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Dogs are teaching humans to be better bosses in this training program

[Jamie L. LaReau](#), **Detroit Free Press** Published 7:30 a.m. ET Feb. 2, 2019



Ginger Auten, Human Resources manager and administration, left, walks blindfolded with Coco and trainer Mike Toger during a Harness the Power of Leadership session at Mitsubishi Motors R&D Of America Ann Arbor Laboratory, Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019.

(Photo: Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

Meet Coco. She's a 2-year-old yellow Labrador retriever raised in a prison — and she happens to be one of the best trainers of people in the world.

Coco is one of about a dozen dogs in the Leader Dogs for the Blind's executive training program, which teaches managers how to improve teamwork skills, clarify communication, build trust, do strategic planning, use creative problem solving and ultimately become better bosses.

"It's the best training for people you'll find," said Dave Bann, corporate engagement manager for Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester Hills executive training program.

Dog teaching man might sound as far-fetched as man biting dog. But not to those who have experienced the training course, such as Ginger Auten of Mitsubishi Motors research and development in Ann Arbor.

"It was amazing," said Auten, manager of human resources and administration at Mitsubishi, who did the training last week.

Auten donned a blindfold, took hold of Coco's harness, used precise commands to communicate where she wanted Coco to go, then surrendered control and extended trust.

The result was an epiphany: "Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith and let yourself rely on help from others to guide you," Auten said. "You're still in charge, even if you're the blind person guiding the dog, and with any leader and employee, it's a give-take situation."

Training people

The challenge of overcoming fear, handing over trust and feeling "amazing" for doing it, seems to be a universal reaction from executives who do the course.

"When you're in leadership, you want to control things. That took me out of my comfort zone. I had to purely trust the dog," said Phil Bertolini, chief information officer for Oakland County. Bertolini and about 19 of his colleagues did the training last year. "It was kind of an amazing feeling."

The tighter Bertolini pulled on the harness, for example, he learned, "The less the dog was able to lead you," said Bertolini, who worked with Coco's canine colleague Flaim, a black Labrador retriever. "If you do the same thing with your team, the harder you pull on them, the less they can help you achieve."



On March 19, 2018 Phil Bertolini wore a blindfold and let Flaim, a 2-year-old male black Labrador Retriever, lead him as part of Leader Dogs for the Blind's executive training. Mike Toger of Leader Dogs for the Blind is on the right.

(Photo: Dave Bann)

Leader Dogs for the Blind started its executive training program about five years ago with Purina as its first client. Purina is a partner with Leader Dogs for the Blind.

The idea for the program came out of repeated comments from Leader Dogs for the Blind's clients who struggled to answer people who asked, "How does the dog work?"

"We realized a lot of our clients are executives and they're successful," said Bann, who said Leader Dogs for the Blind has put together about 15,000 guide-dog teams globally in its 80 years of existence. "They said they often used what they learned working with the dogs across the rest of their lives: in their marriages and at work."

Bann decided teaching the lessons his blind clients learned by working with their dogs might be valuable to others.

One of those clients was Richard Brauer, 57, who lost his eyesight at age 14. Today he owns his own company that specializes in executive recruiting, development and diversity training. He also coaches the Leader Dogs executive training courses.

Brauer spent 36 years working for plastics extrusion company Battenfeld-Cincinnati in McPherson, Kansas. He started there at age 18 on the plant floor, but in 1994, a colleague told him about guide dogs, he said.



Richard (Buss) Brauer presents to a group during a Harness the Power of Leadership session at Mitsubishi Motors R&D Of America Ann Arbor Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019.

(Photo: Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

"I told her I didn't need a dog and I walked away," said Brauer, who admitted he had a chip on his shoulder in those days.

His wife felt differently.

"My wife told me I had to do something different or we'd have to get divorced," Brauer said. "The day my wife took me to the airport, I hadn't been anywhere alone in my life since I was 14. Here I was getting on a plane to go to Rochester, Michigan, alone. I was deathly afraid of what I was about to do."

Key to confidence

The 26 days that followed were life-changing for Brauer. First, he was given a 22-month-old yellow Lab named Monty, who had received over \$40,000 worth of training. Monty has long since died and Brauer's had three more dogs, including his present dog, a 5-year-old Golden Retriever-Black Labrador mix named Logan. But the lessons Monty gave Brauer live on.

"He filled me with this level of confidence and gave me the tools to be a guide-dog handler, which are the same tools required to be successful in life," said Brauer.

Those tools include:

- Clear communication
- Meaningful guidance and recognition
- Strategic planning skills
- Plan implementation skills
- Team empowerment skills
- Change management
- Trust in yourself and in your team

Most important is to demonstrate consistency in the treatment of people around you, Brauer said, using his partnership with Logan as an example.

"I treat Logan with the greatest respect and the same way every day," said Brauer. "What happens if you are happy one day, angry the next? The person who works for you is going to leave because you're inconsistent and lack respect. Logan wakes up every day knowing it'll be a good day because I'm consistent in being humble, kind and if I ask him for something, he knows from my tone, that I am going to help him succeed."

Brauer credits his "great career" to the tools he learned working with guide dogs. In 1996, only a year after getting Monty, Brauer was promoted to safety manager of the company.

"I asked the COO why he'd want a blind safety manager and he said because he wanted to teach people about where they're putting their hands and feet," said Brauer, who has been married 37 years with a grown son. He rose from the plant floor to be the second-highest officer in the company by the time he retired two years ago.

"I was an ugly person who had given up on myself. I was projecting failure and disappointment; that's what made me handicapped," Brauer said. "That was all erased when I learned to walk with confidence. When you're not confident to take your next step, how can you live your life?"

