However, you may still have a few areas that could use improvement, or *you* may be lacking the *discipline* and *consistency* that your dog requires.” I italicize the terms *you*, *discipline*, and *consistency* to remind me of some of my ambiguity around the leader-follower roles.

As I tried to get Bridger to accommodate my tempo and my need to not be jerked around, I was often reminded of my way of leading. Or, some would say my way of non-leading. I have always preferred to let people do their best on their own with maximum support from me and minimum *discipline*. There were times when I probably should have disciplined staff more, to let them know they could do better. Cesar has insights relevant to how a manager's behavior on the job could influence others, sometimes not for the better:

Many owners assume it's their dog that is the problem. I try to help people understand that their *own* behavior has a powerful affect on their dog, and I offer them suggestions for “retraining” themselves to be calm-assertive pack leaders.⁶

Indeed, when I was working as a library administrator, a few did question whether my hands-off approach added value to the library leadership equation. Of course, anyone interested in end results would see the plus side in my

method of letting go of the reins of power. However, some managers were so uncomfortable with this notion that they ignored our unprecedented productivity; for whatever reason these managers valued maintaining the pecking order above achieving desired goals. That said, I have to admit there were a few situations where my hands-off approach was not the right one. I recall one work group (the very antithesis of self-organizing) of seemingly incorrigible and self-destructive staff that never did improve. A hands-on approach was long overdue. By the time I applied it, it was too late.

Bridger did humor me and occasionally became the submissive follower on our walks. Left to her own devices, she would prefer much more freedom to do what she excels at: leaping over fallen logs, chasing squirrels, sniffing out dead frogs in mounds of leaves, dragging twigs and sticks with head held high, exploring unseen trails, and when so moved, cavorting for the sheer joy of it! And, there were some odors that took priority over walking down the trail. They had to be sniffed, lingered over, and reflected upon. Dog-ness is about seizing the day. Understandably, I would get in her way, holding her back from doing what she was born to do—to achieve dog-ness. Would Bridger have been happiest with me totally out of the way? Without discipline? I do not believe so. There is a bond between dog and master above the fundamental food and shelter needs. At times, she would have preferred freedom to come and go, but after she learned the trick of backing out of her collar, she would always return to me.

Yes, leaders often interfere with what followers want to do. Sometimes we frustrate followers. Who is right? Bridger for wanting to eradicate squirrels? Or me for not wanting to be yanked off my feet? I would guess we are both right and we need to reach a compromise, in which I get to stay on my feet and avoid a dislocated shoulder and Bridger gets to chase the occasional squirrel.

For the “my way or the highway” leader there is no room for such ambiguity. Bridger would have to “heel” and forget those squirrels or suffer the consequences. That's sort of the way our dualistic theory of management works. There are two kinds of workers, the responsible and the irresponsible. The latter stereotype demands discipline, prodding, reminding, nagging, oversight, and corrective action by the manager. The other kind of worker is an intuitive self-starter, eager to work and do his or her best. The manager's job is help make that happen.

In my experience there are far more of the responsible group than the other. Yet most of our control systems, workplace “leashes,” are designed for the irresponsible and take up a vastly disproportionate amount of our time away from meaningful work. There are numerous other controls, often invisible, that make up library-ness, the customs and the mores, the do's and don'ts.

What happens when there is an absence of leash? What happens in the library workplace when supervisors lighten up? Do workers go wild? Do workers become indo-



Photo 2. Bridger humoring me—playing the calm submissive role. (There’s a cookie in that pocket, right?) (Photo used with permission, John Lubans Jr., 2008.)

lent, willful, and self-destructive? In my experience, minimizing the organizational controls that inhibit creativity, that impede freedom of expression, that require permission before doing, consistently results in greater productivity, greater service, and more staff who like their jobs.

The potential of what *can* happen with less control is captured in this statement from a member of the *conductor-less* Orpheus Chamber Orchestra: “When you have an orchestra with a conductor, it is always leashed. . . . In Orpheus, the energy that’s there doesn’t get leashed. It’s there . . . and then it starts to go!”⁷ (Into a beautiful musical performance.)

Being unleashed in the workplace can be like that. I saw it happen in a major reform I led. All the controls put into place over years of idolizing the sacred cow of AACR2 had tied the hands of the staff. Many of my administrative peers regarded those layered rules as best practice. In short, we were suffering from a long running tyranny of the experts. Good, thinking people were prohibited from using their common sense. We looked foolish to our users who wanted books, not rationalizations as to why we could not work any faster. These staff members were more than leashed—they were chained to an iron stake in a fenced back yard. As we

undid the controls—releasing the energy that had always been there—using our collective intelligence to the best of our ability, blending leader and follower roles, we found the freedom to bring about the needed reforms.

The Way of the Dog

The way of the dog is doing what you were born to do. Bridger knows what that means. Humans may not. We may be dancers who pore over publisher catalogs to select books and never move to the music in our muscles, or we may be farmers who negotiate data access contracts, never seeing the sky, the hawk’s shadow in the tall grass as it swoops overhead.

Since dogs are not willful creatures, it was hard to be the disciplinarian with Bridger. A thing of beauty, she got away with much that left me frustrated. But in the way of the dog, infractions are quickly forgotten. A short memory has many advantages. Add other attributes like unstinting loyalty and ferocious friendliness to one and all, with no unseemly ambition, and you have an ideal companion, a gallant colleague with whom to conquer dragons.

Both of us learned about each other. I like to think we met somewhere in the middle. In my study after our walks, she’d lay her head in my lap and look up at me with the most peaceful expression, as if saying “All’s right with the world, mate.” I’d turn to my work and she would lie for hours in companionable silence next to my chair, content to be near. Now and then, I’d look away from the computer screen and catch a glimpse of dog-ness: Happily contented, Playful. Trusting.

Time for a cookie!

References and Notes

1. Cesar Millan’s official website, www.cesarmillaninc.com. Also www.cesarmillaninc.com/tips (both accessed Jan. 30, 2008).
2. The Jack London classic can be found at <http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/CallOfTheWild> (accessed Jan. 30, 2008).
3. Millan’s official website.
4. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*. Introduction by E. M. Forster (New York: Coward-McCann, 1962).
5. Millan’s official website.
6. Ibid.
7. *Nobody on the Podium: Lessons about Leadership from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra*, VHS (Boston: Kennedy School of Government, 2002).