

Learning to lead *with* horses

Whether you form part of a business or team discover how you can learn new and improved leadership skills, and recognise your own leadership style, by working with horses



The Leadership Whisperers: Emma Taylor (left) and Jude Jennison



SET UP BY Emma Taylor and Jude Jennison, The Leadership Whisperers in Warwickshire aim to help senior members from large organisations change the way they lead in the workplace.

Working with Jude and Emma's horses at their purpose-built yard, people are invited to work with horses on the ground to learn about their leadership style based on the non-verbal feedback from the horses.

"Working with us is a chance to explore where you're brilliant in leadership and the areas where you've become stuck," says Jude. "Horses mirror our non-verbal cues, which is about 90% of our communication - what we're feeling and thinking - and this can tell us a lot about our leadership."

The Your Horse team wanted to see Jude and Emma in action and so we went along to watch them work with a new group.

"Almost everyone in the group is from a different company," says Emma. "They've never met each other, most have no experience with horses and we have no idea what the day will reveal about them."

After an initial meet and greet, a safety briefing and an introduction to the horses

the group will be working with - Kalle, a 16-year old mare, and Mr Blue, a seven-year-old gelding - the group heads straight into the outdoor arena to get started.

Creating a good first impression

As we all know, first impressions mean a lot and can lead to judgements about a person before you've got to know them. With this in mind, Jude explains how the group will first introduce themselves to Kalle and Mr Blue.

"Effectively this introduction is going to be a horse handshake," says Jude. "When horses meet in the wild they'll go nose to nose and breathe on each other so you'll be pleased to hear that you're not going to be doing that!" Instead, each member of the group is instructed to walk quietly up to each horse, hold out their hand (palm facing down), let the horse sniff it and then stroke the horse on the neck and walk away.

"This will tell the horses that you're

“Encroaching on a horse’s space is like flinging your arms around a stranger”



Nick confidently lead Mr Blue around the arena before getting feedback from the group



Being unthreatening in their ‘horse handshake’ the group form immediate connections with the horses

kind, and by walking away you’re saying to them that you’re not threatening. It helps you to build respect and trust in an instant, just like a human handshake.” This exercise demonstrates how much and how little they need to do when first meeting someone and how important it is to be considerate of how different people might like to be greeted. “With horses, it’s important to avoid doing too much, too soon,” says Jude. “They’re sensitive and encroaching on a horse’s space is like flinging your arms around a stranger.”

What leading reveals

Next it’s onto the first exercise - leading the horses around the arena. As Emma explains, this can reveal a lot about the type of leadership someone already uses. First is Nick, who takes Mr Blue for a stroll. As he does, the group’s asked to give feedback without blame, judgement or criticism.

“Feedback can be viewed negatively but that’s not what we do here,” says Emma. “We want you to get feedback that you can take back to your businesses and apply to work.”

Nick’s leading is described by the group as relaxed, respectful, patient, confident and responsive. He’s asked if any of the words

used to describe it are familiar. “I can see those things in me and the way I work,” says Nick, “but this is an easy environment so it might be more challenging at work.”

But Emma points out that what he’s just done in fact isn’t that easy. “Sometimes Mr Blue won’t move at all,” she says. “And you’re in a new environment with people you don’t know, doing something you’ve never done before, and it’s a windy day. How well it went is a reflection of how well you led. None of these people know you and they just saw a long list of positives in your leadership.”

Next up is Maddy, leading Kalle. “That looked effortless,” says Jude. “Your legs were synchronised as you walked, which indicates that she’s in sync with you, she went with you. Is your leadership like that?” Maddy quickly replies “no!” but, as Jude explains, Maddy demonstrated that she has the skills to lead effortlessly and she can take this back to her business. “Maddy says she approached Kalle thinking she’d be open and honest. It paid off.”

What’s your leadership style?

Next, Emma and Jude want to help the group to understand what style of leadership they usually adopt and, using a specific leadership model, recognise how leadership can be applied in different ways. To do this they talk about the dynamic of an equine herd.

“By watching horses in the wild, horse communicator Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling discovered that there are three roles in the equine herd and this is the leadership model that we use with our clients,”



says Jude. To demonstrate how the model works in business, Emma and Jude ask the group to gather together in the middle of arena. “Let’s imagine there’s a pack of dogs coming up behind us,” says Emma. “If we all acted on impulse we’d probably scatter, going off in different directions. But if we’re to follow Hempfling’s leadership model, we wouldn’t. Instead we’d all have a role to play.” These roles, as Emma explains are:

- The Lead Mare who tells the herd where to go and at what speed
- The Alpha Stallion who puts himself between danger and the herd.
- Those in the middle - and the horses in the middle of the pack are still leaders. They lead by maintaining the integrity of the group, matching the pace of the Lead Mare and Alpha Stallion.

“In business, everyone’s doing a job and these three roles work well if everyone’s doing their bit,” says Emma. To demonstrate, the group is split into two and assigned a Lead Mare, an Alpha Stallion and the rest take up a position in the middle. Together, their job is to guide Kalle and Mr Blue around a set of obstacles. The group discovers how to work in unison.



ABOVE: When everyone performs their role well, the leadership is easy LEFT: When the group falls out of sync, things grind to a halt!



They see that good communication between the Lead Mare and Alpha Stallion is vital. “If you’re leading from the front, you need to know that you have someone watching your back,” says Emma. “If you don’t feel you that support, you’ll constantly stop to look behind and check, losing momentum and energy.”

It also becomes clear that those in the middle of the herd are just as important as the Lead Mare and Alpha Stallion. “In business, everyone’s doing a job,” explains Jude. “Those in the middle have to work hard to maintain the integrity of the herd. They inspire everyone around them and match the pace of those in front and behind. Unless everyone does their bit, the model won’t work.”

What the group learned:

- Good communication kept the group moving as one, in the right direction
- Trusting the team behind them helped the Lead Mare maintain a good pace
- The Alpha Stallion creating enough energy at the back was vital to keep the herd moving forward as one

“The great thing about this leading exercise is that it proves that it doesn’t take forever to build trust or strong teamwork,” says Emma. “This group don’t know each other, they’re not experienced with horses and in an hour they’ve achieved something they wouldn’t have thought possible.”



By the end of the session, a group who was initially fearful of horses, feels completely at ease with them!

See the Leadership Whisperers in action at Your Horse Live!

Visit Your horse Live at Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire this November (11-12) and you can see Emma, Jude and their horses in action in the Country & Stable Arena. For tickets and more info visit www.yourhorselive.co.uk

