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He Ought to Call Himself the Dog Screamer

Written by Steve Dale

Oprah isn't wrong often – but she barked up the wrong tree by choosing Cesar Millan, the self-proclaimed Dog Whisperer, to speak up for canines on her TV show.

For starters, he ought to call himself the Dog Screamer. While he doesn't literally holler at the dogs, he certainly doesn't whisper either. In canine language his confrontational training methods are hardly subtle, and at times he might as well be screaming,

He challenges and provokes dogs. "Well, that certainly is not a commonly accepted practice of educated canine behavior consultants," says Lynn Hoover, president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants.

The esteemed American Humane Association (founded in 1877 to protect children and animals) released a statement in September offering severe concerns about Milan's methods, calling them inhumane, outdated and improper. Speaking for the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, their president Dr. Debra Horwitz adds, "Yes, we have serious concerns. For one thing, many of the techniques shown on television are very difficult for owners to accomplish and may result in injury to them or their dogs and neither are they the more updated training techniques that are now used."

To me, the nickname Whisperer implies that he knows a secret something, and is able to communicate with dogs in a discreet manner. The truth is that he overtly intimidates and hardly ever offers dogs motivation to make their own choices.

Here's an example: In one episode from last season, a Great Dane was absolutely phobic, truly terrified, about shiny tile floors. The general consensus among trainers would be some version of a gradual approach, over time motivating the dog of his own will to step on to the tile, and rewarding for managing the courage to overcome. Depending on the severity of the fear, a veterinary behaviorist or veterinarian may recommend an anti anxiety drug before initiating therapy.

Instead, Millan literally forced this Great Dane to face his fears by placing him on the floor, and letting the trembling dog deal with it. No praise was offered when the petrified pup did manage to take a step. Millan isn't big on praise. He is big on dominating dogs.

If you put yourself in that dog's place, you'll see what I mean. Imagine being deathly afraid of, say, snakes on a plane, and then forced to ride in an airliner filled with snakes. Sounds like a bad horror movie, right? Well, Millan's answer to dealing with fears and phobias is for the dogs to face their fears head on (called flooding in dog training vernacular).

Say, you happen to have a fear of eating bugs, it was your choice to be on the show "Fear Factor" But with the Cesar Way, dogs have no say.

Pushing even typically non-aggressive dogs to the edge can be a concern. That's why even his own cable outlet, the National Geographic Channel, has pop up disclaimers which appear throughout the program, asking viewers not to try it Cesar's Way at home.

In a recent interview, airing on all my radio shows, Millan himself conceded his methods aren't necessarily replicable.

I've received numerous letters from dog trainers telling me that their clients indeed do try Millan's techniques, sometimes they succeed; sometimes they don't. When they don't, the dog may be the ultimate loser – perhaps landing in a shelter. I do believe Millan is a dog lover, and wouldn't want that outcome.

The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants just called for a change in The Dog Whisperer's TV-rating of TV-G for general audiences. The concern is that children are watching without adult supervision, and will emulate Millan's training methods, leading them to engage in unsafe behaviors,

The National Geographic channel did respond to pressure to acknowledge other dog training philosophies. This TV season of the Dog Whisperer includes segments with Millan looking directly into the camera, telling the audience there are other methods to train dogs aside from his own. This is good. However, the problem, of course, is that Millan continues to train the Cesar Way – that's his marketing mantra, and he's sticking to it.

What he's sticking to is really very simple. Millan repeats pretty much the same three conditions as an explanation responsible for all behavior problems in dogs.

Third on the list is a lack of exercise. Cesar's right. How can I deny it? Experts suggest we don't get enough exercise, so it should come as no surprise that our dogs don't either.

Millan's answer are leash walks, so dogs learn to follow the leader. Millan's example is the roller blading shot many have seen by now, with Millan on roller blades and several big dog trailing behind. "This shows you are dominant," he says.

I say, that's the only way to roller blade with big dogs on a leash – or you'll fall on your face!

As far as I know, there no data to correlate that dogs who walk in back of their people will no longer be aggressive to other dogs because you are changing their “energy” (which is a contention Millan makes).

I argue that having dogs heeling at your side is fine. It's not that I think of people and dogs as equals, I do think of people and dogs as partners, however.

Millan's second condition is all about the human condition of doting too much on our dogs, he says, offering too much affection and too much love. Well, I actually agree. A dog is not a person. And we do tend to reward them at the wrong times. For example, in one of the many Dog Whisperer episodes with small dogs with a Cujo attitude – Millan is right to advise “mom” to stop picking up and coddling the diminutive growler when another person walks into the room. However, I just don't believe that we can love any family member too much. I see nothing wrong with tough love. However, I think Millan sometimes leaves out the love.

Number one on Millan's list is the explanation he's offered to each and every family in each and every segment of every episode of the Dog Whisperer I've seen. He says that the humans are not being dominant – which he further describes as calm yet assertive leaders which are necessary to any “pack.”

I agree. In fact, I'll go even further; calm, clear, consistent leaders who provide structure most benefit dogs.

However, I maintain you can be a leader without dominating your dog. Think about all the bosses you've worked for. Do the most effective leaders intimidate or motivate? The Cesar Way rarely includes fun, or accepting the dog as a partner, let a lone a friend. And the dogs have few choices; it's the Cesar way or the highway. Despite the clever marketing, the truth is that Cesar's Way is nothing new. In fact, his way was really the way of dog training several decades ago.

Most disturbing to me is how rarely Millan mentions praise. Dogs live to please. Imagine, going through your life without being told “That'a way!” or simply “Thank you.” It's likely that dogs appreciate that praise even more than we do.

No one's calling Millan a dog hater; the good news is that he continually demonstrates that you can teach an old dog new tricks. But this is the first time so many credible organizations and individuals have expressed public anxiety about any one person's dog training philosophy. Millan shrugs it off, saying even Oprah is criticized – it's a part of what goes into being a public figure. He's right about that. But no one's ever accused Oprah's philosophies being downright dangerous.

This whole story certainly isn't about Oprah, it's not even about Cesar – it's about what's right and what's fair for dogs.