



LESSON 3

BE CONSISTENT

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## Consequences from a Puppy's Perspective

For puppies, learning who's boss begins at birth. The biggest and strongest appear to get to the food first, but if that were consistently true, the runts would die from malnutrition and we know that doesn't always happen. The little guys figure out how to wiggle themselves into tiny spaces to get an advantage over the others. They have to be clever.

Dog moms also ensure that their littlest ones get fed. They'll move a pup from one location to another during feeding to make sure every pup gets a turn.

For puppies, mom is the boss. She teaches them to keep their sleeping area clean, washes them off, and brings wandering ones back into the fold.

She also tells them how to get along with others. If one pup is too rambunctious, mom provides a gentle correction—like a low noise or a slow push. When the pup is downright obnoxious, Mom either puts her mouth over his snout to exhibit dominance or gives a little growl, showing her teeth in warning. If the pup tests its limits with a nip, she nips back. Alert and attentive, dog moms provide immediate corrective action.

Puppies learn their best socialization skills with their baby teeth. Sharp doggy teeth can puncture soft and squishy objects, such as human skin. And like human babies, puppies explore the world with their mouths. When teeth are coming in, biting into things just feels good. The best way to teach a pup not to bite inappropriate objects (such as human hands) is to keep the puppy with its litter mates until they are seven to eight weeks old. Why? When a puppy bites a brother or sister, a retaliatory bite follows. Bites hurt and consequences are immediate and appropriate.

So at eight weeks old, a pup knows these three important lessons about coexisting in the litter:

- Respect the boss.
- Adapt around others.
- Actions have consequences.

Let's apply these principles to the workplace.

**Respect the boss**—In the dog world, the mom (or you, as pack leader) is the giver of order and discipline, the one who provides security and meals. Providing these essentials with consistency is how a pup's mom commands respect.

As a manager, you're the giver of all good things, but if your employees observe you behaving erratically and perceive that your presence has little value, they learn to discount your corrections and you lose respect.

Consider what bosses do to cause people to discount their authority and lose respect for them. They might:

- Implement meaningless rules.
- Easily lose their tempers over small irritations.
- Play favorites with employees.
- Create needless, inefficient work systems.
- Focus on small bureaucratic details instead of the big picture.
- Let ego get in the way of good decision-making.
- Ignore input from employees.
- Hoard relevant information, leaving employees in the dark.

In the work world, as in the dog world, consistency is key. Its absence fosters uncertainty, confusion, and disdain, leading to disgruntled employees and an expensive, high turnover rate. So like a puppy's mom, be consistent in your reaction and discipline so that your leadership is valued and respected.

**Adapt around others**—Puppies develop skills to get along with others and so do employees. Some might be bigger, stronger, or faster than the rest, yet those less gifted or a little slower find ways to “wiggle their way in” like the runt in the litter.

As a manager, you have to be aware of what's happening and be persistent in your efforts to lead well. After all, managing is all about getting people to do what you want to support your organization's mission and goals. In today's diverse workplaces, that means adapting your style and approach to what works best for each employee. You take into account cultural, geographical, religious, gender, and demographic factors and harness their differences and talents to contribute to your team.

This calls for flexibility, knowledge, patience, and appreciation for the strengths of each worker.

**Show that actions have consequences**—Behaving badly can hurt on many levels. Puppies learn that if they bite, they get bitten in return, and quickly figure out they shouldn't bite. (I'm not saying employees should bite their cubicle neighbors; that would be considered rude, and human resources personnel would have fits.) Put mechanisms in place to make sure employees who exhibit inappropriate behavior in the workplace get corrected—quickly and consistently. Canines know this and so should leaders.

### **There is No Sometimes in a Dog's Life**

My dog's breeder and trainer, Trudi, has a mantra: "There is no 'sometimes' in a dog's life." That's great advice for dog owners—and for leaders, too!

Let's say you just got a brand new, completely adorable bull mastiff puppy weighing in at only ten pounds. You cuddle with him because, really, is there anything cuter than a puppy? (You might be thinking, "Yes. My child." I understand. But I'm sticking with the cute puppy example for the purposes of this book.)

So you pet and coo and cuddle with your puppy on the couch. He gets comfortable playing on your couch. The couch becomes your special place to hang out together.

Ten months later, your puppy weighs 180 pounds. One day, Aunt Sadie, who is eighty-seven years old, comes to the house and sits on your couch. The bull mastiff, with its jowly, drooling face, jumps on the couch and plops his face in her lap, expecting to be cuddled, right? That's what you taught him! And in the process, Aunt Sadie gets knocked over the back of the couch.

So what do you do? You yell at your dog!

Sure, his behavior was okay when he was younger, but now that he weighs 180 pounds, you've suddenly changed the rules—not yesterday but *today* when Aunt Sadie arrived. That's simply not fair. Dogs are not equipped to change expectations on short notice, and frankly most employees won't handle it that well, either. That's what we mean by "there is no *sometimes* in a dog's life."

As a leader, what do you do when you realize you have allowed people to take the wrong actions? You fix the situation. If you let undesired behavior continue and then try to correct it several months later, you essentially let the dog drool on Aunt Sadie on the couch. There should be no "sometimes" in how you treat employees, either. Just remember that changing expectations is likely to take some time and you, as manager, must consistently reinforce the new pattern.

### **Why Consistency Must Prevail**

Employees need and deserve the same consistent direction as puppies. Yes, you can make policy changes; just be clear about what changes you want and what they can expect. But you have to be consistent in your communications— always. Remember, there is no sometimes.

Let's say Sam has been coming to work twenty minutes late for a full month. When should his boss have mentioned this to him, now or a month ago? After letting this behavior slip for a month, the boss finally tells Sam he needs to show up on time, but nothing changes. Not a surprise; Sam has lost all respect for his boss's authority. Remember, I can tell the dog to stay off the couch, but if I don't make it stick, he'll continue to join me after a few minutes. Employees are likely to be more capable of self direction than the dog, but some will require accountability to get the message. It's your job to monitor the situation and make sure the change is happening. Discipline isn't a *sometimes* thing.

It is difficult to be consistent. Anyone who has ever raised children knows this. Being consistent is trying because we get tired, worn down. We mistakenly hope that the behavior will change on its own. We sometimes try to delegate the consistency to others, hoping against hope that they will be consistent in our stead. Unfortunately, it's part of our job, and an absolute requirement.

**Communicate expectations with consistency**—Look for ways to reward people when they do their jobs well and dutifully arrive on time (or whatever you think is important for employees carrying out their jobs successfully). If they don't, help them perform better by clearly

communicating your expectations consistently. Now, if every time I did something well and my boss gave me a mocha latte (or a Starbucks gift certificate to get one), I'd be motivated. Inspired. Enthusiastic. Cheerful. Also caffeinated, but eager to do more work.

***Chew on this***

How can you change your “sometimes” behavior to “always” behavior?

Are you being consistent in the actions you tolerate from employees and in the ways you reward them?

***Reminders—How to lead consistently***

- Respect the boss.
- Adapt around others.
- Show that actions have consequences.
- Communicate policy changes clearly.
- Be consistent: If an action was okay yesterday, it should be okay today.

***Remember—Don't let “sometimes” behavior weaken your leadership.***