



1 LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

By Polley Ann McClure

I have had the opportunity in recent years to participate in the sport of agility with my dog. In the course of this experience, I have reflected on the lessons I have learned in the sport and on the astounding fact that most of them are very similar to the lessons I have learned during a career in teaching and leadership in higher education organizations. Now, please don't think I'm suggesting that people are just like dogs. I'm not, of course. It's simply that drawing an analogy between these two activities reveals some general and essential truths about learning, communicating, and relationship-building—three keys to success in both agility and organizational leadership.

My agility teammate is Ivy, a six-year-old Bearded Collie. The “Beardie,” an ancient Scottish herding breed, is a highly intelligent and active creature. Ivy and I have been partners since she was eight weeks old. She is, first of all, my companion and friend, but she is also a canine athlete in agility.

Agility is a rapidly growing sport, introduced into the United States less than twenty years ago. In agility, a team consisting of one person (the handler) and one dog runs an obstacle course together. The dog executes the obstacles, and the handler runs along near the dog, providing directions on the sequence of obstacles. To win a competition, a team must (1) execute each obstacle perfectly, (2) execute

the obstacles in the correct sequence, and (3) be the fastest team with a perfect score. In competition, the course is laid out by the judge, but neither dog nor handler will have seen the particular course before. The handler is allowed to walk the course in advance, but the team gets only one chance to perform the obstacle course perfectly.

In a trial, at the advanced level, a team has about forty to sixty seconds to complete approximately twenty obstacles arranged over a 10,000-square-foot field. The handler's role on the team is (1) to learn the basic skills of the game and to teach these skills to the dog; (2) to develop with the dog a system of communication whereby the handler can make clear to

Polley Ann McClure, Vice-President for Information Technologies and Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Cornell University, received the 2003 EDUCAUSE Award for Excellence in Leadership, sponsored by SCT, an EDUCAUSE Platinum Partner. This lifetime-achievement award honors extraordinary influence, statesmanship, and effectiveness on both individual campuses and within the higher education community. Trained as a scientist, McClure taught ecology and evolutionary biology and conducted research on animal life-history traits at Indiana University and has continued to hold faculty appointments throughout her career. McClure has managed university IT organizations since the early 1980s, at three major academic institutions: Indiana University, the University of Virginia, and Cornell. At Indiana, she built one of the first institution-wide network infrastructures and led one of the first mergers of administrative and academic technology organizations in the United States. At Virginia, she successfully joined the academic, administrative, and voice communications activities into a single organization that provides a model of how IT in higher education can more effectively support the mission of a research university. McClure's work in the IT community is characterized by her exceptional communication and collaboration skills, her capacity to find exciting possibilities for institutional improvement, her focus on staff career development, and her high sense of ethics.

Ten Lessons Learned

Lesson #1:	Trust is the foundation for everything.
Lesson #2:	Put your relationship first.
Lesson #3:	Make it fun!
Lesson #4:	You need three-way vision.
Lesson #5:	Never take your eyes off your partner.
Lesson #6:	Do your job, and let others do theirs.
Lesson #7:	Communicate!
Lesson #8:	Positive rewards produce the best learning results.
Lesson #9:	The mistakes are your fault.
Lesson #10:	The prizes are theirs.

the dog which obstacle is to be executed next; and (3) to give clear and correct directions in the course of a competitive event. The hardest part of this role is developing the system of communication between the handler and the dog.

The dog's role on the team is (1) to learn how to execute each obstacle and to take responsibility for doing so correctly every time; (2) to learn to read the communications from the handler in order to understand which obstacle to execute next; and (3) during a competitive event, to go as fast as possible. The hardest part for the dog is keeping track of the handler and, while executing the obstacles, correctly understanding which one should be executed next.

Below I will discuss ten specific lessons I've learned with Ivy—lessons that apply to success not only in agility but also in organizational leadership.



Lesson #1: Trust is the foundation for everything.

In order for the handler and the dog to have the confidence to compete successfully, each must have a high level of trust in the other. That trust is built by working together successfully over time.

