



Leading the Way

In the arena, horses are helping leaders improve their relationships with others at home and in the office.

By Katie Navarra

Horses are a mirror for reflecting human emotions and behaviors. As herd animals, they are innately programmed to watch for clues on how to react or respond. When a person is anxious, horses channel that energy and become nervous themselves. When someone lacks confidence or clarity, the horse stops and begs for them to take a leadership role. Because horses rely solely on non-verbal cues, how they respond to a person's requests illuminates what goes right—or wrong—in human communication.

“They show us where we have room for improvement and remind us of our hidden strengths.

That makes them the perfect partner for coaching engagements,” said Ginny Telgo, founder of The Collaboration Partners in Ashland, Ohio. Ginny's Paint, Just Plain Chocolate, occasionally participates in coaching sessions along with her other horses.

Decades of research have proven the power of interaction between horses and humans, and the associated physical, emotional and mental healing benefits are well documented. Another form of equine-assisted services gaining in popularity is equine-assisted learning.

With these services, there is no riding or instruction on how to ride. And it's not considered

therapy. Instead, equine-assisted coaching leverages horse-human interactions to help individuals better understand their behaviors and communication styles. Activities with the horses combined with debriefing sessions tie “aha” moments directly to challenges in a person's interactions with peers, colleagues and even family.

“It parallels how groups of people interact with one another by understanding how horses use healthy herd dynamics,” Ginny said. She is a master trainer with E3A, an organization that provides training and certification in equine-assisted learning education programs.

From Skeptics to Believers

Sessions typically start with introductions and what participants hope to gain from the experience. Most are excited for the opportunity to leave a lecture-style program behind and try something hands-on. Some are intimidated by the horses, some skeptics and others outright naysayers.

“I’ll never forget this one gentleman who sat pushed against the back of his chair with his arms folded across his chest in a defiant position,” Ginny said. “When I asked what he thought he might learn from the day, he said, ‘I don’t know why I’m here and I have no idea what horses are going to teach about leadership.’”

At the end of the workshop, she asked each person to share a takeaway moment from the day and was nervous about what this individual had to say. His response shocked her. His response was, “I learned today that I have a lot to learn about leadership.”

“He had a belief that leadership looked a certain way and that others should just do what you tell them,” Ginny said. “When we went to work with the horses he realized that leadership was about way more than just telling people what to do and expecting them to do it.”

Upstate New York horse owner Jen Miller regularly delivers leadership training in her role as a vice president at a higher education institution. Though she knows horse behavior can teach humans a lot about themselves, she was uncertain how they could be teachers for leadership development and teambuilding aimed at C-Suite executives. A half-day hands-on demonstration at The Horse Institute in Ancramdale, New York, changed her perspective.

“It made me realize how horse herd behavior is a lot like people in most work settings. Non-verbal communication is key for horses and, as it turns out, it’s pretty important for us as well,” she said. “Watching a video from that day also made me realize that communication is an important value of mine, but when we were trying to work as a group to move the horses from one end of the arena to another, none of us were communicating.”

Having attended team building and leadership development programs for 20 years, the thought of one more day in a conference room made The Horse Institute Founder Marie-Claude Stockl want to run the other way. This is when she combined her passion for coaching people with her

love for horses and began hosting workshops at her facility. The farm is situated on 30 scenic acres in the heart of the historic Hudson Valley and offers a spacious covered arena.

“The greatest satisfaction for me is when clients connect the dots between what they learn with horses, and use their insights to make changes in their professional life,” she said. “Horses make it easy because they are great teachers.”

Leadership in a Box

Equine-assisted learning programs vary based on the facilitator, the group and the training path they have chosen. Some prefer to let the horse choose which person they will work with for the day by engaging over a fence or stall door. These sessions are less structured with specific activities. Others use a series of activities based on liberty work to emphasize the breakdown of human communication and connection.

Chris Stone, an Ohio-based media entrepreneur, vividly remembers his first session with Ginny. He was part of a year-long, county-wide leadership development institute. As a program kick-off, the group visited Ginny’s farm. He was terrified of the horses, which made his group’s challenge of moving the herd of horses from one end of the arena into a box made from poles at the opposite end even more daunting. Everyone was trying to strategize how to get the horse to move when Chris suggested bringing the poles to the horses and forming the box around them.

“Ginny asked me why I suggested that. I thought moving a horse into a box took a lot of effort and time and why not keep the horse calm

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and put the box around it,” he said. “Sometimes you have to literally think outside the box and be aware of your surroundings and the situation you’re in. That was a big moment for me.”

Facilitators who incorporate horses into their work emphasize that they partner with their horses—as opposed to “using” them. This means the facilitators simply ask the horses to be themselves during equine-assisted learning workshops, thereby sharing the wisdom of the herd with their new human tribe.

“Our equine faculty includes high performers, who enjoy a break from the daily training routine and go back to it refreshed, and semi-retired or retired horses who love having an easier job,” Marie-Claude said.



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Translating Outcomes to Life

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“There are a lot of clients who come from the corporate space, and for better or for worse, the private sector work creates a disconnect between behavior and how people are communicating. The horses show how much we are communicating without words,” said Darya Shaikh, a partner at Leaders’ Quest in New York City. The firm partners with Queens, New York-based GallopNYC for equine-based leadership learning. “Once they are aware of that, out of the context of every day, embodiment happens.”

Part of getting a horse to work with you is directly comparable to leading in the workplace and community roles.

“We spend a lot of time explaining that a horse is very much like your team or staff. If your horse

became spooked and nervous, do you bring that into the office and spook your staff?” explained James Wilson, executive director of GallopNYC. “We teach them how to lead by looking at the moments where the horse loses faith and trust in them. We translate that into the workplace; if someone stops being a leader, someone else might need to step up to take the role, or productivity outcomes will be missed.”

Personal Discovery

Outside the workplace, there are ample opportunities to develop deeper relationships with friends and family. For Debby Stein, a participant in a workshop at The Horse Institute, realizing that she needed to trust her intuition and share freely was a pivotal moment.

“My perceptive abilities are strong, and I am comfortable sharing my thoughts with others,” she said. “At times, I am so busy trying to make sure others are heard and feeling comfortable, I don’t always share all of my thoughts and therefore might inhibit progress.”

Observing horse herd behavior, our own and

that of our team’s responses to it are enlightening ways to learn more about how you show up, in not just your professional life but in your riding, training or horse management.

“As someone focused on achievement, I was able to use the activities as a way to work on not being as tied to outcomes and give myself permission to learn,” Jen said. “As someone who rides, it was interesting and enlightening to experience observation and ground-based exercises with the horses, which I don’t often pay attention to when I’m at the barn.”

Learn More

Discover the teaching power of horses through leadership training.

gallopnyc.org/leadership
thecollaborationpartners.com
thehorseinstitute.com



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