



Make me a better manager: Horse whispering

How can horse whispering help you to become a better leader? Steve Roth stepped into the ring to discover that horse whispering can be revealing about your management style.



The longer I manage, the more I find I need to learn. So when the editor of TrainingZone.co.uk asked me to write a series of articles on improving my management and leadership skills – starting with horse whispering - it seemed a golden opportunity to provide some interesting copy and brush up on my own performance. To that end, over the next few months I intend to expose myself to as many leadership and management improvement techniques as I can find and report back on.

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Currently, I look after an editorial department consisting of around 13 full-time editors and a half dozen or so freelance contributors. There are things about my management and leadership style that need improvement – time management, prioritising, the tendency to get very enthusiastic about an idea and then fail to follow through, or to react only when the train is about to hit the buffers. On the plus side, I'm diplomatic, reasonably aware of the needs of my staff and able to inspire a certain amount of loyalty. My negotiating skills are ok, although occasionally I am prone to resort to a form of Chinese water torture.

According to Gareth Chick, director of Spring Partnerships, the business consultancy that organised the horse whispering day, I am not untypical. Most managers learn not how to lead, but how to manipulate. Far from being authentic leaders – in whom there is a high degree of trust, respect and who give a clear idea of where they are going and how, the majority of leaders are either autocratic - clear about their vision but attracting mixed respect and low level of trust - or inclusive - highly trusted but attracting mixed respect and offering a very cloudy vision. As a result, a huge number of companies have a set of values that mean nothing. In contrast, the authentic leader believes that the way to achieve the goal is to take everybody along. According to Chick: "An authentic leader is not there to be liked or popular, but to do the right thing. If you are authentic, people will follow. The vision has to be so compelling that people want to feel and live the values of the company".

Contrary to popular opinion, horse whispering does not involve murmuring sweet nothings into the ear of a sick or excitable equus. Just 7% of communication is verbal, the rest is based on body language and tone. "I have learned various ways of getting people to do what I want them to do. I can't do that with horses because horses don't play politics," says Chick. "Horses are only interested in three things. They will only follow you on trust, respect and if they are totally clear about what you want them to do. It has to be total. It has to be uncompromising."

Equally important, a horse lives entirely in the moment – and will give immediate feedback. "If you get a horse to do something, it is because it wants to do it not because you tell it to do it," says Chick.

In the wild, horses play a game of push or be pushed – in which they constantly test each other's fitness to lead. Having established a pecking order, the herd can relax in the knowledge that they know who will push when danger appears. People do much the same. They will test to see where the line lies and if it moves. If the message is clear and consistent, with defined boundaries and based on mutual trust, both horse and human can relax and enjoy the journey.

Horse whispering is offered as part of a larger leadership and change management programme and has some powerful advocates. Carlsberg UK has incorporated it as part of company-wide initiative involving workshops and individual coaching. The results have been impressive and

have led to a significant improvement in performance. This is no touchy, feely exercise. "The ultimate test is: does this change results? All this is for nothing if the company results don't change," says Chick.

Keen to have a go, I joined a group of journalists in bright sunshine at former farm buildings near Oxford. After an initial briefing we were introduced to the horses, called Pushover and Zodiac, who looked quite friendly and manageable - how little we knew. Initially we were all asked in turn just to get the horses to follow us around an enclosed circle. The technique - one that should not be repeated in the office - is to stare fixedly at the horse's backside in a visual game of push or be pushed and wheel right or left as required, looking over your shoulder at the horse's rump. If the horse gets too close or tries to block you off, holding your arm out is usually enough to establish the boundary between your 'bubble' of personal space and the horses'. Occasionally - if the horse gets too close - you may need to gently push the horse away. Above all, never look the horse in the eye - not unless you want to end up in a spaghetti western stare out. Everyone is given a go at leading the horse around the arena, after which the whisperer is asked to say how they felt during the exercise and the group is invited make constructive comments.

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It is amazing watching how different people deal with the exercise. Some, for example, when they feel control start to slip away, seek safety by concentrating on technical details. Others give up - they go through the motions but their body language clearly shows that their heart isn't in it. Usually the behaviour shown in the arena is a pretty reliable indicator of the way they react to adversity at work and the exercise is designed to get to the root of the problem. It is important that people are taken beyond their normal experience, says Chick. "If you are going to get people to perform at work they have to move outside of their comfort zone and find that an exciting place to be."

Once the first session is over, the whisperer sets a target for the afternoon - for example to work on their forward planning, or if they have done well on the first challenge, to lead the horse around a predetermined route. First time around the ring with Pushover I did ok. For the second time I was told to work on my self-belief and given a maximum of 10 minutes to take the horse around a figure of eight. It took a few false starts but eventually Zodiac did follow me after a fashion. It must have been a surreal sight watching me wheel around the circle, both arms out fighter pilot style and grinning like a madman, followed by a mildly engaged horse. But actually, at the end, I felt great. "The thing is, it doesn't matter what technique you settle on - so long as it works. This is all about being the best you can be naturally, this is not about teaching you 'the way to lead is such and such'", says Chick.

"It is about being accountable and flexible and putting yourself in someone else's shoes. It's about being there and being in the moment, and that is a massive learning."

Steve Roth is the managing editor at Sift Media.

If you would like to help him on his quest to become a better manager, then send an email to: editor@trainingzone.co.uk