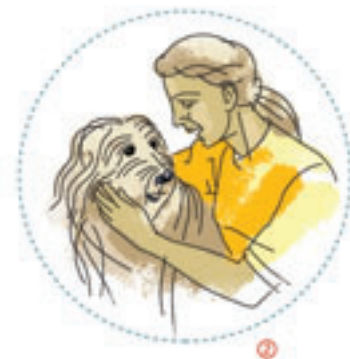
When I leave Ivy at the start line of a trial, I confidently walk out to a position several jumps away. I can do this, which will give us an advantage of several seconds, because I trust her to stay when I ask her to and then to fly into action when—but not before—I'm ready. Likewise, she needs to trust that when she comes out of a blind chute or tunnel, I will be there on the side she expects, to give her direction about what to do next. Most important, she needs to be absolutely certain that I won't ask her to do anything she can't do.

With people, I believe that trust similarly builds as a result of repeatedly demonstrated integrity. Others can come to trust me as a leader when, every time they observe my work, they believe that I have acted with honesty, fairness, and good judgment. Trust takes time to develop, time in which people working together are able to prove that they understand each other and that they can be depended on.

Lesson #2: Put your relationship first.

No matter what happens in an agility training session or in a trial or even in the agility world championship, nothing is more important than the relationship between the partners. If that relationship is put at risk in order to win or to accomplish some immediate purpose, the handler will pay dearly over the long haul because it is the relationship that allows the team to excel.

I play with Ivy at the start and at the end of practice sessions, and we celebrate at the finish line in trials. Playing is like putting money into a relationship bank account. You can use the deposit to ac-



complish powerful things. But if you keep withdrawing and never deposit, you'll end up bankrupt!

Leaders in organizations also need to remember that as important as other elements are, the foundation for success is the relationships among staff and colleagues. As in agility, organizational leaders must continually make deposits to these "bank accounts."



Lesson #3: Make it fun!

There is a saying in agility training: "Work is play, and play is work." We try to make the work of training indistinguishable from play. This is important because we want the dog to come to training sessions and competitions with enthusiasm and gusto. It is only with enthusiasm that a dog can achieve speed and an excellent performance.

With people, this is a lesson that, unfortunately, I often forget. I get so focused on goals that I lose sight of how deadly serious I've allowed myself—and those I'm working with—to become. People work better when they look forward to coming to work because fun, interesting, and good things happen there.



Lesson #4: You need three-way vision.

During an agility run, the handler needs three viewpoints. First, the handler must watch the dog on the course. Second, the handler must see the course from the dog's perspective in order to realize where the traps are, to understand what the dog might be thinking, and to realize how the handler's location affects the dog's thinking. Third, the handler must also see the entire run "from the balcony"—where the perspective of distance helps reveal the big picture.

Leadership is an improvisational art. Actions on any given day depend very much on the specific way that issues and situations present themselves. Leaders make real-time decisions based on their own perspective, but they must also "see" the issues and situations from the perspective of staff. In addition, it is very important that leaders exit both their own and their staff's perspectives and sit for a while "in the balcony"—to be sure to view the big picture.

Another aspect of perspective—in both agility and organizational leadership—is that the signals being used aren't always the ones that are being followed. When we start working with an agility dog, we think our verbal instructions to the dogs are conveying our intentions to them. We also think that the way we wave our arms around, pointing to things, communicates our intentions to our dogs. Later we learn that our dogs are actually taking their instructions from other cues.

I discovered this aspect of perspective during an agility workshop, when the instructor asked the teams to run the course silently. Ivy performed perfectly. Then we were told to keep our hands behind our

back and be silent. Ivy was still perfect. I eventually learned that she was reading the angle of my feet and the direction in which my shoulders were pointing. What was astounding was that I had no idea! I had not taught her about feet and shoulders, but she sure had learned it. I thought I had taught her to follow what I was saying and where I was pointing, but she wasn't using that information. Now that I know this, I can more consciously use these other channels.

In communicating with other people, we may be able to make better assumptions about the communications channels. Or perhaps not. For example, I have relied extensively on my plans, articles, and speeches—my "natural" leadership tools—as the way I communicate directions with my colleagues. Yet I sometimes wonder whether they get any more information from these formal representations than my dog does from my yelling "A-Frame!" If not, what *are* my colleagues seeing and/or hearing when I communicate with them? Is it possible that the way I interact in individual encounters conveys more about the direction we should be going than do my formal documents? If so, what does this say about how I should be spending my time?



Lesson #5: Never take your eyes off your partner.

This lesson is drummed into the head of every beginning agility student. If you turn your back on your dog for even a second, you will break the connection between yourself and your dog. Most likely, you'll lose track of where your dog is, and your dog will lose track of you. Only when handler and dog are closely tuned in to each other can the team successfully complete the course.

