

# Invaluable learning about leadership and coaching from interacting with horses

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Ontological Coaching focuses on Way of Being, which is where our perceptions and attitudes live, often deep seated and out of awareness. Our Way of Being is a dynamic interrelationship between language, emotions and body shaping how we observe the world. To bring about fundamental, lasting change, shifts need to occur in all these areas, so that we are able to be congruent in our language (including listening), emotions, and how we configure and use our bodies, allowing us to become different observers and take more effective action.

Interacting with horses provides a unique opportunity to become aware, quickly and without judgment, of what might be happening in our emotional realm and our bodies. They are able to show what kind of presence we have and whether we are consistent in what we say, do and feel.

## Our Way of Being, Leadership and Horses

The only place we can lead from is from our Way of Being, which informs our behavior and communication. Observing our Way of Being without using verbal language can be useful as it circumvents our tendency to become too caught up with words. This is because sometimes the meaning we make is not necessarily congruent with what we are feeling or communicating with our body, to others and even ourselves. This is what is meant when we say our perceptions and attitudes are often deep seated and out of awareness. So, although speaking could be considered one of our most valuable tools as human beings, it can also entrap us and limit our capacity to observe a broader range of what is going on.

Working with horses, invites us into exploring our Way of Being without words. We are then able to access more profoundly what we consider to be a crucial factor in communication, and that is **listening**. When we are able to listen with our whole being, especially including our emotions and body, we have a doorway into different insights that can provide powerful ways of making sense that bypasses logic and invites our intuition.

Two important characteristics of horses are invaluable is the process of learning from them.

- They have no preconceived ideas about human beings and certainly don't know or care about titles, what we do or don't have materially, what we look like, and the clothes we wear, to name a few things we use to assess ourselves and each other. Horses live in the present and are prey animals, which means they are flight-or-fight animals. They use their instincts to guide them, as safety is a primary concern for them.
- Horses are honest in the sense that they work with what is in the present moment and don't have expectations, which is potentially very useful for how we engage in daily life. They can therefore act as a mirror for us, that is clear and without distortion, offering us ways of seeing ourselves that can be a powerful catalyst for lasting change. Although large animals, learning with them is non-threatening in that they aren't negatively judgmental, and simply offer us information in the moment. Through learning with horses we are able to tap into what is happening for us emotionally, which we may not be aware of, and also to use our body as a shortcut to effect positive changes at the level of our Way of Being.

In terms of leadership, interacting with them can quickly reveal our strengths and opportunities for improvement. In particular they show the range and extent of our influence, and what we do subtly and not so subtly. We can observe a host of things through the interaction we have with a horse, including whether we are saying one thing and doing another, whether we ignore our feelings and pretend, what kind of leadership presence we have, how we hold our body, and how we actually lead versus how we think we lead.

### **A short case study**

A colleague and I offered a morning leadership workshop with horses. Although avid horse riders, it was the first time we were combining our coaching, facilitation and leadership development skills with horses, inviting participants to interact with horses on the ground. The primary focus was to invite people to examine their habitual patterns, perceptions and attitudes that are often in the background of awareness, informing behavior. We were clear that we were not the educators in the program, and that the horses would be our guides, which certainly proved to be the case.

We had a simple process, where each person would have an opportunity to engage with a horse twice, and in between examine what happened in the interaction. Each person reported that the learning was unique and

profound. Through the experience and relationship with the horse, people quickly became aware of habitual aspects of their Way of Being and their effectiveness. By becoming aware of and naming their emotions, as well as shifting their body and attention in the moment, they were able to discover different and more effective ways of positively influencing the horse. Furthermore, they also identified how they could use the experience in their every day lives and as leaders.

One person requested that we do some additional work post the workshop to deepen her learning, and explore further what she had uncovered. She is a great learner, and agreed to let me share what happened for her, which follows.

At the beginning in the workshop Natasha was unable to move the horse, no matter what she tried to do. Natasha could see how this was linked to her inability to connect with people beyond a certain point, and the impact this had on her influencing capacity. She also recognized that she felt isolated and alone a lot of the time, which was both heartbreaking and illuminating for her. During the session she was able to make a shift in how she used her body and her emotional awareness, feeling the horse's acceptance and sense of connection.

Paradoxically when Natasha was only focused on her own agenda the horse became "uncooperative" and "unwilling" to relate. The moment Natasha accepted the status quo and gave the horse space, another horse hung her head over the fence and began nuzzling Natasha as if to say, "hey, you get it".

Through the interaction Natasha began to answer questions of how she could connect with others, how she could influence more, and also how she could engage with her own fear in relation to connecting with others.

Following on from the workshop, Natasha had two further individual coaching sessions in which she gained further perspectives on what happened when she was able to be fully present with the horse. From this reflection she experienced a profound and favourable shift in her mood. Natasha had discovered how she could positively influence the relationship with the horse when she was clear on her purpose without being rigid or demanding. Through the interactions, Natasha's confidence grew and she learned that she could choose when and how to interact with others that could take better care of her and their concerns.

## How all of this relates to Ontological Coaching

In Ontological Coaching we are interested in moving beyond stories and assessments, that can easily keep us stuck, and to explore our own (or client's) Way of Being. Horses offer us the opportunity to examine the phenomenon of what is happening, rather than the stories we tell. This is revealing and provides incisive information, new insights, and with it the possibility for change. Through the engagement we are able to grow our capacity to observe ourselves with some detachment, allowing for more choice, and the facility to be present with what is, cultivating a mood of acceptance.

We also view emotions and moods as central to our wellbeing in Ontology, and horses help us become aware of what is really going on with our emotions and moods. They can help us develop a positive regard for all our emotions and also somehow provide a process for us to shift to more resourceful mood spaces.

Lastly, when it comes to our body, horses very quickly reveal to us what is happening in our body. They act as fine instruments, showing us what is going on in our nervous system, the state of our physiology, our breathing patterns, and how we are holding ourselves in terms of our muscular configuration and specifically tension. We can use the in-the-moment, feedback they provide to create shifts in our body that allow for a constructive shift in perception.

In closing, we don't need unicorns, just horses! As Winston Churchill said, "There is something about the outside of a horse, that is good for the inside of a (wo)man".