



Leadership Lessons

What you can learn about teamwork from a dogsled team.

by *Kindra Gordon*

At first glance, dogsledding may not appear to offer much insight about leadership. But take a closer look, and all of the elements of a functioning team, with each dog playing an important leadership role, are there.

That's what Linda Chamberlain of Homer, Alaska, has learned during her past 10 years as a dog musher. Chamberlain has combined her public health career with her passion for dogsledding and rural living and often uses her experiences to talk to communities and children about teambuilding, leadership and diversity from a dog team's perspective.

What are the lessons to be learned? Foremost, Chamberlain says, is that you can go farther with a team than you'll ever go alone.

As an example from her own life, Chamberlain says when she first began mushing there were some steep and scary trails to conquer. As her ability to work with the dogs on her team improved, she recognized that those obstacles could be turned into opportunities. She adds, "I've learned I'm not fearless, but with the right team and leaders, we can do it." She champions that the same can be done among teams of people.

Every position important

A second lesson Chamberlain points out is that every position in a team is important. With sled teams numbering as many as 12-16 dogs, lead dogs would seem to get the most attention, but, Chamberlain emphasizes, "every position is critical."

Yes, lead dogs tend to "lead" the way, but behind them are the swing dogs — which Chamberlain describes as a mentoring opportunity. A leadership theory that can be applied in life, she says, "This is surrounding yourself with others who know more than you do."

Next are the team dogs, which Chamberlain refers to as "the heart of the

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team." She explains that these individuals understand and accommodate the needs of their teammates. "Team dogs aren't out in front. They can't see like the leader, but they've got to go along — which requires trust. And, they must adapt quickly to changes and hazards in the trail that the team encounters."

Those closest to the sled are the wheel dogs. Initially, Chamberlain didn't recognize the importance of this position. But she has since learned — the hard way — that these are the individuals who keep the sled on the trail. Hence, they have an important role in the team as well.

From her experiences, Chamberlain says, "People have different personalities and so do dogs. You can create the perfect team if you celebrate what people do well and complement them with people who have different talents."

Recognize strengths, weaknesses

That said, Chamberlain advocates that when putting together a team, you need to assess strengths and weaknesses — strengths being those things you enjoy doing, and weaknesses being those things that burn you out.

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She advises soaring with your strengths and managing your weaknesses. “We tend to focus too much on improving our weaknesses, when we should find out what we do well and do more of it,” she says.

As an example from her sledding team, Chamberlain had a dog join her team that had run in three major races by the time she was 18 months old. “It was too much too soon,” Chamberlain says. Today, she runs that dog without another dog beside her in the harnesses. “That’s managing her weaknesses,” Chamberlain says.

As another example, Chamberlain says she’s learned from her team that a leader can come from anywhere. She had one dog that seemed to fit in wherever he was needed and help whoever he was teamed with. Then, one day in a snowstorm, when the lead dog would not take the trail home, this dog stepped up to the challenge and led the rest of the team through the storm.

Chamberlain says, “I didn’t even know he could be a leader.” Likewise, there are people who step up to lead when put in a situation that makes it necessary. “We never know where a leader is going to come from,” Chamberlain says.

And there will be some individuals who do not make team players. Chamberlain has encountered one of those individuals in her kennel. With that dog, she manages his weakness by using him individually.

Lasting lessons

Chamberlain emphasizes two final points about leadership that she’s learned on the trail. One is the “law of the lid” from author John Maxwell’s *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. Chamberlain describes this as the ability to determine effectiveness. Essentially, she says, “You can work harder, but if you aren’t focused on your goals, you won’t excel.”

Chamberlain says one of her dogs exemplifies this theory. As a trail leader, she is in training to learn the commands to be a gee-haw leader — the dog who turns the sledding team. Chamberlain says there is not a harder working dog in her kennel — she even had to get the dog a new harness because she’s become so muscular from digging into the trail and giving it her all.

But, this dog hasn’t learned the commands (gee for right, haw for left). “She hasn’t focused on developing the essential leadership skills to guide the team,” Chamberlain says, “so I have to run her with another leader who can take the commands when needed.”

The last lesson Chamberlain shares is this: “Success is built on relationships, and you need to maintain those as you go along. You need to be supportive of your team — be it community, a business or a dog team — because teamwork is about serving and meeting needs.”



Networking 101

As you become a leader in your industry — or your community — networking will likely be an important part of that process. Defined as “building mutually beneficial relationships,” networking is an opportunity to promote your business or causes that you believe in.

Darla Crown, based in Rapid City, S.D., often gives presentations to help people enhance their networking skills. Crown has amassed her own networking talents during a 30-year history in various officer positions with the Army and National Guard.

Most importantly, she says to recognize that networking is give and take. “If you want to get something from someone, you have to be willing to give back.”

Additionally, Crown says, networking is not another name for sales. “It’s not about expecting everyone you meet to buy something from you. It’s about relationships.”

She adds that the process takes time. “People build relationships with people they know, they like and they trust.”

Crown offers these tips to enhance your networking skills:

- 1) When networking at an event, wear a nametag to help others become familiar with your name. Also, be sure to place the nametag on your right-hand side. This makes it easier for people to read when they shake your hand.
- 2) Never leave home without your business cards. These should include your name, company name, address, e-mail and phone number. Pass the cards out discriminately to people who you meet and may work with again. Do not pass out brochures (unless they are requested). Crown says that is too much information, and it’s expensive.
- 3) Practice your handshake. A firm clasp is preferred as opposed to a jellyfish or a knuckle breaker.
- 4) Create your own self-introduction. Crown says this is essentially a 30-second statement about yourself and what you do. It should include your name, where you are from, the name of your company, and a short statement about what you do specifically. She advocates practicing this at home so when you are put on the spot you can deliver your message.

Reading about leading

For more about leadership, consider reading these books:

- *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion*, by Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee
- *Volunteering: 101 Ways You Can Improve the World and Your Life*, by Douglas Lawson
- *Authentic Leadership*, by Bill George
- *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, by Stephen Covey