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What I Learned about Leadership from My Dog



By John Covington

“What I Learned about Leadership from My Dog,” by John Covington. ISBN 978-1-62137-110-6 (Softcover) 978-1-62137-111-3 (eBook).

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Endorsements

“John understands dogs, people, and organizations. With great wit he intertwines leadership theory, his experience in business and dog training. An entertaining and educational read.”

Dr. Phillip Westbrook

Director of the Blackburn Institute, University of Alabama

“John has done it again! Making the jump from his first book, *Let's Don't Pave the Cow Paths* to his most recent book, *What I Learned About Leadership from My Dog*, is like getting a strong dose of leadership common sense from a fire hose. These two relatively short books are chucked full of folksy stories of John's personal leadership experiences with employees, peers and managers in his long career as a chemical engineer, consultant and perhaps most important, as a dog owner, lover and trainer. Getting to know John and his folks at CCI has certainly helped prepare me for my retirement as I face the seemingly never ending challenge of demonstrating to my wife Carol and our six year old Havanese pup Bentley as to which one of us is really the leader of the pack at our house”.

Tom Patterson

Chairman of the Board

DAXKO, Inc

“John's refreshing book brings together insights from the two worlds of leadership theory and practice and of interaction with dogs. The intersection of these worlds invites and surprises with new ways to consider a leader's roles and functions. Read this book to find a different window through which to see the work and responsibilities of a leader.”

Rev. Karen Greenwaldt
Chief Executive Officer
General Board of Discipleship
The United Methodist Church

“John managed to set a cadence to the narrative of his new book. Each new chapter and fresh idea is like the very beginning of a fireworks display. It opens up and sheds a different light on the topic. But then, the grand finale, it just goes pop, pop, pop, one nugget after another almost taking the breath away with so much wisdom. I see so many applications in our interactions with not only coworkers but family and friends alike.”

Richard Legare
Mortgage Broker and Dog Trainer

“John’s newest book lays out a compelling narrative on the essential elements of effective leadership on the training field and in the business field. His work is a reflection of his devotion to his dog Maggie and his business Chesapeake Consulting, Inc. In 1923, Max Emil Friedrich von Stephanitz, the founder of the modern-day German Shepherd Dog, wrote, “Show me your dog and I’ll tell you what manner of man you are.” Having watched John and Maggie work and train together these last few years, I can tell you that John is a gentle, compassionate, and devoted man. He has developed a relationship with Maggie that is truly built upon the foundations of trust and respect; the same elements that have created an outstanding leader in the business community. I thank John for sharing his passion and life lessons.”

Charles Radle Jr.
Co-owner of Fieldstone Animal Inn and Dog Trainer

Acknowledgements

I am very thankful for all those that reviewed this book and gave me feedback including Dr. Karen Baldwin, Dr. Norm Baldwin, Leigh Covington, Linda Covington, Janet Dooley, Pastor Jim Farmer, Angelia Knight, Pastor Martha Meredith, Dr. Heath Turner and all of those who wrote endorsements.

A special thanks goes to Sean Wise, who provided the photographs.

I would also like to honor all those dogs that have taught me over the years especially Henry, Griffin, April, Heidi and of course our current dog Maggie.

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Foreword

I grew up with a German Shepard named Bullet ... like the one from the old Roy Rogers show. I just called him Bully because he weighed more than I did when we got him and he could wrestle me to the ground any time he chose to. I spent all of my teen years at home on a forty acre plot of ground in northeast Alabama with Bully at my side most of the time. He saw us off to school, he welcomed us home, he went with me to feed the hogs, to milk the cow, to hunt squirrels, to fish, or just to roam. I learned that dogs are smart, or at least that Bully was smart...or maybe he was wise. He would not attack a snake while it was coiled regardless of what kind of snake it was. He waited until it started to crawl and then he was "on it". Bully was not a hunting dog per se, but he sure helped...most of the time. If it was squirrels we were hunting, he walked with enough noise that I could stand and wait for the squirrel to move around to my side of the tree. The squirrel thought he was hiding from a big dog, but he was really about to become breakfast. But Bully did get in the way hunting rabbits. You see, he was almost as fast as the rabbits, so he was usually too close for me to shoot. In fact if the rabbit ran in a straight line in the cotton field, Bully would catch him. He was one smart dog, mainly because he was good at listening to everything I needed to talk to someone about. And he would cock his head as if he understood.

