

Real Alphas: The Iditarod Winning Formula

In the course of researching this book I traveled to Jackson Hole in Wyoming to visit with Frank Teasley, a world-famous dogsled racer. Frank has also competed in the Iditarod race in Alaska multiple times. I wanted to understand what really makes a dog an “Alpha” under the most competitive and extreme conditions and to see whether there were any lessons in it for our industry.

At Frank’s remote location, he and his wife raise 170 sled dogs. From these they select teams that compete in Europe, Alaska, and around the continental U.S. When I got out of the truck, I was greeted with a loud symphony of howls, barks, and cries. It seemed 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 a warning not to get too close to some of the dogs (these are not cocker spaniels), I was given the opportunity to drive my own sled team. Six dogs were harnessed to my sled for a twenty-five mile run. The temperature was minus 10 plus wind chill. My Alpha dog, harnessed at the front, was Esky. She was a veteran of the Iditarod and had run thousands of miles under the most difficult of circumstances. I was damn lucky that Esky knew what she was doing because my learning curve was just beginning.

It took the dogs about fifteen minutes to hit their stride. In that same fifteen minutes I stopped feeling my frozen face, hands, and feet. Besides that, it turned out that controlling the team was complex, based on the individual leader and the composition of the team. No matter a raw rookie like me or 1,100 miles across the frozen Alaska wilderness—the qualities of the team started with the very front dog. The mushers were very clear that there are major differences among 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 to select the top teams to compete around the world? What characteristics might also apply to our top foremen and superintendents? What lessons could be learned?

The true Alpha dog that gets to the elite racing level has three key characteristics. These are as follows:

Desire

The most important aspect to begin with for these dogs 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 teams in a way that separates them from the ordinary performer. Alpha leaders may find themselves restless and anxious if they are not pushing hard. Their natural state of intensity is a little bit higher than those around them.

Aggressiveness

The top Alphas are bred for aggressiveness. These dogs are not little cuddly puppies. The exact words used by one musher were: “You want a dog that would fight to the death but won’t pick fights with the rest of his team.” Though it is not an absolute necessity that an Alpha leader be highly aggressive, it is a typical trait in our industry. It is unlikely that someone who is passive will do well as a construction leader. Aggressiveness is a trait shared by man and beast alike, but clearly there is a profile that balances unyielding fierceness and team cooperation. Again, 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 you have a basic brute mentality. On the sled there were verbal 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 don’t think that sounds very fast, try flying, bumping, and skidding along frozen trails at that rate behind sixteen dogs. Intelligence means they know what to do when given a command—immediately, consistently, and dependably. It also means that the musher/leader cultivates and values intelligence. In construction you often hear stupid phrases being used with apprentices such as, “You’re not paid to think.” That is the old school “I’m in charge” tradition killing opportunity. Construction today is all about creating knowledge-based workers, not just dumb guys to pull the sled.

So, in summary, what are the Alpha 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 of a high-performance team. Oh, and finally, if you want to make them happy, don’t just pet Alphas; give them a job to do.

Understanding Dominance and the Pack

Wolves and wild dogs live and work in packs. They are highly intelligent and social in their interactions. They do everything for a reason and in the interest of the pack. Thus, it seems curious that when two wolves fight for dominance, the pack often surrounds them, waiting for one or the other to be severely injured. It is documented that in many cases when one wolf hurts another badly, the pack will jump in and tear the loser apart. This analogy applies more than you can know in the world of Alpha leaders.

There come times when every leader is tested, by employees, bosses, competitors, clients—you name it. Someone is going to try to test you. I began in a CEO position at age twenty-six. This put a big, fat target on my back. Competitors saw it as their opportunity to kill off our organization. Good old boys wanted to run me off, just to amuse themselves. Tough field guys thought I was just a jerk college boy. The pack had circled. The test was going to determine my fate. I was going to prevail or get torn apart. In these cases, as a strategic method of building both respect and caution on the part of others, you have to assert your capability and dominance.

There can be no question of the consequences of taking you on. Especially in a male-dominated industry like construction, there is a lot of testosterone and all the rough interaction that comes with it.

Now, this does not mean pick a fight with everyone who pushes your buttons; it means you have to let people know:

- That you will not be pushed around or intimidated
- That your age, gender, race, family ties, or anything not related to your performance and position are irrelevant
- That you see yourself as their leader or peer and will demand respect accordingly
- That there will be serious consequences to pushing you, and that they should learn that cooperation is a better way to approach you
- That if it comes to conflict, you will not shy from it and, if there are stakes involved, you will aggressively advocate your position

So I was tested by the pack. Everyone pushed. Some to take advantage and others just to see what I would do. It represented a few very rough years for me. It caused me more than a few sleepless nights and bad cases of heartburn. It made me ask more than once if I really wanted the responsibility and conflict that came with senior leadership. But since I did want it, I had no alternative. Simply put, I could not take any shit, and I was forced to come on strong in many situations. I knew that if I did not do this successfully early in my leadership role, I would be marginalized and disrespected due to my age and perceived inexperience. My personal branding was on the line. And if I was seen as weak, the court of construction leadership opinion might never allow me to recover. Pushing back was the only way for me to survive and succeed in an industry full of very tough and determined people.

You note I also use the term “survive” above. Does this seem a little melodramatic? Well, let’s go back to the pack and why they make that circle and kill off the loser in the fight. When the pack (crew, office, industry competitors, and so on...) circle up to watch two individuals in conflict, it is not to watch for amusement. The way that conflict turns out may indicate to the pack whether the loser still belongs or if his or her weakness is a fatal flaw that must be eliminated. The pack knows that weakness in one reflects weakness in all. Are we so different from the wolves? How quick are we to judge others for their courage or lack thereof? How fast are we to identify those unable to maintain the level of group performance necessary? How often do we tolerate the uncommitted, incompetent, or incapable?

A leader is by default put in a highly visible position. Thus, all the highly aggressive and ambitious pack members can be expected eventually to test or challenge the lead Alpha. It is normal. It is the way of nature. It is the way of business. It is the way the pack thrives and succeeds. Leading well will require conflict and pushing back; just make sure it is about the best interests of the pack as much as it is about you.