



Horses for courses

Meet Daisy, a 15-hand dark bay that loves carrots, long canters in the countryside and training professional people in leadership skills. **Guy Whitmore** finds out more

Sitting around the large table, a group of delegates listen intently as the corporate trainers introduce themselves. After outlining the agenda, everyone discusses leadership qualities, personality types, different working styles and decision-making, before heading off for a series of exercises. Not far away and waiting patiently are the other trainers involved in the day-long course, who will be working with delegates on a number of practical exercises. While they are not your typical corporate trainer, they have gained a reputation as effective and intuitive coaches, who excel in enhancing the communication skills of

Guy Whitmore

Writing for *Countryside* for five years, Guy has a strong interest in farming and rural affairs



those they work with. But as the group arrives, there are no firm handshakes to greet them, just a blast of air through the nostrils and a shake of the head. For the trainers – Daisy, Polo and Liberty – are the equestrian representatives of a training programme that uses horses to develop people’s confidence and management skills. ‘Using horses is extremely effective as

they don’t have personal agendas and there are no personality issues with those they work with,’ explains Kate Webber, who runs the Liberty Equine Leadership course in Hertfordshire.

‘This means people are more accepting of the feedback the horses give them, and gain more from the day’s training.’

Getting feedback from a horse may sound like something reserved for Dr Doolittle or Monty Roberts.

But Kate – who also teaches natural horsemanship, and studied personality profiling and Neuro Linguistic Psychology – points out there are very clear signs that horses exhibit when those giving instructions are not doing so effectively.

This is because horses do not react to words or commands; they react to body language and the subtle signals unwittingly given off by humans. This means that if your body language does not portray conviction and confidence, the horse will usually ignore instructions.

‘Horses want to know that their leader will ensure their safety and wellbeing,’ Kate says. ‘When a horse believes the humans will keep them safe, they will literally jump through fire for them. However, if the human does not portray confidence, the animal is unlikely to do what it is asked.’

The ability to read body language and the subtle signals humans give off is something horses have developed over



CONFIDENCE: Delegates guide horses using voice and body language, an exercise that builds self-belief in those attending the course



INTERACTION: Kate demonstrates the use of breathing to control a horse’s speed around an enclosure

thousands of years to keep them safe. From the moment a horse sees a human, it is determining whether we really are ‘friend or foe’, despite what we say.

But how does all this work in the corporate world?

Melody Cheal, of the GWiz Learning Partnership – which runs the Liberty Equine Leadership course with Kate – points out the course brings into sharp focus how humans may sound confident, yet undermine their own words through body language and subtle signals.

Whether it is getting a message across in a meeting, selling a product or idea, or encouraging those around you to fulfil a task, not having a genuine belief – or understanding about what you are saying – can seriously undermine the message.

‘Horses always read the intent behind the language, so working with them and seeing their reaction is an excellent metaphor for how humans also read intent in people,’ explains Melody.

‘Understanding this can dramatically improve someone’s ability to get the required message across, both in their professional and personal life.’

During the one-or-two-day courses, Kate and Melody use the horses to demonstrate the importance of self-belief, body postures and breathing to communicate. None of the exercises involve riding the horses. Delegates also use a number of exercises that do not involve the horses to

demonstrate how different people react to different management styles and levels of input from others.

Exercises include instructing the horses to move in required directions without using physical guidance, as well as the use of breathing and body postures to adjust the speed of the horses as they trot around enclosures.

‘It’s amazing to see how delegates become more confident in their ability to work with the horses, which, in turn, means the horses react to instruction more immediately,’ adds Melody. ‘This also allows delegate’s self-confidence grow, which has a very positive impact on their self-belief and the way they see themselves in the future.’

Even those who are at first nervous around horses or ponies tend to overcome their fear, Melody points out, with many feeling comfortable around the animals by the end of the course. Jo Burnett, a team leader from Bedford, believes the day-long course helped her change the perception of how she worked.

‘I was struck at how the horses did not

respond to a command unless the person giving it truly believed it will happen,’ she explains. ‘That had a huge impact on me as I realised the same happens at work. If there is not a conviction in what you say, people pick up on it. I took from the experience that I needed to fully prepare for meetings to be

able to communicate with total conviction.’

‘I used to be very nervous of horses, but I think I’m going to take up horse riding now!’

‘I couldn’t see how working with horses could do anything for my career or teach me about dealing with people – but it has.’

But she added that working with horses was also immense fun, something echoed by horse owner and fellow delegate Lucy Smith.

However, for her the day not only provided an insight into her career, but also the way she

rides her horse.

‘I have never realised just how much horses pick up on your body language and signals until today,’ she says. ‘It will definitely change the way I ride and deal with my horses. Working with the horses really demonstrates how you may think you are saying something, but you may be sending signals that counter it.’

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Melody Cheal has in excess of 20 years training experience, and has a Masters degree in Applied Positive Psychology. She is a Master Practitioner in Neuro Linguistic Psychology, working with delegates to develop interpersonal skills and self awareness.
 ● For more information on the Liberty Equine Leadership course, visit www.gwiztraining.com/Liberty%20Equine%20Leadership%20Course.pdf or www.katewebber.co.uk.
 ● Alternatively, contact Kate Webber on 01462 742488 or Melody Cheal on 01767 640956.



TEACHING: Kate works with delegates to demonstrate how different people react to different management styles and levels of input using tension on a lead rope



ONE-TO-ONE: Kate, right, prepares delegates for moving the horses around an enclosure