

Learning with Nature's finest leader - the horse

While we humans spend many hours applying our intellect and energy to understanding, defining, teaching and learning good leadership - it can be seen effortless, powerful, innate, graceful and beautiful in the natural world. For many species, leadership is simply the way in which the animals organise themselves to maximise the chances of their herd, pack or group surviving. One such species is the horse.

The horse-human relationship is timeless. Seen as a mystical and spiritual creature in many ancient cultures, the horse later developed functional uses for mankind: transport, warfare, hunting and even a source of meat. Since the decline of the horse's practical role in our society, equestrian pursuits have become more and more popular. And today as we struggle to find meaning in our lives, often through connection with our natural world, the horse is involved in something of a renaissance as a spiritual and learning partner.

Working with horses as an experiential learning process is, I believe, one of the most exciting developments currently emerging in leadership and personal development. It should not be seen as just another type of "outward-bound" experience where the horse replaces planks, ropes or rafts. This is far from the reality of what working with horses can offer.

Adrian Chalmers, a senior professional in the oil and gas industry first observed the power of equine assisted learning at a team event facilitated by Harriet Worthington, an EAL specialist. "I got fascinated and quickly realised that there was so much more I could learn about myself. I didn't know anything about horses but I knew I had stumbled on a whole new world which also supported my own beliefs about how leadership should be." Adrian went on to enrol in a further six sessions of equine assisted coaching as part of his leadership development process.

As a species, horses survive due to their highly sensitive, intuitive nature, their ability to sense danger and be decisive in the face of it. Each member of the herd has a role to play in ensuring the herd's survival and they can communicate their emotions to each other instantaneously and across distance with a kind of sixth sense. Horses are also playful creatures: next to safety and comfort they are motivated by play - even above food sometimes!

It is these qualities which make the horse such a powerful partner for us in developing our own self-awareness, emotional intelligence and leadership. Their finely tuned senses pick up on the most subtle and unspoken nuances of attitude, emotion, intention and behaviour. They relate to our inner



story and dialogue – not what we show to the outside world and not even what we choose to believe about ourselves. And they respond to this inner story in the most honest terms possible.

In Adrian's words: "Horses don't lie. They have no need to. So the feedback they give you is totally honest. If they don't believe in you – they just don't follow you. If you are fearful or uncertain or lack authenticity they won't trust you. For me leadership is about trust : trusting myself, inspiring trust in others and being able to trust others in turn."

Developing a trusting and at the same time respectful relationship with a horse teaches us a lot about doing this with other humans. And horses are generally far more sceptical than we are! Learning experientially with horses is a "real-time" experience. We rarely see resistance in participants to the learning offered by a horse. Perhaps because the feedback is pure, authentic and without agenda it is much easier to accept, however uncomfortable it may be.

The learning is also very powerful because it happens at the level of mind, body and spirit. Horses do not respond to how we think – they respond to how we are. So, any change we strive for in the way in which we relate to a horse has to be felt in order for it to be effective. This opportunity to actually feel how it is to be a better leader is one of the most powerful learning aspects of Equine Assisted Learning.

"You can't get this sort of personal change from a book or a course. In fact I don't believe you can even be taught it. It was so powerful for me because I felt it in the natural, physical world. With the horses I had to be a good leader emotionally, physically and mentally. I actually felt how it was to be like that with the horses and now I am so much more aware of how I am as a leader with my team."

The learning outcomes from equine assisted development can rarely be predicted. A process with broad objectives is designed for the human learner. What actually emerges is down to that person and the relationship which they create with their equine coach.

"The impact on me has been huge. My confidence as a leader has grown and I am much more aware of the dynamics at play in my relationships at work and at home. Dealing with conflict has become a lot easier for me. I believe I have become a more effective follower too, as well as a better leader."

Once, I imagine, leadership came as effortlessly to human beings as it still does to the horse. In an age where the leadership lessons learned yesterday may no longer be useful today, perhaps it is time to retrieve our leadership *nature* - responding in the moment, guided by our intuition and a deeper connection with ourselves. Working with horses can help us do this and also to develop a felt sense about where we are going and how we need to be to inspire others to follow.

Some facts about Equine Assisted Learning:

- Equine assisted development does not involve riding or horsemanship
- No knowledge of horses is necessary
- Some people are afraid of horses – this is taken into account during the process. Fear is also an emotion often present in our organisations and which is rarely addressed. Working with it in the sessions is extremely useful.
- Individuals, groups of people or teams can all benefit from equine assisted development.
- One or more horses are used depending on the situation and sessions are typically outdoors.

Pam Billinge is an Affiliate of the Centre for Leadership Studies. She is an expert coach and facilitator working with leaders and teams in the public and private sectors and is also a body psychotherapist. She has kept horses for 15 years and is a teacher and practitioner of natural horsemanship (sometimes known as horse whispering). Her journey with horses has had a profound impact on her own personal change process, and she is passionate about helping others to benefit from this transformational experience. She partners with coach and EAL specialist, Harriet Worthington, to bring innovative, natural leadership and personal development experiences to their clients.

Pam and Harriet will be hosting some introductory sessions for those interested in exploring how horses can help us to learn about ourselves in March 2009. For more information please contact Pam on pam@bestillmore.co.uk, or visit www.bestillmore.co.uk.