

## Pack Mentality

A dog is defined by his or her status in the pack. Status determines when he eats, works, plays, and sleeps. When the pack is stable, the dogs act almost as one, each fulfilling its role for the survival of the whole. This stability can only be achieved when a strong, confident dog is in the lead—the Alpha dog.

The Alpha must be calm but powerful to maintain the respect of the others. It is his responsibility to lead, organize, and protect the pack, initiate the hunt, and defend the den. The Alpha makes it clear which behaviors he approves of and which he will not tolerate. When Buck is in the lead “where judgment was required, and quick thinking and quick acting,” he sets the ground rules with the other sled dogs, correcting the bad habits that slow them down. For example, “Pike, who pulled at Buck’s heels, and who never put an ounce more of his weight against the breast-band than he was compelled to do, was swiftly and repeatedly shaken for loafing; and ere the first day was done he was pulling more than ever before in his life.”

An Alpha expects the other dogs to follow, but does not force them. Aggression is a sign of weakness in an Alpha dog and a destabilizing force within the pack. The Alpha’s position is maintained through the constant deference shown to him by the other dogs, rather than by force. In the case of Spitz, who “never lost an opportunity of showing his teeth,” Buck is able to become the Alpha dog when Spitz’s aggression threatens the whole pack.

Most dogs are comfortable being followers. It is less stressful to live within the boundaries set by the leader than to set the rules. Some behaviors that evidence the hierarchy in a pack include allowing a higher-ranking dog to proceed first through a narrow passage, to eat first, to sleep where he pleases, and not greeting that dog with teeth or

paws. The Alpha, of course, receives the most deference, always eating first and not being disturbed when asleep. If any of the pack members infringe on the Alpha’s privileges, it takes only a harsh look to restore order.

If the Alpha dog is not living up to his duties, he will be challenged and replaced. The pack dogs are receptive to the Alpha’s rules, but will not accept a weak leader. In fact, weakness is not accepted in any member of the pack. If a dog is weak, he may be killed. The survival of the pack is more important than any one dog. This is illustrated by the pack’s killing of the weak but friendly Curly after she approaches a superior husky. “They closed in upon her, snarling and yelping, and she was buried, screaming with agony, beneath the bristling mass of bodies.” Perhaps the best follower in *The Call of the Wild* is Dave—relaxed in his downtime and fiercely hardworking in the traces, he serves the pack until his body gives out.

Domesticated dogs bring the pack mentality into their relationships with humans. Biologists believe that between ten and twelve thousand years ago, dogs began to live with humans. In exchange for food, dogs worked herding livestock, pulling heavy loads, and hunting game. The domesticated dog in a healthy household views its owner as the Alpha of the pack. From John Thornton’s first appearance, he establishes himself as the Alpha. Thornton’s “kindliness and largeness” win Buck’s loyalty and respect. “Buck’s love was expressed in adoration. While he went wild with happiness when Thornton touched him or spoke to him, he did not seek these tokens... Buck was content to adore at a distance.” Buck finds in Thornton, as the other dogs had found in Buck, a leader fair in his discipline and at ease in his power.