

# 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.

Cesar Millan on Dog Psychology	Implied Systems Thinking on Emotional Process
What's the same about a dog, an elephant and a horse? These animals all organize behind a leader.	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.
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 <i>how</i> to relate to them.	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.
Dogs communicate through constant energy. The pack leader always projects a calm, assertive energy. Energy is what I call beingness; <i>who</i> and <i>what</i> you are being at every moment. ... Pack leaders don't project nervousness. They don't project panic. They don't project tension.	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 <i>feel</i> non-anxious, you just have to project it and function like you are).
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.	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.
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.	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.
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.	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.
Dogs do not speak using words; they interact through constant energy. Barking is one part of interaction but not the only way dogs communicate.  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.  Humans often rely on verbal communication when they interact with dogs: “Come on, Johnny, please, <i>please</i> stop eating the	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.  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,

flowers!" The pack leader doesn't negotiate or cajole 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.  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.	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 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.	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.
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 <i>work</i> for food.	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.
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.)	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.
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.	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.
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.	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 follow emotional or lovable leaders; they 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: <i>first</i> , be effective in providing the leadership functions, <i>then</i> , worry about whether people "like" you or not. Your family needs your

<p>birthday party for them or reward good behavior.</p>	<p>love and affection; your other systems (work, church) probably can do without it. But they cannot do without your defined leadership functioning.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>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!</p>
<p>Once you share calm, assertive energy and the dog goes into a submissive state, then you can share love and affection.</p>	<p>People can only learn from you or hear what you are saying when they are focused, non-anxious, and moving toward you.</p>
<p>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!</p>	<p>Important leadership functions include setting boundaries, directing, controlling, and administering. These have less to do with “power” or “authority” than about appropriate functioning.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>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 <i>only</i> 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.</p>	<p>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.”</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>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!).</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>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 <i>needs</i> of its leader.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>

<p>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.</p> <p>This natural balance – calm, assertive leadership with calm, submissive behavior – nurtures stability and creates a balanced, centered and happy dog.</p>	<p>All systems “understand” that they need a Leader. 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.</p>
<p><b>Project calm, assertive energy.</b> 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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><b>Set rules, boundaries and limitations.</b> 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!</p> <p>The dog’s mom sets these rules from day one: where they can sleep, how far they can walk, when they can eat. These rules, boundaries and limitations nurture a healthy state of mind.</p>	<p>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 <i>needs</i> of the leader.</p>
<p>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.</p> <p>Without rules, boundaries and limitations, your dog will not respect you as the pack leader.</p>	<p>When the leader fails to provide the leadership functions appropriate for his or her position, which the system <i>needs</i> of him or her, it will not take long for the system to loose respect for the leader and to lose it’s way.</p>
<p><b>Make feeding a ritual.</b> 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.</p> <p>Dogs don’t get fed when their mind is excited, nervous, tense or aggressive. They get fed when their mind is calm and submissive.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>When the leader functions as a leader, the emotional systems stays focused, centered, purposeful, and can self-regulate.</p>
<p><b>Walk the walk.</b> 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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>When your dog recognizes you as the pack leader, you will enjoy the connection that you have sought all along.</p>	<p>Substitute “system,” “family,” or “congregation” for “dog,” then, Ditto.</p>