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Owning a Working Dog

Owning a true working dog is a great experience, if you are working him. Many people buy working dogs and then life throws them a twist and the working dog now becomes a pet. Unfortunately, this cannot only be disastrous for the dog but the owners as well.

Most working dogs are dominant by nature and only respect one true Alpha human. That's what makes them great working dogs. They are active, and strong, physically and mentally which makes them great working dogs but not so great family pets. When the Alpha human is not around, the dog takes on the role of Alpha to all in the home; including the other humans. The Alpha makes all the rules: the Alpha decides when to play, when to seek affection, when to eat, etc. and when a subordinate begins to make these decisions on his own, he is reprimanded by the Alpha.

Is this dog nuts?

The Alpha dog is not crazy or aggressive, or you wouldn't be reading this article, you would be seriously hurt. The Alpha dog is trying to teach the rest of his pack how to show respect to him, now that the Alpha human is gone and he is in charge. Here are some examples of Alpha dog situations:

A family member comes home and says hello to the Alpha dog lying down in his crate or on his bed. The Alpha dog immediately growls. What this means is that the Alpha dog doesn't want to be greeted by this subordinate. The Alpha dog is saying 'stay away'.

The Alpha walks over and demands to be petted. The family member pets the Alpha dog, the after awhile, the Alpha Dog growls. The Alpha dog went over to say hello to the subordinate, the Alpha dog is now done saying hello and wants the subordinate to stop petting. Social time is over for the Alpha Dog.

The Alpha dog is eating or drinking when a subordinate walks into the room, the Alpha growls. The Alpha dog is simply saying, I am eating/drinking, don't bother me.

A family member or another dog enters the room, the Alpha dog growls, raises his fur and sometimes leaves the area or breaks eye contact. This is the same as the first situation, the Alpha dog is saying leave me alone, don't approach or talk to me.

How to handle the Alpha:

The only way to handle the Alpha dog is to assume the Alpha role when the Alpha human is not at home.

1. Walk the Alpha dog and make sure he stays next to you the whole walk; the Alpha leads the pack.
2. Take the Alpha dog in the yard and play with him but play with him and make him respond to commands when you are playing; i.e sit, throw ball, down, throw ball, come, throw ball; etc.
3. Do not talk to or touch the Alpha dog unless you are doing some type of physical activity with him; i.e. ball playing or walking. Ignore him the rest of the time.
4. Stop treating him like a pet; he is a working dog. He is never going to be a pet.
5. Have control under all circumstances; Your Alpha dog should not be charging the door when it rings, tell him to come and place him in a stay. If there are other dogs in the house, they must do the same thing. The Alpha greets first and you must greet people first.
6. Don't give affection, attention or treats unless he responded to some command. Make him work for your attention and affection. Make him work for his food.
7. Ignore him unless you want him to do something for you.
8. Right now, ignore the growling when you enter a room. **INGORE THE DOG COMPLETELY** or immediately give a 'come' command, take him outside and work with him. Put him thru his drills, his obedience commands.

Conclusion:

The Alpha dog will not change overnight and show you respect. Respect needs to be earned from the Alpha dog and it's going to take a while to get that respect. In the mean time, keep a collar and a six foot leash on your Alpha dog so you have control and you have something to grab if your Alpha dog decides not to respond to your command. And, by all means, seek professional help. Do not attempt this alone at first, have a professional trainer work with you and teach you how to get your Alpha dog to respect you.

Beth Bradley

Beth Bradley began studying animal behavior and dog training at 12 years of age. She became a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer in 1986. Beth graduated Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice. Throughout her schooling, Beth worked and studied under many well-renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. Beth formed her own company in 1989 and has made dog training her full time career since 1995. Beth is also a writer for the *Animal Companion*, she has produced CD-ROMs and DVD's on training and is author of a training book titled *Real World Dog Training*.

Beth is a member of the German Shepherd Dog Club of America, the German Shepherd Dog Club of America – Working Dog Association, the United Schutzhund Clubs of America, and she is Secretary and Training Director of the Greater Philadelphia Schutzhund Club. Beth actively competes in both American Kennel Club and Schutzhund Trials both in the United States of America and Europe. Beth is a certified Canine Good Citizen Evaluator for the American Kennel Club. Beth can be contacted via the web at www.dog-trainer.biz or her business (201) 247-8472.