



Participants in the Red Barn Leadership Program work with a horse as part of a team building exercise. (Photo: L.A. Cicero)

## Horses are the teachers in new Stanford Red Barn Leadership Program

*Formally launched this spring, the Stanford Red Barn Leadership Program offers leadership, team building and youth development training, using horses to teach life lessons that participants can use inside and outside the stable.* By Robin Migdol

Forget PowerPoint presentations and personality tests. Staff and leadership development at Stanford University's Red Barn is a whole different animal - literally.

This spring, a group of coworkers, one of the first to participate in the [Stanford Red Barn Leadership Program](#), was tasked with leading a group of horses around a tarp. For skittish horses and working professionals alike, this was no easy task.

"They sat down and said, 'OK, we need to have a strategy for this. So who's going to be the point person on this?'" said Vanessa Bartsch, Red Barn executive director and head coach. "I was like, 'What are you guys pointing on?' They're like, 'Tarp leading.'"

Proficiency in leading horses through obstacle courses may not come up on anyone's performance review or report card, but according to the Red Barn program, the skills it requires just might. Formally launched this spring, the Stanford Red Barn Leadership Program offers leadership, team building and youth development training, using horses to teach life lessons that participants can use inside and outside the stable.

The program offers three basic types of training: executive leadership, corporate/team building and youth groups. Executive sessions are one-on-one weekly classes for professionals in management positions who wish to improve their leadership skills.

Corporate groups, teams and youth groups opt for weekly or single-day classes to work on leadership, group dynamics, teamwork, confidence and more.

Although the training takes place at the university's Equestrian Center on Electioneer Road, the Red Barn Leadership Program is completely un-mounted: Participants do not actually ride horses. In addition, no prior horsemanship experience is necessary.

Though each program is tailored to meet the specific needs of the participants, all take part in some standard exercises designed to illustrate group dynamics and the effects that different styles of leadership can have on the completion of various challenges.

## **HERD INTERACTIONS**

The first task is the observation of the herd of Leadership Program horses, said Avery Brown, program director and Red Barn manager. Participants note the unique personalities of the horses and how this affects their interactions with others in the group. Then, participants take turns entering the paddock and "introducing" themselves to the herd.

"Dynamics immediately shift," Brown said. "Some horses want to come over and say hi, some stay under the tree. We see how folks are able to motivate horses within the herd and able to communicate and pay attention to body language to explore their own leadership potential in that environment."

The horses' reactions to people within their herd reveal the personality and leadership style of the person. If a person is aggressive, for example, the horses will cower in intimidation. Too weak, and the horses won't obey his or her commands.

For children especially, watching herd dynamics in action can be a powerful mirror to their own style of social interaction. Are they bold and pushy like Master, the herd leader, or are they timid and shy like Comet, the outsider?

"It lets them have a very tangible, safe place to talk about their own interpersonal skills and dynamics," Bartsch said. "The horses are so clear. They change their personalities a little bit, but at this point in their lives, they own their own self and learn to adapt to a herd. [We ask the kids], 'When is it OK to blend in with the group and when do you need to stand up and take a leadership position?'"

## **PROFOUND FEEDBACK**

Next, participants are challenged to lead single horses and groups of horses to different places and through obstacles. Sometimes horses are haltered and sometimes they are not, so participants must figure out the best way to communicate with the horses and motivate them to follow directions.

"The horses are wonderful teachers. People usually drastically change both their strategies of interacting with each other and their strategies for expressing themselves even within the course of an exercise," Brown said. "What's wonderful about the horses, too, is they tend to give you immediate, profound feedback. It's not personal. Either the horse says, 'Yes,' or the horse says, 'No, thanks.' It's that easy."

Jacqueline Hartman, Red Barn Leadership Program lead instructor, said horses' natural tendency to be "in the moment" teaches clients to pay attention to their own emotions and stresses. Everything they experience while working with the horses is useful for exploring their leadership potential and areas of improvement.

"It allows them to interpret more stimuli and make decisions based on the complexities of all that," Hartman said. "What matters most to you, what matters most to other people, and what's happening in your whole being?"

## **LASTING LESSONS**

So far, Red Barn Leadership Program participants have included local executives, Stanford groups and [Lauren's House 4 Positive Change](#), a program for at-risk children and teens in East Palo Alto that comes to the Red Barn for group sessions every Wednesday night.

The horses' straightforward response to the kids is a welcome change from their home environment, where adults constantly judge them, Hartman said.

"The children [from Lauren's House] have so much to gain from being in this environment, where nothing is ever good, bad, right or wrong," Hartman said. "It just worked or it didn't work. This support among children will be long-lasting."

Jennifer Rogers, senior property manager at Premier Properties Management, a commercial real estate firm in downtown Palo Alto, recently completed a 12-week executive leadership course with Hartman. Her boss recommended she take the training because her position changed to include managing more staff and leading the firm's hiring process. She, too, wanted to improve her leadership skills and become more comfortable with horses.

Rogers said interacting with the horses allowed her to notice how others responded to her and how she was presenting herself. After completing the training, she has already seen big changes in her work.

"I'm more aware of different personalities and am a better listener to colleagues and clients," Rogers said. "I'm finding I have an easier time setting goals and arranging the appropriate steps to reach them."

The Leadership team welcomes participants from all backgrounds and insists that even those who are afraid of horses or have never interacted with them before will benefit from the experience.

"The feedback we've gotten has been really phenomenal, versus just sitting in a room with a leadership trainer who's making you take Myers-Briggs tests all day long," Bartsch said. "It's pretty impactful, if not slightly more poop-encrusted."

*Robin Migdol is a writing intern with the Stanford News Service.*

<http://news.stanford.edu/news/2012/july/red-barn-leadership-073012.html?view=print>

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