

How to train managers: lead a horse to water

Executives try horse whispering to understand how to deal with staff

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Of course you are a brilliant company boss. Everybody says so. You even have an MBA to prove it.

But what would a horse tell you?

More than you might want to know, perhaps, but possibly as much as an honest team leader needs to hear. Just ask Andrew Froggatt and Janine Sudbury, the operators of an unusual new programme dedicated to teaching leadership skills.

Talkinghorses, as the programme is called, has already won enthusiastic reviews from its corporate clientele, who have generally relished the opportunity it offers executives to put their skills to the equestrian test by swapping the briefcase for a bridle, the boardroom for the tackroom, and the corporate hard sell for a picturesque day of heavy horse-whispering.

At the very least the programme also represents something of a turnaround on the usual relationship between horses and the country's businesses, which usually show up in droves to sponsor virtually all of the country's major horse-sports events.

In the equestrian world, the similarity between leading horses and humans has long been a commonplace.

Bad horse trainers, like bad company leaders, often bully and intimidate horses into doing what they want. Good trainers, on the other hand, persuade the creatures to do what they want of their own free will by convincing the horse that they genuinely know best.

And horses who voluntarily follow instructions because they respect their leader are willing to do much, unlike those who are forced to obey instructions under coercion but become resentful, reluctant and often try to find ways to avoid doing what they are

asked.

The same could be said of bullying, tyrannical bosses who order employees around under threat of dire consequences if the staff do not comply – and end up with employees who may do what is required from fear of being abused or fired, but will just as likely make ample use of sick leave, quit abruptly or simply make a lucrative sideline out of stealing the office stationery.

Horses, say Mr Froggatt and Ms Sudbury, can teach more about commitment, teamwork and partnerships than humans often can – and usually all in the course of the day most of the couple's courses run for. The patterns of leaders and followers, dominance and submission, competition and co-operation, they say, bear striking similarities to the way both animal herds and successful workplaces organise themselves.

But there are some distinct, and helpful, differences as well. Horses don't lie to flatter an ineffective boss: if you're a hopeless leader, they won't follow. They may even make that point a little loudly too.

"Often the best learning comes from experiencing something original," explains Ms Sudbury, a London-born journalist whose books-at-bed-time accent has been a regular fixture on National Radio since she arrived in New Zealand in

1999. "And what we've already found is that this is an original way to build powerful teams, improve leadership skills and take staff out of their comfort zones."

Talkinghorses was originally the brainchild of Mr Froggatt, who has trained horses from wild kaimanawa to top-class eventers and racehorses over the past decade. Mr Froggatt's system for training horses incorporates techniques that include establishing leadership, sending clear signals, building trust and respect, and helping the creature become a team player.

The couple quickly saw that the same principles could prove effective in teaching leadership skills to company executives.

Horses, after all, are unusually sensitive animals, which makes them behave like an emotional mirror to humans. At the same time, they are herd animals who instinctively look for an authoritative leader.

But those seeking to lead them need to do so using natural leadership skills – s59 of the Crimes Act may be a defence for disciplining a child, but it doesn't help assert authority over these creatures.

Participants are given a series of challenging exercises with their chosen horse. In order to succeed in dealing with them, the human has to learn, quickly, how to inspire the creature to want to work for them and how to control their energy levels so that the horse can begin to trust them.

Participants soon realise, the couple says, the importance of clear communication, how to develop a positive attitude, determination and commitment.

The couple first road-tested the concept among business leaders in 2004, using a rented arena for a slew of ASB Bank managers. Impressed with the idea, the bank brought in most of the country's branch managers to the event, which Shaun Drylie, ASB's chief manager of branch banking, later described as having taken three hours "to teach what would normally take three days in the classroom."

The success of that experience, and others like it, spurred them to buy a 50-acre property, which they have named Sudbury Fields, located an hour's drive north of Wellington in the Horowhenua region. The site, which includes an arena and racetrack, opened for business earlier this year.

Talkinghorses offers, as well, a venue for corporate functions, leadership and teambuilding experiences, boutique accommodation and "horse whispering holidays with a difference."

Could staff at Radio New Zealand, with its famously low staff morale, also benefit from a full programme of corporate horse-whispering? Ms Sudbury, who now works in public relations but who recently hosted a large group of her old National Radio colleagues at the farm for a free session, weighs her answer carefully.

"That would be a nice idea," she says.

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