Leadership Lessons from The Dog Whisperer

by Israel Galindo

If you ever want to become a good “systems leader,” then you need to understand emotional process. I define emotional process as, “The natural, patterned, ways in which an emotional system facilitates the dynamics through which relationships are developed and function in order to maintain homeostasis.”

Because emotional process works “under the surface” and cannot be seen directly (we only observe the symptoms or indicators of emotional process—reactivity, triangles, anxious behaviors—getting a grasp of the dynamics of relationships in emotional systems can be a challenge.

I’ve been fascinated watching Cesar Millan, the Dog Whisperer. Here is a man who has a keen understanding of emotional process in dogs and in their relationship and interactions with their own kind and with humans. While Millan uses his own terminology to describe what is happening (like “dog psychology”), I think what he actually demonstrates is not psychology, but rather an understanding of how emotional process works. I’ve never been a “pet owner,” and I’ll confess that I don’t “get” the whole owner-pet thing. But as an example of how understanding emotional process can help functioning, I think Cesar Millan can teach us much about being a systems leader.

The best way to enjoy Millan as a teacher of emotional process is to watch his show, The Dog Whisperer, on the National Geographic channel. Watching him work with dog owners and their pets, and seeing how he “trains” them (the owners, not the dogs), is a dramatic learning experience on how understanding emotional process can help the leader change functioning and influence the system. Below I present some of Millan’s teaching points about “dog psychology” and parallel some systems principles related to emotional process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cesar Millan on Dog Psychology</th>
<th>Implied Systems Thinking on Emotional Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s the same about a dog, an elephant and a horse? These animals all organize behind a leader.</td>
<td>Emotional process is universal because it is “all about protoplasm.” All emotional-relationship systems follow the “rules” of emotional process. For example, all systems need a leader, and they need that leader to function in certain ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People make a mistake when they treat dogs like humans. Every species has its own psychology – if we understand its psychology we can control the behavior because we know how to relate to them.</td>
<td>Leaders make a mistake when they confuse one system for another. For example, a congregation is not a family; an institution is not a community. Every system has its own emotional process. Knowing the kind of system we are in, and how emotional process works in that system, helps us know how to relate to it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs communicate through constant energy. The pack leader always projects a calm, assertive energy. Energy is what I call beingness; who and what you are being at every moment. … Pack leaders don’t project nervousness. They don’t project panic. They don’t project tension.</td>
<td>Anxiety is merely “energy”; and anxiety communicates emotional process. Effective leadership begins with self-differentiation, knowing who and what you are and what you need to be in the system. Effective leaders provide a non-anxious presence (you don’t need to feel non-anxious, you just have to project it and function like you are).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simply put, the pack leader is a calm, assertive presence that provides balance to the pack. They control everything and it’s not open to debate. It’s also not about gender – a female or male can become pack leader.</td>
<td>When the leader is projecting a non-anxious presence, he or she provides balance to the system. Leadership is about functioning, not about gender, style, looks, or personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When dogs come into our homes they meet emotional energy for the first time. We shower them with affection and they see us as excited energy. This is why dogs don’t listen to humans. Their mother was never this way. Where did the calm, assertive leadership go? We often develop a different agenda for our dogs. We want to make puppies our babies. When people see a nervous or shy dog they see it as human and console it like they would another human.</td>
<td>The emotional field in the system affects all of the players in the system. Leaders often mistakenly create a wrong agenda when entering a system: they want to be “liked,” want to be perceived as “nice,” or want to “be a friend” to the system. Perhaps they want to rescue the system, or want the system to rescue them. This is a sure formula for ineffectiveness. Systems need leaders who will provide the leadership functions that the system needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the absence of a 100 percent leader, the dog – even a submissive one – will seek to fill what they see as a vacant role. The dog will ignore the owner or act out in other ways. This is the beginning of giving control to them.</td>
<td>When a leader defects in place by not being emotionally present, the system detects the leadership vacuum. The ensuing anxiety results in reactivity to get the leader’s attention and force the leader back into functioning in the leader position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs do not speak using words; they interact through constant energy. Barking is one part of interaction but not the only way dogs communicate.</td>
<td>Even humans do not communicate what they are experiencing through words—often, they “act out” because of anxiety as a way to “communicate” emotional process. In humans, it may be the “reptilian brain” and middle brain (rather than the nose) that is most powerful in relating and connecting to their (emotional) surroundings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think of a newborn puppy: First the nose starts to work; then the eyes; then the ears. The nose is the most powerful thing for them to use to relate and connect with their surroundings.</td>
<td>The effective leader can distinguish the content of “messages”—what people SAY, from how people are functioning emotionally. Therefore, the leader will work to affect change in emotional process rather than respond to messages (criticism,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans often rely on verbal communication when they interact with dogs: “Come on, Johnny, please, please stop eating the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|flowers!” The pack leader doesn’t negotiate or
cajoled to get what he or she wants. No wonder
the dog is ignoring you! | seduction, or pursuit). Saying and talking is not the
same as (emotional) functioning. |
|---|---|
|When you meet a dog for the first time, share
the same energy that they would receive from
their pack leader. This calm, assertive way of
being will let them understand who you are and
really see you. Crouching down to their level
while smiling and cooing tells a dog absolutely
nothing; you might as well be speaking
Martian. | Only after a leader can establish his or her position
as leader in the system will the system be able to
“listen” to what the leader wants to say. This is why
we say it takes at least five years for a pastor to be
able to “do the vision thing” in a congregation—it
takes that long to move from “official” leader to
“emotional” leader. Lowering oneself to the level of (reactive)
functioning of an anxious system is of no help to the
system. Focusing on the least mature and least
differentiated persons in the system only ensures
ineffectiveness. Work with those who can relate to
you, as leader, on a mature and responsible level. |
|The dog will respond to your calm, assertive
energy by balancing it with a calm, submissive
state. Once he achieves this state you can share affection and love. | Respect for the leader has more to do with the
leader’s functioning than it does about whether the
leader is “liked.” Never underestimate the influence
