

Working with People: Learning from Nature
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Management is defined as the art and science of working with and through people. It sounds simple but it is not always an easy task. Throughout history theories and principles of leadership and management have been studied and discussed to find the most effective ways to work together to accomplish our objectives. Some people have studied the habits of different species in nature to help explain the challenge of working as a team, examining herds, flocks, or schools of fish.

Many correlations have been made between the habits of birds and animals and the management skills needed by humans. A few of my favorite lessons in communication and team building come from these comparisons. The popular *“Lessons from the Geese”* suggests that effective leadership techniques and strategies for building strong teams can be developed by modeling some of the habits of geese. Several authors are credited with this work including Dr. Robert McNeish and Milton Olson. One habit to consider is the following:

*“The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.”
(These loud honking sounds help them stay together.)*

The message for leaders is:

“We need to make sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, the production is much greater.”

Another leadership lesson from the animal world is entitled “Canine Life Rules.” It states that

“If dogs could teach us we would learn things such as:

When it is in your best interest practice obedience

Let others know when they have invaded your territory

If what you want lies buried, dig until you find it”

The leadership lesson I would like to share in this article comes from nature as well. It is a lesson of mentoring and supervision. The teachers of the lesson were a pair of mourning doves and their young. The classroom was a fenced backyard in Texas. The class lasted for about 5 days. I observed the doves teaching and coaching their young to leave the nest and fly. I was stuck by the similarities between the doves’ behavior and an effective activity department manager’s actions. I observed the following:

The male and female doves take turns feeding and protecting their young. Work tasks are clearly defined. When the young are strong enough to leave the nest, both become actively involved, gently nudging the babies to leave, but staying close to protect. They modeled simple techniques first, how to get from the ground to an object a few feet up. After practice and becoming proficient at this task, a more difficult task was introduced. In this case, the task was getting to the top of a high fence or low branch. When the young have difficulty, the adults stay close and practice patience until fear abates and confidence grows. When one baby was reluctant to fly and follow, it was the other baby that stayed close and provided guidance, flying back and forth to a branch a few feet away. With increased ability and confidence, the team of 4 birds stayed together on a protected branch for several more days. The adults coached and mentored their young before leaving their place of security.

Consider the following questions as you supervise and mentor both staff and volunteers:

- Does the person you are working with have the skills to do the task without failing?
- How will you teach and model the skills to your staff members?
- What training are you providing? Are you breaking tasks down into simple steps?
- How will you help your team member gain confidence to leave their comfort zone?
- How will you address the fears of your teammates?
- How will you provide continued reinforcement and nurture success?
- How will you provide a secure environment in which to practice? Is there trust?
- How will you “back off” when necessary and encourage risk taking?
- How do you encourage others on the team to support each other?

Coaching and mentoring are important approaches to be used. Like the doves, it takes time, it is a process, and sometimes it cannot be rushed.

Source: *What We Learned in the Rainforest: Business Lessons from Nature* by Tachi Kiuchi, William K Shireman 2002.

Canine Life Rules



If dogs could teach us, we would learn things such as:

- when loved ones come home, always run to greet them
- never pass up the opportunity to go for a joyride
- allow the experience of fresh air and the wind in your face to be pure ecstasy
- when it's in your best interest – practice obedience
- let others know when they have invaded your territory
- take naps and stretch before rising
- run, romp and play daily
- thrive on attention and let people touch you
- avoid biting, when a simple growl will do
- on warm days, stop to lie on your back on the grass
- on hot days, drink lots of water and lay under a shady tree
- when you are happy, dance and wag your entire body
- no matter how often you are scolded, don't buy into the guilt thing and pout...run right back and make friends
- delight in the simple joy of a long walk
- eat with gusto and enthusiasm. Stop when you have had enough
- be loyal
- never pretend to be something you are not
- if what you want lies buried, dig until you find it
- when someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by and nuzzle them gently

Applying the above lessons to your life should make it a little less RUFF!
Philosophy of Hunterbrae Dog Training