

Horses as Partners in Powerful Coaching



By Lisa Murrell

If you enlist a 1200-pound coaching partner for your next session, it's likely you'll achieve a remarkable change in the dynamic of the coaching relationship. No, it's not through intimidation; the method is equine-assisted coaching, working with horses to help clarify and resolve issues, heighten awareness of assumptions, develop trust and get results.

Horses are sentient beings with the capacity for independent thinking, social relationships, individual dispositions as well as physical abilities and limitations—and they make excellent partners to create powerful coaching. They have no investment in the outcome of the coaching relationship; they don't lie, they have no egos or agendas. Horses simply are who they are, clearly, purely, without any need for things to be right or wrong. That's why the information they give us about ourselves and our clients is so powerful. They are perfect mirrors for us to look at how we are creating our current reality.

In equine-assisted coaching, clients engage in a dialogue with the coach while interacting with a horse that is at liberty in an enclosed area, called a round pen. Discussing issues while the client directs the horse to perform simple activities (i.e. trot in a circle, stop, allow the client to approach) creates a dynamic that allows a coach and the client to identify and address key elements that impact the client's effectiveness. Below are examples of how an equine coaching partner can help you understand how communication and listening can impact results.



Samira takes a breather from her work with the Marketing team, and contemplates that last exercise.

Clear and direct communication through listening

Horses do not deal in ambiguity. When horses communicate they are not trying to please you or avoid confrontation; what you see is what you get, and they expect the same from you. Horses thrive on direct communication that keeps things clear and congruent in their environment. What you tell them is what they react to. If you are not clear about what you want from them, it becomes obvious, because they either do what they think you have asked of them, or they become anxious because of the ambiguity. Often a lack of clarity on the human's part leads to equine reactions that are misinterpreted as 'bad' behavior, such as aggression or flight.

Isn't that what often happens in the human side of life? We think we are communicating our needs clearly and when people don't respond the way we think they should, we don't think very highly of them. We decide they are not smart, have a bad attitude, are too uptight or just don't 'get' it, and we end up not trusting them to do the things they need to do. Horses show us how much communication and trust are linked. They need us to be clear about what we want and clear about how we ask for it.

Learning and results

If horses learn that they can trust you to do what you say you are going to do and ask clearly for what you want, they will almost always give you what you ask for. They are simple in this way. They show us how our relationship to them can give poor or wonderful results. Whatever your goal is around a horse—that he'll let you pet him, ride him or just walk alongside—if you have established the basics, you will achieve the results you want. Horses as partners in coaching show us the critical importance of relationship in learning and results. This type of clarity should form the basis of any human interaction, as well. When interpersonal relationships don't work or are less than optimal, so are business results.

Are you not getting the results you want with your team or clients? See if a horse can help you progress together by learning about the basics of developing trust, and communicating clearly.

"While I had an idea around the concept of experiential learning, I did not really know what to expect. Working with the horses, however, was one of the best experiences I've had in terms of gaining immediate and unbiased feedback. The exercise that we did became a very clear metaphor for me in terms of how my team currently approaches tasks and what will happen if we do not make specific adjustments in order to achieve our overall objectives related to product launch. The horses are better feedback mechanisms with respect to leadership assessment than any manufactured management tool. It was great learning."

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