of a self-defined, non-anxious leader in the system. |
|The pack leader doesn’t project emotional or
nervous energy and neither should you. If you
don’t set rules, boundaries and limitations in
calm, assertive ways, your dog will not respect
you. | Leaders are the immune system of the system. They
set boundaries, inculcate disciplined thinking and
mature functioning. They raise expectations and
provide challenge. These facilitate a system’s
capacity to be clear about its purpose and to
function purposefully. |
|Waiting is another way that pack leaders assert
their position. Puppies wait to eat; dogs wait
until the pack leader wants them to travel.
Waiting is a form of work for the dog –
psychological work. Domestication means dogs
don’t need to hunt for food, but they can still
work for food. | Effective leaders do not overfunction. They do their
own work, but do not do the work of the system nor
do they take responsibility for things that rightfully
belong to the system and its members. Effective
leaders do not reward irresponsibility. |
|Establish your position as pack leader by
asking your dog to work. Take him on a walk
before you feed him. And just as you don’t give
affection without your dog being in a calm,
submissive state, don’t give food until your dog
acts calm and submissive. (Exercise will help
the dog – especially high-energy ones –
achieve this state.) | The first step in assuming systemic leadership is to
understand emotional process. We must understand
the systems of which we are a part and understand
our own functioning in them. |
|The first step in assuming the role of pack
leader is to understand dog psychology. We
must recognize dogs as animals and
remember what is important to them as a
species. | Systems really don’t care about your personality,
gender, predilections, “style”, appearance, or other
secondary and inconsequential “qualities.” What
emotional systems really care about is how well you
will function in the position of leader. |
|Dogs don’t know you as your name, your race
or your achievements. You could be the
president of the United States; dogs don’t
know. What they know is the energy you share
and the activities you participate in with them. | Dogs don’t follow emotional or lovable leaders;
ye follow calm, assertive leaders. The mother
is calm and assertive when she’s giving birth
and that’s the first energy that they experience.
Being a “nice guy” or empathetic does not correlate
with being an effective leader. Effective leadership
is about providing the leadership functions that the
system needs. This is what emotional systems crave. |
|You must project calm, assertive energy before
you share love with your dog. Love is a human
gift; we’re the only pack leader who will love
them. Their dog pack leader won’t throw a | The effective leader gets his or her priorities straight: first, be effective in providing the
leadership functions, then, worry about whether
people “like” you or not. Your family needs your
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>birthday party for them or reward good behavior.</th>
<th>love and affection; your other systems (work, church) probably can do without it. But they cannot do without your defined leadership functioning.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most dogs that live in this country have shelter, food, and lots of love. These are the dogs that often become unstable because they’re not working for food and water. Dogs need a pack leader to feel balanced and connected. They need to be told every day what to do. Leadership is forever and love is forever. But sometimes we get lazy and only share love—no leadership.</td>
<td>Emotional systems need both assertive and balanced leadership functioning from their leaders, as much as they need to “feel affirmed” or “stroked.” Effective leaders know how to stay emotionally connected to their systems, how to demonstrate appropriate love and affirmation, but also how to be strong and assertive when necessary—sometimes at the same time!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once you share calm, assertive energy and the dog goes into a submissive state, then you can share love and affection.</td>
<td>People can only learn from you or hear what you are saying when they are focused, non-anxious, and moving toward you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs also look to the pack leader to set rules, boundaries and limitations. People often ask me at what age they should start training their puppy. The answer is immediately!</td>
<td>Important leadership functions include setting boundaries, directing, controlling, and administering. These have less to do with “power” or “authority” than about appropriate functioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking in front of a dog allows you to be seen as the pack leader because position matters to a dog. Conversely, if your dog controls you on the walk, he’s the pack leader. Master the walk and your dog will relate to you as a pack leader.</td>
<td>Where and how you position yourself in the system will communicate whether you are the Leader in the systems or not. Systems need to know who is in charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the walk you will feel the highest level of connection with your dog. My clients are often surprised by this because they think dogs only crave love and affection. Not so. Dogs crave rules, boundaries and limitations from their pack leader. This allows them to relax and accept their role within the pack.</td>
<td>When you are functioning at your best as a leader is when you will be most “emotionally connected” with your system. This is because what a system needs most is a leader who functions as a leader—often, more so than they need to “feel good.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs don’t follow emotional leaders or lovable leaders; they follow calm, assertive leaders. This is the same for all animals in the animal kingdom. Humans are the only animals that follow unstable, emotional leaders around the world.</td>
<td>Human systems often have great capacity to accept abuse, dysfunction, and to live in frustration. Sick systems often attract dysfunctional leaders to keep them “stuck” (remember that emotional process is about maintaining homeostasis, not about changing it!).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The biggest mistake people make is seeing their dogs as humans or babies. This allows them to miss out on what the dog needs as an animal. The sad thing is people do this out of well-intentioned love. But what they’re doing only nurtures unstable behavior and deprives the dog what he needs most.</td>
<td>It is important for leaders to understand the nature of emotional process in the system they are in. A congregation is not a family; an institution is not a community; a school is not a church and a church is not a school. A good intention is not equivalent to effective functioning. Know what your system needs of its leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dog is an animal first and a breed second. For example, people think all German Shepherds act a certain way. German Shepherd is just the breed – a cultural background in the dog world. A mutt can develop the same negative side effects as a German Shepherd. Do not focus on the breed; instead, focus on the behavior. The breed is just the skills or the “outfit” the dog wears. Underneath, they are all just dogs.</td>
<td>Leadership is about one’s functioning in the emotional-relational system first and foremost. It is much less about secondary things like gender, race, ethnicity, personality, “style,” looks, intelligence, credentials, authority, power, or expertise. Ineffective leaders often focus on the secondary factors than they do about what is of primary importance to emotional systems: the mature, self-defined, non-anxious functioning of the leader.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most dogs are born submissive because there can only be so many pack leaders. When dogs become unstable they exhibit fearful, nervous or other unwanted behaviors. Our goal is to provide the dog with the same calm, assertive leadership that they would experience in a pack.

