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FEATURES

Leadership training: horse whispering

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Is 'horse whispering' really a useful leadership tool, or a waste of time?

"What's with the long face?", someone asked. I had just volunteered to step in at the last minute to take a test drive - or perhaps saddle up for - a leadership programme run by Spring Partnerships and training company Choose2B called Horses for Courses. But it wasn't this that was the cause of my furrowed brow, after all, it would be just another management course, with handouts, tea breaks, etc?

No, the cause of my concern was that I had just been informed that the event would involve actually getting in the ring with one of nature's more headstrong, not to mention wilful and free-spirited beasts. I would have to actually interact with these notoriously stubborn stable dwellers, and I'd not so much had a donkey ride in the past 25 years.

Then there was the matter of 'horse whispering' itself. What did that mean? Do horses actually listen when people talk to them? What if the horse is some exotic breed, such as an Arabian or a South American mustang? Would they be able to understand English? And would the horse enjoy all this chatter? Surely, it'd be happier just going for a run?

Stubborn as a mule

Horses are said to be highly intelligent animals that can't be fooled. Hence the contention that: 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.' Apparently. Horses, you see, can somehow see through your evil plan to make them drink more than they want to and they just won't have it. They may need you to show them where the water is, but expect them to lap it up? No chance.

Casting aside such speculation, I headed to the heart of the Oxfordshire countryside to learn about horse whispering, taming the equine beast, and 'authentic' leadership.

Saddled with doubt

Before getting in the ring, we were treated to a classroom lesson about the corporate success stories related to horse whispering. Companies such as international brewer Carlsberg and car maker BMW have all used the technique to good effect. So how does it work?

Gareth Chick, a director of business consultants Spring Partnership, quotes professor of psychology at UCLA in the US, Albert Mehrabian's famous assessment of human interactions – that 93% of all communication is non-verbal – and says that working with horses, who do not communicate verbally (at least not in English), provides an ideal opportunity to begin to understand that.

"It's about authentic leadership about being empathetic, getting your message across non-verbally and using positive reinforcement," he says.

"Horses have no preconceived ideas and are not prejudiced by who you are, the house you live in, the clothes you wear, the car you drive," he adds – thereby ruling out all hope of surreptitiously whispering that you backed Red Rum both times in the Grand National in an bid to get on his good side.

Fortunately, there is no riding involved and you don't touch the horse, except to give it a well-done pat.

Lisa Brice, managing director at Choose2B, explains that it's all about gaining the trust of the animal and maintaining that trust.

"By taking away words, we are forced to really think about the way we act and the impact this has on others," she says. "Achieving rapport with the horse to establish a relationship of mutual trust is not about showmanship and dominance, it's about establishing ground rules and boundaries and communicating consistently."

Nature of the beast

To do this we are told to fold our bodies slightly so as not to appear threatening to the horse, while simultaneously imagining that we are pointing our belly buttons towards the horse's hind quarters, ensuring our hips do not push towards the horse at any time. And as strange as that might sound, it does seem to prompt the beast to follow you. However, the second you lose concentration, the horse picks up on your lack of focus and goes off to do its own thing.

After several attempts, it became easier, and it's amazing what a sense of achievement just strolling around in circles with a horse at your shoulder can give you.

The verbal feedback from Chick and Brice on how participants interact with the horse provides the essential clues to the usefulness of this technique, by laying bare the instinctive natures of the human beasts taking part.

And as Brice says: "A leader is someone with people [not horses] following them if no-one is following, then they are just a person out taking a walk."

And the main lesson to learn was that to get people on board you need to speak their language and empathise with their concerns.

It's all about seeing things from the other person's perspective and using positive reinforcement to get the results you want, says Brice. However, she did advise against taking the training too literally by wandering around the office focusing on people's rear ends.

Identifying the fakers

So does horse whispering work? It is certainly a strangely fulfilling thing to do, but can it translate to the real world? Clearly, the likes of Carlsberg would not be investing time and money in the Horses for Courses programme if it didn't.

Focusing on the rear end of a horse might lead some to speculate on the potential for being taken for a ride. However, like any training intervention, it is limited by the willingness of the participants to build on their new-found knowledge and the inclination of the organisation to ensure there is some follow-up to the training to maximise the potential benefits for the organisation.

Cynics might argue that all the Horses for Courses programme does is teach people how to lead horses around an arena. Yet it could clearly be very useful for firms trying to find out just what potential its so-called 'high potentials' might actually have – to help organisations avoid the common fate of having ineffective people getting into unfeasibly advanced positions with no noticeable abilities.

This was superbly demonstrated in the latest series of *The Apprentice* by finalist Helene Speight, who managed to weedle her way into the last four despite having no discernible interpersonal or leadership skills.

Horse whispering would have exposed her as a faker far earlier than Sir Alan Sugar. So, far from being a crock of 'horse apples', horse whispering could clearly be a useful tool in filtering out the managers from the manure.

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