The "trick" that always amazed me though, was how Bully could literally tackle me when I ran from him with a football. My brothers and I were always throwing a ball of some kind when we had free time. When one of us would catch the football and start running, Bully thought it was a personal challenge to him. He would grab the very bottom of our pant leg and throw his paw in front of us and trip us. It was great fun for all of us to play the game.

Bully was not well trained like the dogs you will meet in John's book, but he was good about the things for which I needed him to be good...hunting, sports, companionship, and listening. It was a relationship that I still feel good about. Would it not be good if we could feel good about all of our past relationships where we were the leader and someone else was our subordinate? Better still if those good memories are because of our effectiveness as a team. The real test of a good dog and master relationship is how they do as a team, each dependent on the other, each doing their job but not the job of the other (because they cannot). I think the analogy is that in a leader-subordinate relationship, it is because we should not try to do each other's job. And sometimes that is the first mistake of a leader.

I happen to believe that all of creation is well ordered and that we can learn lessons about some of the more complicated things from some of the more simple things. I am forever using analogies to communicate and to teach. When we see dogs and their master work, we sometimes think that it is simple. It is, to a real master trainer, but not to an amateur like most of us. Leadership is not simple, but it is easier to one who has mastered some of the principles involved. In this book "What I Learned about Leadership from My Dog", John Covington has focused on one leadership analogy and explored its many facets starting with trust and ending with communications. There are eleven other good facets in between those two. Study them as though they were facets on a diamond you are considering or actually buying. They just might be that valuable.

Tom Kilgore,
President and Chief Executive Officer
Tennessee Valley Authority

Preface

It has been my experience that we can learn a lot about life and important things by observing nature and things that might not be so obvious with regard to our leadership skills – such as dogs. God has created for us an earth full of education and learning experiences – all we need to do is stop, listen, and observe. When we get too close to issues involving our own leadership style, or even how others lead, we sometimes lose something; pride, ego, and territorial behavior may inhibit our senses. It is so easy to detach ourselves from the learning and to not do a proper self-examination. When dealing with your dog, it is difficult to run away from your leadership style. A famous saying among many a professional dog trainer is “Each handler gets the dog they deserve.”

Is it the same way with our employees and our culture? Does each leader deserve the culture they have? If your dog’s behavior is bad and you have owned the dog for a while, then my guess is you may have some personal leadership issues that you need to address. I certainly found some things in my personal leadership style that need addressing.

Experiences with handling both leadership positions and dogs have been a central part of my life since I was a child. I attended the United States Naval Academy where development of leaders is their stated mission and from there went on to gravitate to leadership positions in industry, church, and other non-profit organizations. I have owned and dealt with dogs all my life. I also have a deep passion for both topics.

The analogy of dog training and leadership of people is uniquely applicable and I think that connection will become more and more obvious as we go through this book together.

The topic of leadership is deep and it involves our personal relationships. If a topic mentioned in this book helps one person discover something that will help them in their own personal relationships, then the book is worth the effort to write. Can we humble ourselves and ask our dogs to teach us a thing or two about leadership?

Suzanne Clothier says in her book *If a Dog's Prayers were Answered Bones Would Rain from the Sky*, "To ask what can I learn from you is to open the door to an entire world of possibility in which our dogs can and do serve as our teachers." By learning practical techniques to maximize the utilization of the dog-human capability, we will also learn to do the same with the human-human capability.

Leadership is a personal and spiritual issue and one that carries with it enormous responsibility as to its impact on both people and dogs. The Monks of New Skete raise German Shepherds in their monastery in upstate New York. These monks put a holy dimension on working with dogs and feel that it is a mind-expanding experience. I certainly found this to be true. The subject matter of this book has taken me deeper than I expected and it has been fun.

In my last book on leadership, *Enterprise Fitness*, I outlined an overall leadership model that made sense to me and in the summary chapter I will outline how I think these two books weave together. However, I think this book is going to be more fun to write. We will talk about specific situations that we all address, and hopefully have a mind expanding experience by comparing the world of working with your dog to that of working with people.

Gaining a keener sense of self awareness is perhaps the single most important thing a leader can do. To understand how your behavior impacts others and your personal relationships with them is critical. We will find no better laboratory than our dogs.

Many dog training books focus on specific techniques to teach a variety of skills/commands; sit, down, come, stay, etc. There are a hundred ways to teach those commands and it is not as big of a deal as you might think. What is more important than the mechanics of training the technical skill for the dog, is training the human to be a better dog owner and to be a better leader. There needs to be a significant self-reflective aura to dog training, otherwise the potential for achievement between dog and handler is never approached.

