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THE COACH AND HORSES



**HANNAH
COURTNEY
BENNETT WRITES
ABOUT THE ROLE
OF EQUINE-
FACILITATED
LEARNING
IN CAREERS
COACHING AND
GUIDANCE**

Photos by Lucy Merrell

What is equine-facilitated coaching and why is it effective?

Horses are predominantly non-verbal and highly intuitive. Historically, like most prey animals, they have relied on authenticity (being true to oneself), awareness and leadership to survive. Today's domesticated horses still carry these instinctive behaviours. They remain herd animals with a natural hierarchy and roles within that hierarchy; just like our own social groups and corporate teams. It is these instinctive behaviours that support the learners' experience during an equine-facilitated coaching session.



Horses possess keen, highly-perceptive intuition. They are generous, playful, curious creatures, instinctively tuned to any change in their environment. Their ability to 'read' us is at times uncanny, yet highly accurate. Recent research (McComb 2018) has demonstrated that horses give functionally-relevant responses to a range of human emotions. The horse gives immediate and easily-interpreted feedback on style, responding favourably to the correct stimuli and naturally questioning poor or inappropriate leadership styles that may be exhibited by the client(s).

Interacting with horses enables clients to see their personal challenges and for them to be coached to overcome them. Any changes that clients may make in their behaviour are reflected back instantly by the response of the horse in a vivid and memorable way. This results in simple, yet powerful experiential learning.

Horse-led exercises provide the learner with the chance to stretch comfort zones, build self-awareness and learn from non-judgemental feedback.

How is this relevant in a career coaching context?

Today as I write, we are entering our eighth week of lockdown. During this time our tech skills have been challenged and our economic understandings developed. To a greater extent we are also witnessing how society is placing increased recognition and greater importance on those who work in care, as well as the importance of good teaching. We are appreciating (or missing, depending on individual quarantine circumstances) time with family. Even before the corona crisis took a hold and created the 'new normal', we were beginning to hear and see increasing evidence that future work is likely to place greater importance on soft skills, as machines take over ever more skilled and technical work.

Coaching sessions spent working with horses facilitate the development of emotional intelligence skills - skills which we know to be strong predictors of achieving a successful career. Research shows that interpersonal competence, self-awareness and social awareness - all elements of emotional intelligence - are strong predictors of who will succeed and who won't (O'Boyle 2010).

Partnering with a horse is a very effective way to develop confidence, communication, leadership and team working skills. For the horse, it's simple. Do your words, actions, voice, and body match your thoughts, feelings and actions? Are you letting yourself be led by your talent? Are you authentic?

An equine-facilitated coaching session provides the opportunity to build confidence, learn how to focus, develop assertiveness skills and experiment with leadership styles. All of which are transferable to the workplace as well as day-to-day life.

Two case studies

During a group session last year, Greg wanted to work on developing his leadership style. Through working with the horse, Greg was able to identify how to develop his focus and experience the benefits of learning how to be present. When Greg focused and expressed his intention effectively, the horse followed him (photograph 2). When Greg became distracted it was easy to see from the horse's expression and movement, that he and the horse were no longer synchronised (photograph 3).

This illustrates how coaching with horses encourages the practice of self-belief. If you believe, you will succeed, and in leadership situations you are likely to be followed. Greg's session offers a powerful illustration of what happens in a leadership situation when focus is lost.

During this same session a team of young people worked together in an attempt to get the horse to join them in

Photograph 2



Photograph 3



executing a simple task. Their approach at the beginning of the exercise was chaotic. The newly-formed team were unable to communicate effectively with each other let alone convey their vision to the horse. However, once the team took time to understand their shared goals and to recognise and identify the different roles required within the team to achieve, success was theirs. A powerful and enjoyable way of practicing team building skills and, particularly for young people, gaining the sense of achievement which is experienced from fulfilling shared goals. The participants experienced the benefits of learning how to be present and learned how to project confidence in a safe and happy environment. This session also reinforced the principles of learning with a growth mindset. Growth mindset states that people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work - brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment (Dweck, 2015).

Coaching with horses is an immensely powerful way of helping clients to build confidence and develop resilience.

The importance of career resilience (the ability to bounce back from career-related setbacks, learn from experiences and continue to move towards career goals) is gaining increasing currency, especially in this Covid-19 world.

Practitioners of Equine-Facilitated Coaching, also known as Equine-Assisted Learning, use horses for a broad range of client interventions depending on their own professional training and interests. I am an occupational psychologist who specialises in careers, so developing confidence, resilience and employability skills are usually the focus of my own equine-led client interventions.

It is the coach and the horse who facilitate the sessions with the client or clients. The horses used for this type of work do not need to be specially trained, but they do need to be mannerly and safe. Often a 'horse handler' is also involved, especially during group interventions. The role of the horse handler is to concentrate on the horse and its welfare and its position in the group; this allows the coach to focus solely on the needs of the client. All work is from the ground and clients do not need any previous experience with horses or riding horses.

It is not unusual for a client to report being wary or anxious around horses. On such occasions, individuals are encouraged to interact in a way that they feel comfortable. This might involve simply experiencing being present with the horse at a 'social distance' of their choosing, sometimes over a gate or stable door, as their comfort zone dictates.

If you would like to find out more about how these sessions run or would be interested in experiencing a 'virtual taster' session, feel free to contact me.

References

Dweck, C. (2017) *Mindset; Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential*. Ballantine Books.

McComb, K (2018) *Animals remember previous facial expressions that specific humans have exhibited* Current Biology.

O'Boyle, E et al (2010) *The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Job Performance. A meta-analysis*. Journal of Organisational Behavior.

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