

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE HERD

PART FOUR

COMMUNICATION

Horses are masters of communication. In this issue Julia Felton explores how we can learn from them

It's simple to become a master communicator but it is not easy as it requires practice and an ability to listen, really listen to what the other person is saying, or perhaps more importantly, not saying. It also relies on us being really present and aware of what is happening right now and not being distracted by abstract thoughts about other events.

Communication is the life-blood of any relationship and yet time and time again I witness poor communication from the boss failing to explain his vision for the company, the team member too scared to communicate how he is feeling and friends not being honest with each other.

Often our inability to communicate leaves us in a state of turmoil, uncertain about what

is happening and this invariably leads to stress and anxiety. This not only affects us but also our friends, family and work colleagues who are impacted by the troubled state we get into.

Intuitively we know that communication is about more than just words. Think about a time when you have asked your friend how they are feeling and they say "fine", but you know that is not the case. You can tell from their body language and tonality that all is not well. I wonder if that Christmas present from Aunt Sally was really what you wanted, or did you just say that to appease her, thinking she wouldn't know; but I bet you she did.

Back in the 1940's a Californian psychology professor, Albert Mehrabian, undertook some

research into the relative importance of verbal and non-verbal communication. His findings have also become known as the 7%-38%-55% rule. Face-to-face communication can be broken down into three components: words, tone of voice and body language. When verbal and non-verbal messages are not consistent, what people see us do and the tone we use can far outweigh the words that we say. Furthermore he noted that when feelings and attitudes are being communicated then:

1. What we say accounts for only 7% of what is believed
2. The way we say it accounts for 38%
3. What others see accounts for 55%

Amazingly, this means that more than 90% of the impression we convey has nothing to do with what we actually say.

**The art of
communication is the
language of leadership**

James Humes

Because communication is only 7% words, we can engage in interspecies communication. As prey animals, horses live in the present moment and their acute perception and survival instincts have been perfected over millennia. They rely on and look to the lead horse to protect them and make the right decisions whenever the herd is in danger and requires leadership. Horses are sociable animals with distinct personalities. They are experts at non-verbal communication and help us improve our communication skills by reacting to human responses and body language. As sensitive, highly intuitive animals, they react to the smallest changes and stimuli in their environment.

If you watch a herd of horses you will see what I mean. They can communicate in the subtlest of ways with a slight nudge of the ear, a passing glance or the slight cross over of the hind-quarters and the result is that their companions move out of the way. They sense the oncoming storms way before we even know that they are coming. They listen to and respond to everything. However, not all their communication is subtle. Sometimes it is obvious and very directive. Take the picture above of a stallion taking territory on another herd member. See how every muscle in his body is taut and there is no doubt that this horse means business. There is no incongruence between what this horse is thinking and how he is acting.

For humans, however, we often cloud our communication by not wanting to hurt others'

feelings and the result is that we can become inauthentic. Over the years I have come to realise that this is never the answer and that in the long run, plain speaking, whilst it can be direct and sometimes hurtful, is the best option for both the communicator and the receiver. When we are intertwined with incongruence between what we think about and what we actually do or feel it creates clutter and a struggle for clear, focused thinking and planning. Ironically, when we are confused in our conversation it often means that the receiver is confused by the message. Being able to regulate your emotions while communicating, and in fact while you are engaged in any activity, permits clear focus, self-motivation and allows creativity and self-expression to be harnessed.

During my *Unbridled Success* workshops clients work with my horses and are challenged to focus and react in the moment while simultaneously experiencing emotions such as fear or inadequacy. By learning to modulate the vibes you are projecting, your non-verbal communication, you develop a mastery of self-control, poise, and socio-sensual awareness. Through directed activities with the horses it is possible to visualise the desired outcome in the face of distraction, confusion, frustration and even anger.

I can attest to the fact that horses assist people in learning the power of non-verbal communication, decision making, assumptions and dependencies. Certainly once I started listening to my horses I learned a whole load about myself which enabled me to better communicate with others. When horses invite humans into their herd structure the horses offer you a 'truth mirror'. It's important to be true to yourself first. A somatic awareness is developed



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as the horses reveal to us that the mind, body and spirit are an interconnected system. The mind attempts to understand itself and our environment, the body responds to the environment and our spirit goes after an underlying desire for finding possibility and meaning. Connecting all three puts us in touch with the natural world and our natural state, which is where the horses are.

Horses can teach us to be honest in our communication and all aspects of life because they consistently point out our incompetence at being totally honest. They simply don't accept falsehoods and when we are inauthentic with the horses, problems become evident immediately. This is why horses are such great teachers of communication. They never lie and they give you feedback just as it is. Sometimes it is hard to take but believe me, if we listen to our equine friends they can help us develop the fundamental life skill of communication which, in my opinion, is mastered so poorly by many of us.

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