How it works

It took about a year to write the curriculum for the executive training course, Bann said.

The course also needed qualified dogs to "teach" it. That's where Coco and her colleagues came in. Coco is one of the 12 "ambassadors" with Leader Dogs for the Blind. Piper, a 20-month-old Golden Retriever; Flaim, an 18-month-old black Lab; and Arctic, an 18-month-old Golden Retriever, are other ambassadors. The ambassadors do events to showcase guide dog skills, promote Leader Dogs for the Blind and they do the executive training courses.



Dave Bann, Leader Dogs for the Blind corporate engagement manager and his dog Coco at the Leader Dogs for the Blind campus in Rochester Hills, Tuesday, Jan. 1, 2019.

(Photo: Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

The guide dogs are bred at Leader Dogs for the Blind's facilities in Rochester Hills. They spend a year with volunteer puppy raisers and are exposed to a variety of environments to condition them to different situations in the world. In Coco's case, she was raised by an inmate at Fort Dodge Correctional Facility in Iowa.

About 400 puppies start the training each year, but only about half pass the rigorous four months ultimately required to be a guide dog, which are provided to blind people for free. Those that don't qualify are given "career changes." Some become other service dogs, some are adopted by their puppy raiser and others are available to the public for adoption. A \$1,000 tax-deductible donation is required at the time of adoption.



Puppies are seen at the Leader Dogs for the Blind campus in Rochester Hills, Tuesday, Jan. 1, 2019.

(Photo: Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

Coco and Arctic passed the rigors to be guide dogs, but Coco is prone to ear infections, so placing her with a person who is blind would not work. Likewise, Arctic had some kennel anxiety that disqualified him. But both had the skills and friendly demeanor to be ambassadors. Coco lives with Bann.

The executive training courses are either a half-day or full-day. They involve the blindfold walks, a white-cane walk and various team-building activities such as clicker training, in which participants must complete a task based only on cues Bann gives them by using a dog clicker. In short, they become the dog in an exercise designed to teach them how to give and receive instructions through cues. It's analogous to how different parts of businesses often speak different languages yet have to learn to communicate so they can work together.

Shorter 60- to 90-minute sessions for large groups are less interactive with the dogs, relying more on speakers.

The typical cost is \$375 per person, or about \$300 per person for those businesses that are part of the American Society of Employers.

No boring classroom

About two years ago, Bann started aggressively marketing executive training at conferences. He's done about 20 sessions since Purina in St. Louis first did the course.

One of those businesses was Mitsubishi in Ann Arbor, where Ginger Auten said she met Bann about six months ago at a human resources conference. On Jan. 29, 20 of Mitsubishi's directors participated in the daylong training.

"I wondered about the relevancy of this," Amy Kopin, manager of regulatory affairs and vehicle emissions lab at Mitsubishi, said minutes after doing the blindfolded dog walk that day. "It's very interesting to be totally in darkness, you feel like you're not in control and it would take some time to develop some trust. It'd be nice if there were more of that trust to trickle down in the company."

Auten arranged the training primarily for the interactive team-building exercises.

"The whole classroom thing bores me to death," said Auten. "The interaction means people retain more."

Daniel Meloni, 56, is senior director of talent development at ProQuest, a technology company in Ann Arbor. He and about a dozen senior managers did the Leader Dogs for the Blind executive training last fall. One team-building activity that involved building a display using different colored blocks, has now changed the way Meloni talks to his staff.

"I heard it from experienced leaders, 'Grab the blue block.' Well, the blindfolded person can't see that it's blue or feel that it's blue, so you have to use clearer language," said Meloni. "It required saying, 'Take the block that is in front of your right hand.' You have to be a lot more intentional."

Intelligent disobedience

Training also teaches the power of strategically planning and intelligent disobedience.

For example, a person who is blind must plan a walking route and be ready to change course if an obstacle appears. The guide dog must be given leeway to disobey commands when the dog knows best.



Dave Bann, Leader Dogs for the Blind corporate engagement manager, presents to a group during a Harness the Power of Leadership session at Mitsubishi Motors R&D Of America Ann Arbor Laboratory in Ann Arbor, Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019.

(Photo: Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

A dog handler trainer at the Mitsubishi session told of a woman who was blind and lived in a high-rise apartment building in New York. One day, when the elevator doors opened on her 78th floor lobby, she commanded her guide dog to walk forward. The dog did not budge. Again, she said, "forward." The dog refused. That's because the elevator doors had opened to an empty shaft and the dog knew stepping forward would be deadly.

"So in business, even though the boss says 'proceed,' there is a place for intelligent disobedience," said Meloni. "The white-cane walk is analogous to a manager who's trying to accomplish things on his or her own and not placing full reliance on their team."

The blindfold walk with the dog is analogous to a leader who empowers the team to deliver results, Meloni said, adding, "You still set the direction, but the team depends on you for unambiguous language."

Harness talent

Meloni paid about \$400 per person for the course. He said it was worth it because the managers who completed it are better leaders. That will help them keep the best employees.

"We're going to be able to harness their talent and better use their talent and ultimately attract better people because we're more successful," said Meloni, who plans to have a senior level directors group do a half-day session of the executive training this year.

Bertonlini said he believes the course made him a stronger leader, which will translate to retaining his people. The lessons, Bertonlini said, resonate because its experiential and emotional.

"There's nothing worse than someone droning on and reading from a PowerPoint," said Bertolini. "This is totally different from that. You're learning from people who learned to work through their life and maneuver through their world without sight. That's powerful."

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Visit the Harness the Power of Leadership website at www.HarnessThePower.org to learn more or call Dave Bann of Leader Dogs for the Blind at (248) 218 – 6318 (dave.bann@leaderdog.org).

