

# LIFE LESSONS FROM THE HERD

PART TWO

# COLLABORATION

**In this series Julia Felton explores what horses can teach us about improving our skills for life and business**

In the last article we looked at how herd dynamics and the leadership positions within the herd can be effortlessly applied to your workplace situation. I'd be intrigued to hear how you have been getting on. Now we are going to look at what horses can teach us about creating an environment of collaboration and connection.

It never ceases to amaze me that wild horses live in harmony with each other. There are few fights within the herd, and those that occur are dealt with swiftly, as the misbehaving horse is run out of the herd. In fact pushing a horse out of the herd is the way that mares teach their foals good manners. When a horse is run out of the herd basically they are kept a distance from the main herd, usually around a quarter of a mile. Knowing as we do that horses are prey animals, being excluded from the herd is a dangerous place to be. Separated on the plains, the lone horse is on high alert for

a predator attack. They will be kept there until they show some remorse for their actions and lick and chew indicating that they want to rejoin the herd.

One of the reasons that there is such harmony is that there is a very strict hierarchy within the herd. Everyone knows their place and their role and how it contributes to the safety of the group. In essence the herd contains the lead mare and stallion, a bunch of dominant mares whose job it is to ensure that the herd is paying attention at all times, and then a group of more submissive mares who make up the numbers. The main difference between a horse herd and a human team is that within a horse herd leadership is never a given. The lead mare's and stallion's positions are continually reassessed by the other herd members, and if they fail to match up, they are challenged. The fact that the leadership positions are continually under threat ensures

that the lead mare and stallion never get rusty, but continually seek to develop their leadership skills. The feedback from other herd members helps keep them operating at their optimum level and ensures that they don't become lazy or complacent, thus missing something significant that could put the entire herd in jeopardy.

Contrast this with what happens in businesses where people are given the leadership role and tend to keep it. Sure there might be some office politics as team members don't like the leader's decisions, but generally the leader's position is safe. How differently teams might operate if the leader was always being evaluated and they could be usurped at any moment? Would it have stopped the fat cat crisis and financial meltdown that we have just experienced?

Another reason for harmony within the horse group is that there is a real sense of community. Horses know that in order to survive they need to work as a team and stay connected in the herd. Individuals alone cannot survive and as such the

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value of the community is more than the sum of its parts. Contrast this with our society today where many people have become so competitive and self-serving that in some places community is becoming a thing of the past. Each individual does their own thing with little thought of how their actions influence others.

Just imagine the impact that it would have on your life and business if everyone was supportive of each other. We would live in a much more connected society where everyone helped each other. Oh how different the workplace would be if there were no office politics and instead of competition and everyone looking after their own interests, collaboration reigned. I believe that the results would be happier, more motivated, engaged and productive team members. Also imagine how much more effective and successful your team at work could be if each member understood how they contributed to the overall success of the team.

What I find ironic is that we claim to live in a connected society. We may have hundreds of Facebook friends and yet no real relationship with these so called 'friends'. How many people know their neighbours' names? Very few and yet it was only a generation ago when my parents were growing up that the sense of community existed in towns and villages across the country. As we have lost the herd instinct of community our



**In the herd there is a sense of community which is more than the sum of it's parts**

predatory instincts have kicked in and life and work has become somewhat combative.

So why has this happened and what is the missing piece of the puzzle that horses can teach us? For any relationship to be successful it requires three basic elements: deep friendship or a bond, trust and respect. These are the first three Waterhole Rituals™ of Sharing Territory, Saying Hello and Taking Territory (see recent back issues of *Horsemanship Magazine*). Without these elements there is no basis for a connection. Horses know that they need to invest time in developing relationships and to prove themselves as a trustworthy member of the herd so that others trust them, and respect each other's personal space. If you think about your own relationship, both at work and home, how much time do you spend just hanging out with people and getting to know them? I know I'm guilty of seeming to be so busy that I don't spend the time getting to know people that I should. How about you? Do you have relationships that would benefit from you just spending time hanging out with that person

and getting to know them? Like with your horse this is no agenda time, just time spent connecting.

In the workplace I know that there is always pressure on deadlines and getting things done, but I am convinced that if you can carve out time to invest in developing relationships with others then actually you can become more productive, as these people can support you and help you achieve your task. I know in the corporate world the best investment I made of my time was getting to know the people in the print room. I always went and collected my own printing and had a quick chat with them. This paid off time and time again as those people always helped me out of a crisis, even staying late to get my work done. Collectively as a team we achieved more than either of us could have accomplished individually, and this is the powerful life and business lesson that horses can teach us. Community is so powerful.



**Julia Felton** is the founder of Business HorsePower and author of *Unbridled Success*.  
[www.businesshorsepower.com](http://www.businesshorsepower.com)



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