

# Identifying your alpha dogs

by MARK BRESLIN

Special Contributor

**I RECENTLY TRAVELED** to Jackson Hole, Wyo., to research parallels between top sled dog teams and top performing union construction teams. I wanted to understand what really makes a dog an “alpha” under the most competitive and extreme conditions, and see if there were any lessons in it for our industry. During my visit with Frank Teasley, a world-famous sled dog racer, I learned true leaders – alpha dogs– share three key characteristics: 1) desire/stamina, 2) aggressiveness, and, 3) intelligence.

Teasley and his wife raise 170 sled dogs in a remote location near Jackson Hole. Among these dogs will come sled teams that will compete in Europe, Alaska and the continental United States. Teasley, himself, has competed in the Alaskan Iditarod multiple times.

When I arrived at Teasley’s property and jumped out of the truck, I was greeted with a symphony of howls, barks and

cries, which seemed to be a huge chaotic mix of over-excited animals. What I was actually looking at was an Olympic training ground for some of the most amazing animal athletes in the world.

After being warned not to get too close to some of the dogs — these are not doe-eyed cocker spaniels — and an orientation, I was given the opportunity to drive my own sled dog team. Six dogs were harnessed to my sled for a 25-mile run. It was minus 10° Fahrenheit. My alpha dog, harnessed at the front, was Esky. She is an Iditarod veteran and has run thousands of miles under the most difficult of circumstances. I was lucky Esky knew what she was doing, because my learning curve was just beginning. After 30 minutes, I was feeling it. Frozen face, hands and feet. And, controlling the team was complex.

The mushers were very clear that there are major differences between all 170 dogs. So, for research purposes, I had to know, how do they select their top dogs? How do they decide between all of these high-performance animals, and select the top teams to compete around the world? What characteristics might appear in parallel to our top foremen and superintendents? What lessons could be learned?

## DESIRE/STAMINA

With these dogs, the most important aspect to begin with is the ability and burning desire to go hard. When you walk up to the sled, these dogs start howling and crying like you are stealing their souls. They strain in their harnesses and jump into the air trying to break the sled free. They live to run. They live to work. Nothing gives them greater pleasure and purpose than pulling and running hard.

Are humans so different? Can any leader really succeed without the willingness to go hard? Leaders have to find pleasure and purpose in hard work. Leaders have to have the stamina to keep pushing themselves and their team in a way that separates them from the ordinary performer. Alpha leaders may find themselves restless and anxious if they are not pushing, because their natural state of intensity is a little bit higher than those around them.






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### AGGRESSIVENESS

The top alphas are bred for aggressiveness. These dogs are not little cuddly puppies. Though it is not an absolute necessity that an alpha leader be highly aggressive, it is a common identifier in our industry. It is unlikely that someone who is passive will do well as a construction leader.

As one musher said, "You want a dog that would fight to the death, but won't pick fights with the rest of his team." This combination of aggressiveness and team orientation is something very transferable to leadership in the construction workplace.

### INTELLIGENCE

Perhaps the most important element for a real alpha dog is smarts. You can have stamina, desire and aggressiveness, but, without the brains to capitalize on these attributes, you have a basic brute mentality.

On the sled, there were a few commands that guided the team: hike (go), gee (right), haw (left), whoa (obvious), easy (slow down together while maintaining tension on harness) and get up (push harder while going uphill). A dog racer in competition may be going between 15-18 mph. In case you think that doesn't sound very fast, try flying, bumping and skidding along frozen trails at that rate behind 16 dogs.

Intelligence means the team knows what to do when given a command: immediately, consistently and dependably. This

will only be demonstrated if a musher/leader cultivates and values intelligence.

In construction, you often hear stupid phrases being used with apprentices like 'you're not paid to think.' That is the old-school "I'm in charge" tradition killing opportunity. Union construction today is all about creating knowledge-workers, not just dumb guys pulling a sled.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Character is more important than skills. Without desire and stamina, knowledge is nothing. Adversity of conditions filters for top performers. Strong alpha personalities need to value teamwork. Aggressiveness is necessary, but not at the expense of the crew. Intelligence that is well-directed and supported is the most important aspect to a high-performance team.

Oh, and, finally, don't pet an alpha. Just give them a job to do. ■



Mark Breslin is a strategist, speaker and author specializing in labor-management challenges. His books, *Survival of the Fittest* and *Million Dollar Blue Collar* are used by more than 300 apprenticeship programs in the United States and Canada.

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