Our company, Chesapeake Consulting Inc. (CCI), began focusing more on leadership when it became apparent to us that leadership drives culture and culture determined how successful a client would be implementing our process change technology. What we learned initially is that there are two basic models for leadership – an attribute model and a self-awareness model. In the attribute model, the attributes of a proven leader such as Churchill, Lincoln, Powell, etc. are defined and an individual leader is measured against those attributes. Then a gap analysis is done and the individual has an improvement plan based on that gap analysis. I think it is a laborious and stupid method – an individual spends their time trying to be someone else. In the self-awareness model, the leader learns how their own natural behavior may affect their relationships with others. This means not only understanding their own behavior, but having some insight into the behavior of those they lead so they can adapt their behavior to meet the other person at the best place. It does not imply being “false.” In fact it is the opposite – it is simply being empathetic.

One of my good friends, Carol Ptak, recommended that I weave the evolution of CCI into the discussion. Carol is also an accomplished dog trainer and handler. I founded CCI in 1988 so I have raised her from a pup so using some examples in this book from over the last two decades will hopefully enhance our learning.

Many of the concepts such as “trust your dog” will appear in several chapters. This redundancy is done on purpose and is intended to enhance the chance that the reader will learn more from this book. I first learned about “spaced repetition” when I was deploying the DuPont STOP safety program in plants that I managed. The writers of the program claimed that retention on a concept could go from about 10% to over 80% by using the method. Maybe we even learned something new about leadership in the Preface? That would be cool.

There are seven things that I learned or re-enforced while writing this book:

1. Put more effort and science into the selection process.
2. Realize that we need to adapt our leadership style based on the person, situation, and time.
3. Leadership is about relationship and our level of self-awareness is a critical factor.
4. Trust your dog if you want better performance.
5. Be in the moment.
6. Learn the language of those you are leading.
7. Be more serious about dominion and its responsibilities.

Let's begin the journey with our canine friends.

Chapter One

Trust Your Dog and Consider Trusting Your People

It was a winter day in Patapsco State Park and Lucinda had gone off into the woods to hide and pretend like she was lost. Maggie, my female German Shepherd Dog (GSD) and I were to go find her. I was to supply the leadership and Maggie was to use her nose and sense of smell.

I have owned German Shepherds a good portion of my life and I just love the breed, although Maggie is the first dog I decided to put through a lot of formal training. Prior to Maggie I had always trained my dogs, and if I must say so, I did a good job. Novice dog folks would marvel at what April, Heidi (my other two GSD females), and Major could do. All my dogs had good “recall,” which is dog people talk for “come.” They could do a long stay and halt from a dead run which could have been a life-saving command if they were chasing a squirrel in front of an oncoming car.

My wife, Linda and I had gone about 20 years without a shepherd then we (I) got the itch. There was a breeder in Vance, Alabama (near Tuscaloosa) that had a litter of puppies and Linda called to see if I wanted one. I told her to get the largest female. We will learn later in the book that this is not the best way to select a puppy, but fortunately it has worked out great. I would not trade Maggie for a boatload of puppies.

Our trainer, Charlie Radle, said that the only thing you could get two dog trainers to agree on is how screwed up the third trainer is. I have found that to be true. Charlie had titled several

shepherds in Schutzhund, which means “protection dog” in German. Schutzhund is a dog sport that has three elements to it: obedience, tracking and protection or, as some call it, “bite work.” Bite work is where a dog runs and jumps on the person in the padded suit, it’s not as bad as it sounds. For many dogs, bite work is an elevated game of tug of war.

One of the things that stuck with me was Charlie did less talking about training and more talking about establishing a relationship with your dog (does the same hold true for our employees?). He talked a lot about engaging in playing with the dog and that we were going to work on learning how to play. However, I am a tad impatient and sitting around learning how to play was going to test me. I now have a better understanding of what he was trying to convey. The fact is you can do both at the same time – train and play.

Maggie and I continued training on the elements of Schutzhund. She was excellent in obedience, ho-hum or worse in bite work, but loved tracking. In fact she is a tracking goddess. During this training I met Anne Wills, who is the founder of Dogs Finding Dogs, a search and rescue group for pets. I had checked into some traditional S&R groups but I got mostly negative feedback – they trained all the time, spent a lot of their own money, and never got called out to do much because the authorities would rather use their own K9 units. Pets get lost all the time. The principles of tracking are the same and you get to do a lot more work. It is also rewarding whenever you can reunite someone with their lost pet. The major issue for me was being able to work my dog and if in the process I could help someone else, then that’s a really cool thing.

