

Leadership – Lessons from Horse Whispering

When I arrived home after being on the Horse Whispering course, I was so energised and positive from the experience that I wrote a short briefing on the programme for a group of local Chief Executives. I knew they would probably think it (and me) a bit barmy, but somehow the power of the learning meant I didn't really mind.

It is almost 18 months since I went on the course and this is the updated version, not to take away from what I wrote in the white heat of the moment, but to add the important revelation about longevity: what I gained from the experience has grown, been applied many times and is as vivid now as it was then.

I have no doubt that I am a far better leader, but equally a far better parent, colleague and friend. I use horse whispering analogies every week to describe situations and behaviours - from talking to someone I am mentoring or coaching about how to get more out of a member of staff to giving sought after advice to my brother about how to cherish their new baby. I have given both local and national presentations with the key learning as the backdrop.

Above all, I reflect now on the fact that the course was about me owning issues; no excuses - it is my behaviour that affects how people behave in return. If the horse isn't following, I am not interesting enough - it is not that the horse is lazy; if a Director isn't delivering the new vision to their staff, I haven't given them the right energy - they are not being deliberately difficult; if my kids are causing havoc on Saturday morning; I haven't clearly set out what we are doing and set about implementing it (preferring to watch the cricket...) - they are not just having "one of those moments".

You can end up "owning" too much of the problems and people, unlike horses, do have their own agenda, but affirming the starting point, that changing me is all I can do to change what I get back, has been immense.

Background

In June 2004, I was invited to join and evaluate a pilot leadership course that used horse whispering, or intelligent horsemanship, as the basis for the learning. I was deeply sceptical about the two-day event, but it seemed like a gamble worth taking.

The premise of the programme was that you do not have to break a horse's will in order to make it do what you want it to; rather you can create a communication with a horse that will allow you to lead it. This resonates with the way we look at modern leadership – not by rules and discipline, but vision and motivation (and also has many obvious messages for modern parenting).

It is based on the work of Monty Roberts in the USA, though similarities to Robert Redford in the film seemed a long way distant!

The programme featured an introduction, observation of experienced practitioners, practical sessions working 1:1 with a horse and team exercises. In between there was space for reflection in the group and to draw out the metaphors from the practical exercises.

Learning

There were many lessons around leadership and communication, many of which I knew and were reinforced, but some that were hitting me for the first time. "Hitting" is right; the most noticeable thing about this course was the huge explosions of learning, not messages that I could possibly ignore or find hard to understand and interpret. They were practical and about people too - I still know hardly anything about horses and have no particular love of animals - and were practical.

The course allowed me to explore areas such as:

- Non-verbal communication
- Ability to inspire and motivate
- Necessity for clear boundaries
- Clarity of vision – where are we going
- Being purposeful and definite
- Making it easy for people to follow you
- Energy and how we transfer energy
- Doing things together rather "doing to"
- Recognising what your innate leadership strengths are
- Operating at your best – focussed and relaxed

The list does no justice to the excitement - having a horse under control moving round you faster or slower because of how you think about speed and with no perceptible movement, was joyous to watch and a true lesson in how we exchange energy.

One of the most impressive parts of the course was the ability to tailor the experience to what individuals wanted to work on. There were people who wanted to be better at setting and delivering tasks and equally those who wanted to examine how they noticed things about staff and responded better in the moment.

Conclusions

I am clear that if anyone told me of the significant impact that a couple of days spent with a horse could have, I would have been singularly unimpressed with the message (and fairly concerned about the person too!).

However, I have done a lot of work on understanding and developing leadership style over the past few years and this was the comfortably the best piece of input I have ever had.

It was something about working with a live prop, something about the group of people I was working with and something about the completely different situation for learning. For me the basic premise of the course is right and the power and transferability of the metaphor works astonishingly well.

Jerry Clough
November 2005