This lesson is just as important in organizations. The same kind of disconnect will develop if a leader's attention strays. How many times have we delegated a project to someone and turned our attention to something else only to find out later that the original project was floundering? I'm not advocating meddling or micro-managing, but I *am* suggesting that using frequent, friendly check-ins with the team, keeping the communication channel open in both directions, is very important.



Lesson #6: Do your job, and let others do theirs.

In agility training, I work with Ivy to make sure that she understands how to correctly perform the obstacles even if I am not right there beside her. This is important because sometimes I can't possibly be there. I also work with Ivy to teach her to run out ahead of me and take the jumps in front of her. She can run much faster than I can, and our team's performance will be seriously compromised if I allow the team's speed to be held back by my slow running. On the other hand, a dog that runs ahead independently sometimes executes the wrong obstacle next. So, building the dog's independence also necessitates that the handler develop even better communication skills that can work at a greater distance.

The implications of this lesson for leading an organization are clear. Members of the organization need to be encouraged to work on their own, exercising their basic professional skills, without a leader's micromanagement, because the pace of the whole organization will be retarded by the leader's limited ability to know as much as each of the experts within the organization.

There is no way that a leader can perform optimally if every decision has to be made in the leader's office. A leader's job is to make sure that the organization and its people have the resources they need and then to help them understand the environment well enough that they can work independently. The leader also needs to develop mechanisms for "checking in" to ensure that everyone is still on the same course.



Lesson #7: Communicate!

A big challenge for a handler in agility is how to communicate clearly to the dog what needs to happen next. We thus develop a language that our dogs understand. An example is when Ivy and I perform a "serpentine," which consists of three jumps that Ivy needs to take in series. The direction in which these jumps are to be taken varies. Sometimes Ivy is supposed to come toward me on one of the jumps and away from me on another, but at other times the directions are reversed. By consistently using one element of body language for the "go out" and another for the "come to me," I am able to communicate to Ivy which direction she should take with each jump. This works because she and I are both very clear about what these signals mean.

People, of course, generally have the advantage of speaking the same language with one another. But it can be misleading to think that just because of this fact, every time we say something, we have actually communicated with our colleagues. The really important messages need to be stated consistently, in as many different ways as possible. I hate overly simple slogans, but they do help to send a consistent message.



Lesson #8: Positive rewards produce the best learning results.

In good agility training, no corrections of any kind are allowed. The only negative feedback that is permitted is the lack of a reward. This rule is important if a handler wants a dog to be enthusiastic and to love the sport. Handlers cannot criticize their teammates into a brilliant run.

People respond in exactly the same way. People love to do what they are recognized for, and they won't come to work with enthusiasm if they expect to be criticized or punished.

A corollary rule in using only positive rewards to signal correct performance in agility is that whereas the handler gets to decide what action to reward, the dog gets to decide what the rewards are. Ivy loves grilled hot dogs, cheese, and garlic-flavored chicken breast. Sometimes it is a pain to prepare and cook the specific treats she loves, but I've learned that if I want her best performance, I have to make that investment in her. I can't expect an outstanding performance if I insist that she should be willing to work for kibble or milkbones.

For people in organizations, the rewards can be as obvious as the "attagirl, attaboy" that we all use or perhaps more tangible rewards such as extra pay. People differ in what they really care about. If a leader can find out what these things are, they can be used to reinforce outstanding performance. Some people crave recognition; others appreciate one-on-one time with the leadership; some relish the opportunity to be in control of an aspect of their work; others care more about having fun toys to play with. Whatever it is, leaders should try to give a reward right at the time of an achievement, not three

months later. The connection between the reward and the performance that earned it needs to be as direct, clear, and explicit as possible.

Another aspect of using only positive feedback is that dogs are happier and learn better when they get what they want. For example, when Ivy and I practice heeling, I do not use a choke collar—or even a leash. Ivy *chooses* to work with me and to heel because there is something good in it for her. Notice the reciprocity here: she trains me to give her treats by doing what I want (heeling), and I train her to heel for me by doing what she wants (giving her treats). This is what we call a "win-win" result! This approach produces a teammate who is enthusiastic about learning and who behaves eagerly to solve problems and find out what the trainer wants done rather than sitting back and waiting to be told or, worse yet, resisting.

Although coaxing good performance from people and organizations is definitely more complex, the approach of using only positive rewards carries immensely greater power than the alternative of repeatedly correcting mistakes.



Lesson #9: The mistakes are your fault.