Most of our weekly training is finding humans and that is why Lucinda got lost. This was a big day for us because we had a brand new trainer, Janet Dooley. Our group had just come off a very bad experience with the previous trainer. That trainer had a low regard for the dogs and our ability as handlers. Training sessions were tense and we were not advancing and making

progress. The trust level between handlers and the trainer was non-existent. We were all anxious to prove to Janet that we were good S&R teams so the heat was on Maggie and me to find Lucinda. There was some pride and ego at stake.

Off Maggie and I go and she is on the scent. Dogs follow a scent pattern that is composed of discarded skin, crushed vegetation, and ruptured soil. Here is a short explanation...

When you mow your grass it has a strong and pleasant odor that we all can detect. When you step on a blade of grass the same thing happens, however you and I cannot smell it, but your dog can. When you disrupt a big pile of compost it is easy for us to detect the odor. The same thing happens when you walk on the ground, however you and I cannot detect the smell, but our dogs can. Each of us flake off skin all of the time and when we walk, it falls to the ground and creates an odor. Thank heavens we cannot detect that as it probably has the aroma of my smelly feet.

Scent is like fallen leaves – the wind blows it around so environmental conditions must be taken into consideration when tracking. The best weather for tracking is moist with little or no wind and the worst condition is low humidity and windy.

Maggie tracked Lucinda down a dirt trail in the woods. All of a sudden she seemed to lose the scent and she wandered off to the left and into the woods. She stared out into the forest and seemed disinterested. Did she not understand that Janet was evaluating us and that she was making us look bad? I could sense myself getting a tad angry with her. She then took a poop – talk about lack of concern! “Poor Lucinda is lost and all you can do is stare out into the woods and take a dump?” Janet stands coolly off to the side with her arms crossed not saying a word. She then said, “Why don’t you take her over here and cast her.” Casting is a method of taking the dog back to where they had the scent and moving them in circles so they can reconnect with the scent. That worked like a charm and Maggie was back on the trail. It was not long before we found the long lost Lucinda standing

behind a tree with a hand full of doggie snacks and a ball as Maggie's reward for finding her.

After the track, Janet got us around to recap. She started off by saying, "I hate the term crittering." Crittering is the dog handler term used for explaining that the dog is out to lunch (looking for critters) when they should be working. I guess she felt that is what I was going to blame our snag on, and she wanted to block that excuse from the start. She went on, "When Maggie loses the scent, no one is more upset than Maggie. She wants to do a good job and she is stressed out when she loses the scent. When she offers alternate behaviors such as looking off into the woods, she is showing signs of stress. The absolute worst thing you can do is get angry and make the stress worse. Your job is to relieve the stress and help her." And then she said something that I will never forget which might just be the theme of this book; "Trust your dog."

Crap – I just had my rear end chewed out by some lady young enough to be my daughter. Things got better and after several hours of training, Maggie hopped in the back seat of the car and we started home. I was thinking about the whole track with Lucinda and how I had reacted to Maggie. I couldn't help but ask myself the question; "Do I ever treat people like that?" I don't think I liked the answer. Does my ego get in the way of my leadership? Yes it does – it is the same old ego that also helps strain relationships.

Charlie had it correct – it is about relationships with your dog. For the most part, especially for larger dogs, the relationship must also be based on you being the leader. Leadership is simply a form of relationship – a deep one where you have been given the power by the other person to influence them from time to time. This relationship will be based on respect – either respect from being afraid of you or respect from trusting you. We want to embrace trust.

So what is the answer and recipe for establishing such relationships? Are they all the same? Let's look at a several dog-people relationships.

Maggie and I were walking by our local school and I saw a man playing with his German Shepherd off leash. Up until now, the only shepherds I had seen off leash in our neighborhood were Maggie and the police officer's K-9 that lived down the street. There was something special about this dog – he just had an air of confidence and composure about him. I put Maggie on a down command and went over to talk with the man. He introduced me to his dog, Dollar, who was nine years old and a retired Navy SEAL. The man was not the dogs' service handler but was the adopted "dad." It was a unique relationship between dog and man and on this occasion I give most of the credit to the dog. After talking with the man it was obvious he had so much respect for the dog that he did not view the animal as something inferior to himself; Dollar certainly felt that level of trust. I later pondered what Dollar had seen and experienced during his service career. How could you not be in awe and trust this dog? What if we had that type of thought process of trust and respect about all of our dogs? Would it make a difference in how we related to them and thus our ability to influence them? How about with the people we lead and spend time with?

