

Corporate Training With Added Horse Power

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HOW MANAGEMENT SKILLS COULD GET A BOOST FROM ADDED HORSEPOWER

What can horses teach us about communication and leadership? More than you'd think, says Zara Myers who conducts Equine Facilitated Learning Workshops in the Lake District.

She says: "Working with horses is an incredibly effective training tool because the feedback they give you is genuine, immediate and non judgemental.

Traditional training methods such as peer reviews, 360 reviews, self-assessments and psychometric testing, can all be very subjective. Horses are sensitive prey animals and when you interact with a horse you can see immediately how they respond to subtle cues in your body language, breathing and energy that you might not be aware of."

Zara is CEO of Harness Change at Cumbria Rural Academy, a Community Interest Company (CIC) which runs Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) courses and Alternative Education alongside more traditional riding school activities.

With a background in management consultancy as well as in dressage where she competed at Prix St Georges level, she has combined these two apparently diverse skill sets to create bespoke training packages for companies seeking to improve their performance in areas such as communication, teamwork and siloed working.

Earlier in her career she had used EFL to effect behavioural change in primary schools in Cumbria. Working with horses has been shown to reduce anxiety, improve self-confidence and encourage mindfulness because horses react to what is happening at the present time. Zara soon realised that those same principles could be beneficial to organisations, teaching clear verbal and non- verbal cues to boost teamwork and leadership.

In the workshops, conducted in the arena, participants are given groundwork exercises to perform with Gaia, a grey Lusitano mare, either individually or as a team. Typically, it might start with something deceptively simple, such as leading Gaia around a series of obstacles.

Zara explains: "Every workshop will be tailor-made, depending how participants present themselves on the day. Based on their interactions with Gaia, I'm able to identify the blockages between where they are at the present time and the outcomes they want to achieve. The classroom session that follows will work on those areas and then it's back to the arena to put those new insights into practice with another team session with Gaia."

"I've chosen Gaia to work with because she's very good at connecting when you need to connect and disengaging when things go a bit wrong. But depending on what the group wants to achieve, I might choose another horse. For example, if the company's currently trying to work on building better sales communications or winning better contracts by being more assertive, I'd use a horse that won't engage with them unless they are being strong and assertive, so that they can really step into that role."

Jacqui Gale, MBE is the Chief Executive Officer at Reframe Cancer which provides cancer-specialist services for organisations. She and her team took part in a recent Harness Change workshop and she was impressed was how quickly lessons could be learned.

She says: "We're going through a significant period of change at Reframe, and I wanted to give some of our team the opportunity to step away from the day-to-day pressures and think about how we communicate, build trust and work together. We are all incredibly busy, and finding ways to develop ourselves and our teams that are both meaningful and efficient is really important to me.

"I've been involved in leadership and team development for many years, and we can spend hours in workshops talking about behaviours, communication and leadership. Yet working with Gaia brought all of that to life in minutes. There was no hiding behind words or explanations. You could see and feel the reaction to your behaviour almost immediately, make a small adjustment and see the difference.

"That immediate feedback is incredibly powerful. It helps you understand not just what you do, but how others experience you. And because you actually experience it rather than simply being told about it, I

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believe the learning stays with you.

“For me personally, one of the biggest reminders was that leadership is not always about doing more, pushing harder or giving more direction. Sometimes a small change in how you approach a situation can make an enormous difference.

“What surprised me most was just how sensitive Gaia was to the smallest changes in my behaviour and approach. It was fascinating and a little humbling too.

“The team experience was equally valuable. It gave us the opportunity to see one another in a completely different setting, understand how our individual behaviours affect those around us and learn together in real time. I think that is where the real magic happens. It creates conversations, openness and understanding that can take considerably longer to achieve sitting around a meeting table.

“My hope is that we take that greater awareness back into our everyday working relationships, particularly when things are busy or challenging. We now have a shared experience to reflect on and remind ourselves how even small changes in our approach can make a big difference.

“The real value for me is the speed and impact of the learning. In business, time is precious, and we need development experiences that genuinely make a difference. This was such an effective way to accelerate self-awareness, understand reactions and behaviours, and translate that learning into how we lead and work with others. What might take hours of discussion can become clear in minutes. That is pretty impressive.

“I would absolutely recommend the experience to other leaders and teams. It is different, memorable, great fun and, most importantly, incredibly effective. I came away smiling, but also reflecting on what I had learned, which is a pretty good combination.”

For more information, contact Zara Myers

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