

You can lead a horse... or can you?

Is horse whispering just another new-age namby pamby management development technique? **Katie Pattullo** visited the Waterstock House Training Centre in Oxford to see if there was any substance to the ancient art of horse whispering as an effective way of increasing an organisation's bottom line. The results were surprising – and revealing

In the Robert Redford movie *The Horse Whisperer*, a teenage girl riding a horse is hit by a truck, and both horse and girl are left seriously injured, physically and mentally. The girl's mother attempts to heal their souls with the help of a 'horse whisperer' – a cowboy with the ability to communicate with horses. For the sake of a syrupy movie it's a good premise and, although not the happy ending you would expect from such an Americana epic, the main characters walk into the sunset healed and healthy.

So where is the connection then between horse whispering and corporate leadership and management? Gareth Chick from business consultants Spring Partnerships and Lisa Brice from Horses for Courses (a horse whispering company) run leadership training courses with horses at Waterstock House Training Centre, a converted courtyard stables in the picturesque village of Waterstock near Oxford.

As we stood in the courtyard in glorious sunshine (albeit in a state of trepidation of what was ahead), Chick explained: "While horse whispering may not at first appear to be linked to leadership, mastering the techniques of horse whispering are completely akin to mastering leadership skills. Horses do not respond to verbal communication, they communicate solely through the use of body language."

If leadership can be defined as one's ability to get others to willingly follow, then it would stand that a successful leader needs to have a clear, vivid picture of where to go, a firm grasp on how to achieve success and, importantly, that they can build trust in their followers.

Horses are individuals, it is easy to make connections between communicating with them and communicating with people. Horses have no preconceived ideas and are not prejudiced by who you are, the house you live in, the car you drive, your annual turnover or even your job title.

After a brief introductory talk from both Chick and Brice, we were lead into the horse training paddock and introduced to the horses that would be testing the leadership skills of the reasonably tense team present. Following a demonstration from Brice, each participant was given an allocated time to, using body language alone, encourage our horse to follow our lead round the ring. There were mixed results in the morning session but after what felt like a well-deserved lunch in the courtyard stables dining room, each participant was given a further challenge in the afternoon, involving bollards and tight turns – not dissimilar to a



A leader is someone with people following them, if nobody is following them then they are just a person taking a walk

tricky course experienced in a cycling proficiency test. This was devised to make us really concentrate on aspects of our character that could be developed to improve our leadership skills.

What is absolutely evident is that the experience really forces you to think about your communication technique. As soon as any of us lost concentration or focus on what we were doing, the horse picked up on it immediately, and walked away. But even when disengaged, it was surprising how quickly trust can be rebuilt.

Despite the different techniques used by each participant, it also became evident that as long as you regained consistency and a clear direction, this trust could be sustained – something that can undoubtedly be mirrored in the workplace.

Many leaders may see this development technique as too 'soft', something that may be taking them out of their comfort zone. But major companies, such as Carlsberg who have invested heavily in horse whispering for leadership training, are now beginning to realise how this ancient art can be applied – extremely successfully – to their business world. Effective leaders mean effective business.

As we all went in our different directions at the end of the day I think we all took something positive away with us, and I guess that most of us, myself included, are not quite as sceptical about a technique that sounded, at best, a bit fluffy and, at worst, irrelevant.

WC Fields said: "Never work with children or animals." Okay, I agree about the children but maybe we'd all learn something about ourselves if we worked with animals once in a while. ■