I wonder how much of Dollar's obvious air of self-confidence and good nature was a reflection of all of the positive vibes he got from people. Everyone who met Dollar was made aware of his background as a Navy SEAL so he immediately won their respect. Dollar felt the trust others had in him for good cause. Somewhere along the line a sailor trusted Dollar with his life.

Several years ago a young lady, who was attending the Naval Academy Ring Dance, was staying at our home. It was my responsibility to get her to the airport on time to catch her flight back to Birmingham. I messed up and let the time get away from me. We were all in a panic as we only had a short time for her to catch her flight. Mary Ann, the young lady, Leigh, my daughter, and I rushed off to the airport. As we were speeding towards the terminal, I was barking out instructions to Mary Ann and Leigh. I told Mary Ann to concentrate on getting checked in with her luggage and my daughter Leigh to go down and stop the plane;

this was long before 9/11 and airport security was at the gate. When I gave Leigh those instructions, I had absolute confidence that she would accomplish the task – I trusted her. She was about 12 years old at the time. Leigh flies through the terminal, to the gate, down the ramp, and onto the plane and announced to the pilot and flight attendants; “Stop this plane, you must wait for Mary Ann!” The flight attendant looked at her and said, “Young lady, how did you get on this plane?” They waited for Mary Ann and all was well. There was never any doubt in Leigh’s mind that she would stop the plane – she felt the trust.

Prior to founding CCI, my career involved leading and managing employees, and I was weary of having to deal with people. I did not want any more employees and I was perfectly content on doing everything myself and focusing on helping my clients. After about a year, I found myself swamped with work and tasks that needed to be done – I was going to have to hire someone else or go crazy. I made a list of everything I was doing and then went back and circled the items that only I could do. The list of circled items was a lot shorter and manageable. I needed to hire someone to deal with the items that were not circled. Andrea Siple was my first hire and my initial instructions to her were, “Your first job is to take care of all of the grief associated with hiring you, then address these non-circled items.” Andrea was great and played a large role in our initial success as a company. Trusting Andrea was a good thing to do for everyone and for our brand new company.

Like humans, dogs are different and unique. Linda noticed the bag of cat food had a Cairn terrier rear-end sticking out of it. My little buddy Griffin had gotten into the closet, pulled out the cat food, and was in the process of chowing down. From Linda’s perspective, this was a massive rule infraction. She playfully swatted Griffin’s rear end and fussed at him to get out of the cat food bag. Griffin came out of the bag furious – teeth glaring, lips curled, and snarling at Linda – he even charged her letting her know that he had no intention of abandoning the bag. Linda snatched his little 20 pounds or so off the ground, put the cat food

bag back in the closet, and closed the door. The incident was essentially over. That was just Griffin – our little enforcer. The only ones he did not mess with were me and Henry, the older Cairn. Both Henry and Griffin have since made their journey over the Rainbow Bridge, however Linda and I still laugh about the incident on numerous occasions as we reflect on our memories of our pets. I then said to Linda; “That would not have been so funny if it were Maggie.” An 80 pound German Shepherd dominating you is an entirely different story and quite a scary one. Under no circumstances would we have let that happen. Our relationships with all of our pets are different because they have different personalities and are in different situations. In many respects our leadership style is the same, however it needs to be adapted for each pet. The same is true for humans as they also vary in behavior style.

Here is what we should learn from this chapter. We want to improve leadership and leadership is about relationships. In order to improve relationships, we must improve our level of trust. Trust is unique to each relationship we have and is largely dependent on our individual mindsets. The good news is we have the ability and can control improvement in this area; we control our own mindset. We can choose to trust or we can choose not to trust in any given situation.

Trust is situational. I trust Maggie’s ability to track. I do not trust her to guard the pot roast. The same is true for the people you lead – there are things that fall into their wheelhouse of skill and knowledge and there are things that don’t. Part of your job is to sort those out and set your employees up to win.

Trust must work both ways as you must gain the trust of those you lead. Admiral Chester Nimitz said, “Leadership may be defined as that quality that inspires sufficient confidence in subordinates as to be willing to accept his views and carry out his commands.”

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