

# 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.

## Introducing "Monty", an equine partner

Recently I brought a long-time coaching client into the round pen. Sharon needed to move her career forward because she needed to provide more income for her family. However, she didn't want to sacrifice her time with her children to spend more time working. She was also afraid she wasn't capable of bringing in more money; that she had reached the height of her earning power. Thirdly, she was recovering from surgery that had left her physically weak. Between these three issues, she was making no progress and becoming more anxious than ever.

Sharon had ridden and loved horses as a child but had to give them up due to a debilitating illness at age 12. Now, years later, she was experiencing horses again in the round pen. With Monty as her equine partner, I asked Sharon what she felt she needed to do at this point in her life. She began talking about her need to make more money and her fear of spending less time with her children. As she talked, Monty was completely disengaged. At one point he decided he'd had enough! The more she spoke about her situation from her perspective, the more agitated Monty became. When she stopped, so did he and pooped! I guess this is what he thought of her view of things. In the silence, he came over to Sharon, she put her hand out and he came willingly to nuzzle her hand and shoulder. Just standing there, breathing together, she began to cry. Through her connection with the amazing and generous creature, she told me later that she connected with a part of

herself that she had long forgotten—the part where she was strong and happy before her childhood illness. As Sharon began to voice this aloud Monty moved in closer, gently nudging her to go on. Supporting her back. She said she knew that the only way she could go to the next level in her career and life was for her to step into that place of clarity and strength she remembered as a child. Sharon had convinced herself that the issues in her way were about talent and being a good mother. What she found in the round pen with Monty was that the real issue was about integrating and honoring that part of herself that she put away a long time ago. From that point, Sharon began to engage in life with a completely different energy, and amazing changes began to take place immediately.

### A clear and agreed upon foundation

Sometimes we can only learn from the obvious. Things have to become big and 'in our face' before we'll pay attention to them. The very size and presence of a horse compels us to set clear guidelines and expectations to create a safe interaction. Why, then, when we deal with each other, are these basics so often neglected or deemed unimportant? Frequently, it is not until we find ourselves in a bind that we realize it all started from the lack of a clear and agreed upon foundation. Our equine coaching partners enable us to create new awareness around this basic issue.

Susan was in the process of beginning a new business while still a high level manager at a large corporation. Things were not going well. She couldn't figure out why she couldn't get her arms around this new endeavor. No matter what she tried to do, things were clearly out of control. Back on the job, that was one thing she had in her department, control. In the round pen with Grace, Susan found a new perspective on her situation. Grace, a normally gentle and calm 18-year old Arabian mare, became highly agitated and full of energy, running around the pen and bucking when Susan came in and began to speak about her business. Grace was mirroring the lack of control that Susan was experiencing. She was also not buying the story of Susan wanting to start a new business. Was Susan convinced she should be starting another business? According to Grace, her equine coach, apparently not!

I experienced the coaching session with Susan and Grace during one of Kendall Summerhawk's HorseWise Brilliance Unbridled® retreats last year. You can read more about this experience in Kendall's new book, Brilliance Unbridled, How the Secret Lives of Horses Reveal Your Power, Courage and Passion to Achieve Extraordinary Results.

What Susan discovered in this session was that there were issues around the whole foundation of the project that she had not dealt with. Her father was part of the business, but his role was not clearly defined, and she felt his expectations were greatly impacting the effort. Susan was also dealing with debilitating health issues that kept her from putting in the energy she needed to get things moving. She did not have a clear foundation for building her business. Grace's mirroring of lack of control and her physical rejection of the whole idea each time Susan spoke about it, helped Susan to see that unless these basic issues with her father's role and her health were clarified and set straight, she would never be able to get her new business under control.

With horses as a coaching partner, we can learn about the importance of setting a good foundation in any situation because we naturally begin by establishing a clear and agreed upon foundation with them. If we don't, we don't get anywhere with them easily. We saw from Susan and Grace, that it can be the same in business.

## Learning and results

Horses can teach us a great deal about learning and results. After all, isn't that what coaching is all about? Learning and getting results around the issues we bring? 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 with 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, are honest and communicate to him from your authentic self rather than ego, you will achieve the results you want. Horses as partners in coaching show us the critical importance of honest 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 clients? See if a horse can help you progress together by learning about what you need to know about setting a clear foundation, and communicating honestly from the real you.