This natural balance – calm, assertive leadership with calm, submissive behavior – nurtures stability and creates a balanced, centered and happy dog.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>All systems “understand” that they need a Leader.</strong> And they intuitively “understand” the functions they need from that person in the Leader position. Systems get anxious when a leader defects in place and fails to provide the necessary leadership function. When that happens, no amount of “charm,” no style, no amount of “smarts,” no credential will be enough to help the system, because none of those things affects emotional process.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| **Project calm, assertive energy.** This is the key to connecting with your dog. The mom or the pack leader always projects calm, assertive energy. Dogs in the pack balance that energy with a calm, submissive way of being. |
| **The most effective posture of the leader is to work on his or her own reactivity, stay focused on his or her own vision and functioning, to stay connected with the system in non-anxious ways.** |

| **Set rules, boundaries and limitations.** This is the hardest thing for people to do. They even wait to introduce any rules or training until the puppy is at least six months old! |
| **The effective leader understands that setting boundaries, taking stands, giving directions, setting goals, and articulating a vision has more to do with appropriate leadership functioning than it does about “power” or “authority.” That it is less about him or her personally, and more about providing the leadership functions that the system needs of the leader.** |

| **As adults, dogs look to their pack leader to set these rules. They don’t question the pack leader’s position and the pack leader doesn’t look to the dogs to affirm his position. This is the natural balance of the pack.** |
| **When the leader fails to provide the leadership functions appropriate for his or her position, which the system needs of him or her, it will not take long for the system to lose respect for the leader and to lose it’s way.** |

| **Make feeding a ritual.** When puppies are little, they wait to be fed by their mother. This waiting is a form of work. When feeding, we ask the pack to work for food and water – this is why we walk the pack before they eat. Dogs don’t get fed when their mind is excited, nervous, tense or aggressive. They get fed when their mind is calm and submissive. |
| **Leaders need to “feed” the system in appropriate ways—by providing vision, challenge, staying emotionally connected, being open in communication, and functioning from the leader position.** |

| **Walk the walk.** If we study dogs in their natural habitat, walking is how they earn food and water and experience the world. Dogs would rather walk than do anything else because they get to work their body and their mind. When your dog recognizes you as the pack leader, you will enjoy the connection that you have sought all along. |
| **Challenge is healthier than cuddling. Persons and systems need “purpose.” Effective leaders provide challenge and vision as ways to help the system “self-regulate” anxiety, find their homeostasis and move toward purposeful living.** |

| Substitute “system,” “family,” or “congregation” for “dog,” then, Ditto. |

---

Copyright © 2006, Israel Galindo. Do not reproduce.