



KNOWING YOUR HERD

How horses can teach corporate leadership and teambuilding

BY DEBORAH WEISS for Equine Wellness Magazine

The trainer that day was Chris Irwin, and he explained that in order to train the horses, they would have to accept him as their safe and reliable leader. With acute awareness of his own body language and intentions, and the same level of awareness to his environment and the beings (horses) within it, Irwin succeeded in attaining join up from the 4 horses, and he was then in the position to affect change in the horses' behaviour as he went on to work with them that night in the arena and over the weekend.

Equine Assisted Learning

The demonstration fascinated me and the concept of herd dynamics as a model to teach humans has become my life's work. With a number of Equine Assisted Learning certifications under my belt, I began to create personal development programs, both for special needs children and corporate groups. There is much overlap in what is effective for both of those populations, as diverse as they may seem. A troubled child and a troubled corporate team can both flourish when they can truly 'know they're heard' and 'know their herd'. The double entendre is clear, and the Knowing Your Herd™ workshop was developed by Horses At Heart Inc. so that learning life lessons from horses could be accessible to a broad population.

Applications within the workplace

"Improving leadership capability and embedding a new culture in a junior supervisory team was key in moving our business forward," says Tracey McKillop, the Operations Manager of a medical insurance company. "I had the right people in place, I now needed to instil confidence and allow for personal and professional development. I was looking for something different, individualized, challenging and not your typical sit around a boardroom table approach." Tracey brought her team to the workshop with clear goals. I provided the group with a debriefing on horse and herd behaviour; enough for them to employ safe horse-handling techniques and to be able to establish themselves as safe and reliable team players and leaders through several hands-on activities with the horses. A thoroughly enjoyable day was had by all, and at the end of the day, her group was able to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their team skills. We had wonderful discussions processing the activities and Tracey summed it up in a follow-up letter to Horses At Heart stating that "Working with the horses was a positive experience helping us identify how and why we lead the way we do, seeing and experiencing in the moment how we function with others while allowing us to appreciate the impact of new behavior in order to break past experiences and quickly build new ones."

Horses At Mirrors

It is so simple to see the results of our behaviours when we are around horses. Their feedback is in the moment and with no hidden agendas. Horses provide a clear mirror for us to see how our interpersonal skills and our leadership skills effect our environment. Heavy handed leadership can so quickly translate to a resistant horse exhibiting what we interpret as 'misbehaviours'. Inconsistent leadership results in any number of issues. An unsure leader or rider can produce a horse seizing control of the leadership role. The possibilities in this scenario are wide ranging. A leader/rider with a horse in control often becomes aggressive attempting to regain control. A frightened leader/rider with a horse in control tenses up, creating a nervous horse in control, and resulting in a leader/rider sending any number of mixed messages to their mount. The mixed messages can create both short and long term problems not only in the way the horse interacts with the leader/rider in the moment, but even in the horses' physiology as they brace against an insensitive rider. In a human team, these kinds of issues manifest themselves in numerous ways that can deteriorate the productivity and morale of a group of people working toward common goals.

What we really want in our work relationships is mutually respectful partnerships; the same thing we want with all our relationships and the same thing we want with our horses. We want join up, the elegant state of multiple beings choosing to move as one. Successful leadership and teamwork depend on mutual respect and it is wonderful when enlightened individuals in the corporate world make choices to help their teams become aware of what mutual respect looks like. Linda Kohanov, a pioneer in the field of Equine Assisted Personal Development and author of *The Tao of Equus* and *Riding Between the Worlds* says that horses have "an extraordinary ability to awaken intuition in humans while mirroring the authentic feelings people try to hide". The next step after awakening intuition on a personal level would be to awaken intuition on the group level. With all that our equine friends have already given us as beasts of burden, as military partners, as athletic partners, and as barnyard friends, how nice it is that they are also now contributors to the evolution of human consciousness.



DEBORAH WEISS IS A LEADER IN EQUINE ASSISTED PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THERAPY PROGRAMS, WITH MULTIPLE CERTIFICATIONS AND 8 YEARS AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HORSES AT HEART EQUESTRIAN INC. SHE HAS DEVELOPED PROGRAMMING FOR CORPORATE COACHING, FAMILY COUNSELING, AND GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL PROGRAMS FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. HORSES AT HEART OPERATES FROM WATERSTONE ESTATE & FARMS IN NEWMARKET, ONTARIO.

Four horses were led into the arena one by one. The horses did not know each other and they had never been together. Their owners were there in hopes that the horse trainer could teach their horses to be safe and reliable partners. They also wanted to learn skills that would help them be safe and reliable leaders.

Setting the Stage

The dynamics were dramatic as the horses bucked and reared and made lots of noise. Their personalities emerged in the drama of the arena. One horse was clearly the bully and was chasing and posturing relentlessly. One of the horses moved wherever the bully moved, staying close enough to mimic the bully, but far enough away to avoid getting kicked herself. One horse in the arena was repeatedly being charged by the bully and seemed to come back for more. One horse remained disengaged from the drama, moving away from the noisy display throughout the entire performance. I didn't know these horses, but I knew the characters well; the bully and the bully's sidekick, the underdog and the observer, were all playing out their roles. Watching these horses now, the arena became a stage for the equine drama, as well as a stage for a metaphorical group of individuals trying to learn how to successfully coexist.