In agility, if a dog makes a mistake, it is generally the handler's fault. For example, in one obstacle, a dog is supposed to weave in and out between a series of vertical poles. During trials, I worry about Ivy's performance executing this obstacle. As a result, when we practice at home, Ivy tears through the weaves, but she often weaves at a glacial pace during trials. I can't blame her for the poor trial performance: I cause it myself. She senses my anxiety about our performance and

simply tries extra hard, going extra slow, in order to not make mistakes.

As in agility, in organizational leadership the best assumption to make is that the leader is at fault. Even if this isn't true 100 percent of the time, it is by far the best assumption to make. At a practical level, if leaders take full responsibility, they then have many options for improving performance. They can go back and re-train, or they can proof the behavior in new environments, or they can analyze their own signals to see what was unclear. On the other hand, if a leader blames others, there isn't much that can be done to improve the performance, and the organization is "stuck."

In both agility and organizational leadership, mistakes are enormously important. If a leader is trying to teach someone something, and the person (or dog) makes a mistake, this is golden information. This helps the leader realize that the person doesn't really understand the job, and it can even help the leader figure out what aspect is not understood. So, leaders need to continue to push even when mistakes happen. If the "right" responses happen about 80 percent of the time, the other 20 percent can be used as a perfect opportunity for teaching.



Lesson #10: The prizes are theirs.

In agility, the handler's job is a "back room" operation. Even though I don't think Ivy cares one bit about them, all the prizes and titles are issued to her, not me.

In the organizational leadership arena, I think it is very important that the leader likewise step to the rear and let the organization shine. There is nothing more demotivating for staff than to have the CIO or manager hogging the limelight.

Conclusion

These, then, are some of the lessons I've learned from working with Ivy. Agility and organizational leadership have these lessons in common because, at the core, both activities involve the same three underlying processes: learning; communicating; and relationship-building.

- **Learning.** In agility and in organizational leadership, the fundamental process is learning. To effectively manage change, leaders have to understand how individuals and groups of individuals learn new things. As I have become enthusiastic about using purely positive training methods in agility, I have become keenly interested in how to better use purely positive methods in organizations and also in how to give more control to individuals in order to make learning more fun and work more like play. For me, this was a key insight, since I was trained as an experimental scientist. The most highly valued skill in that profession is critical thinking. The one who can most effectively find the flaw—in the design, analysis, reasoning, or data—is the winner. It took me, as a leader, a long time to realize that being the sharpest at figuring out what was wrong was not the only (or even the main) way to get a problem fixed.

- **Communicating.** On the surface, communication seems like such a simple thing: "Just say it!" Yet the process of learning how to communicate effectively—really effectively—with an agility dog or within an organization can consume a lifetime. Communication involves two ends, which is what makes the process so difficult. It's hard enough to get your end of it right, but that turns out to be of absolutely no communication value if the message doesn't get through to the receiver on the other end or if the meaning the receiver attributes to the message is not the meaning intended by the sender. And of course, the sender has no direct control over the making of meaning by the receiver at the other end. All the sender can do is observe and, based on the results, adjust what is sent the next time. This is why estab-

lishing effective communication takes time to develop.


- **Relationship-building.** It was much easier for me to realize that agility is all about my relationship with Ivy than it has been for me to realize that my organizational leadership roles are all about my relationships with colleagues. It took me a long time to finally get it through my thick skull that leadership is as much about relationships as it is about ideas. Of course, a leader has to have good ideas and understand the overall organizational situation, but in the end, the investments that a leader makes in establishing trust with other people and commitment to common goals are what enable effective leadership.

Learning, communicating, and relationship-building are the keys to success in agility. And they are just as essential in successfully leading people within organizations. I believe that the greatest legacies of leaders are these people and these organizations—the people and the organizations that we leave behind. *e*

Note

See Polley Ann McClure, "Learning, Teaching, and Leading," EDUCAUSE 2003 Annual Conference, Anaheim, California, <<http://www.educause.edu/conference/annual/2003/resources.asp>>, to view a video that includes film sequences of the agility demonstrations described in the article.

RELATED RESOURCE

 The EDUCAUSE Leadership Awards program (<http://www.educause.edu/news/2003/08/awards.asp>), sponsored by SCT, an EDUCAUSE Platinum Partner, honors prominent leaders for exemplary achievement and broad influence. The program recognizes outstanding contributions in the use of information technology to support and advance higher education.