

Leadership Has Gone to the Horses and Teamwork by Horsin' Around!

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What can a 1000 pound horse teach you about leadership and teamwork? Why horses? Who is drawn to this new learning technology? Where is it being offered and by who?

These types of programs are being offered all over the world including Canada, US, Europe, Asia, and South America. Quickly gaining credibility as one of the most incredible experiential learning programs offered today, equine (horse) guided learning is innovative, provocative, and creates powerful learning shifts in two-legged participants. Companies such as IBM, Microsoft, and Sun Microsystems are some of the large global organizations that have participated in this learning. Locally a variety of organizations including public sector, municipalities, utilities, community service agencies, financial institutions are bringing their leaders and teams together to experience learning outside of the classroom surrounded by the beauty of nature and the natural ways of learning together. A team gathers in a large outdoor arena surrounded by a several equine-learning partners. The facilitator challenges the team to work together to welcome these new "team" members to their project and to "lead" them through the gates of success - the challenge is that they must do this without any restraints or aids on the horse.

Very quickly the team sets out to achieve the goal only to find that the horses run away from them. They continue to try approaching the horses only to find themselves continually defeated. A team member is heard saying "I think that horse is laughing at us!" The facilitator stands back and allows the team to brainstorm the "problem". "Stubborn horse, this is impossible, let Sue do it, she's a horse-person" these are some of the comments the facilitator hears. After several more attempts, a time-out is called, and the team gathers together to debrief their experience. "What's going on, the facilitator asks, genuinely curious and listening intently for the response. "The horses don't want to do this", one participant offers up quickly as others join in and offer their perspective. "Hmmm...says the facilitator, how is this similar to a situation you might face in the workplace, with another team member, customer or department? What happens for you when someone doesn't want to play the game by your rules, do you give up, get frustrated, angry or ignore the situation? What could you do that might engage these new team members in a way that might be more about relationship and trust-building rather than goal focused? What planning and decision-making approach did you use? If you were being recognized for your degree of innovation and ingenuity, what might you explore that is different than what you have already done? What are you noticing about your team synergy and ability to work together effectively?" The questions and debrief continues.

The team moves into a huddle and sits down on the ground. One team member says "what if we dropped our assumptions about what we think will work or what we think we know, and try something completely different? What could we come up with? The team begins a learning conversation and within a few minutes, two horses approach the circle as if they are listening intently to the approach. The team stands up and implements their strategy. Within a few minutes, the horses are part of the team and moving through the obstacles. Smiles, laughter and cheers from the team (and the horses don't run away!). We move together again for the final debrief of the learning.

Stepping into confidence when you have no experience or knowledge is challenging at the best of times - add a horse to the mix who is counting on you to be clear, and see what emerges.

Horse guided learning brings participants together in a discovery process that focuses on intention, motivation and intuition. Horses live in herds (teams) and require clarity and authentic teamwork and leadership in order to feel safe. In their natural habitat, as animals of prey, their survival depends on this. Leaders and teams who have experienced this program continue to provide feedback many weeks and months after about the powerful learning they experienced with the horses. One leader recently said "My lesson with Lightning is indelibly etched in my mind. I must remember not to push or pull my team, but to be clear on my requests and coach them through the learning process".

Respect as a leader is earned by the presence that we bring to our relationships, and the clarity from which we act. The horses will insist on knowing who is leading each step of the way, and that we are purposeful and centered within ourselves. This program will have a profound and lasting impact on your understanding of what makes a true leader. You will also be reminded of the importance of bringing humour, fun and play into the workplace.