

Free reign learning

Tapping into the energy and emotional intelligence of horses is a powerful development tool for individuals and businesses, writes **Charlotte Francis**.

“How you interact with the horses is how you interact with the world.”



We're standing in a circle in a paddock doing simple visualisation and breathing exercises. We tune into the sounds around us – warbling magpies and trilling fairy wrens – and become aware of the ground beneath our feet. The key is to get out of our heads and into our bodies; this work is all about intuition, body language and emotional intelligence.

Where many people are familiar with corporate team-building exercises and community volunteering projects that involve hands-on activities ranging from planting trees to serving meals in a soup kitchen, teaming humans and horses up for personal and business growth and development is less well known.

Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) originated in

the United States more than 20 years ago but has only recently found its way to Australia. “EFL is really big in the States,” says American born and trained Cindy Jacobs, who runs Free Rein Australia from her homestead in Torquay, Victoria.

As a non-rider, I've always been a bit nervous around horses, so I wasn't sure what to expect from an open day experience at Free Rein. As it turns out, a lack of horsemanship proved an advantage: “Equestrians, forget everything you know,” says Cindy before our meet and greet with the horses. “How you interact with the horses is how you interact with the world,” she says. “In this arena, there are no expectations and no judgements. It's an opportunity to see ourselves as others see us.”

The instruction is simply to go up and introduce ourselves to each horse and observe what they observe.

It's a bit like going to a party where you know no one; you want to make an impression and to be liked. We learn that whatever it is we're doing and thinking, the horses pick it up and mirror it back at us. When the horses lick their lips, it signals approval. Three horses push one woman in our group away; she feels rejected, but recognises this is a reflection of her relationship with her three children. Another participant notices that one of the horses detects her nervousness and is breathing heavily.

“The horses want to know if they can trust you. Are you congruent?” challenges Jacobs. “They know if you're saying one thing and doing another. If you're not present, they'll just stand and stare.”

That's why this experiential work that bypasses language and the intellectual mind is so effective as a learning tool for both individuals and businesses. Whether it's an Art of Mindfulness workshop or

a Leadership Learning event, the horses demand authenticity and need clear direction, integrity and congruency. We discover this for ourselves in an exercise that involves working together in groups of four to get a horse to go over a jump.

Cindy, who has a background in organisational change and development, directs each group to discuss and agree on a strategy and then to carry it out non-verbally. It soon becomes clear that my group lacks a coherent vision and is over-focused on the goal. We are working with Perri, a young thoroughbred chestnut mare rescued from the racing industry. One man in our team waves his hands around and tries to force her to move in the direction of the jump while the rest of us look on helplessly. Perri senses confusion and bolts to the other side of the paddock. By contrast, the other group are united behind their leader and work to a shared vision. They all believe their horse will jump ☺

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over the jump, and it does. These kinds of group exercises are designed to mimic situations in the workplace with the horses representing the staff, the client or even the project.

“If your team works together in harmony, that’s attractive to the horse. If you don’t care about the wellbeing of your client or staff and don’t have faith in them, it creates resistance. It’s important to sense the energy of horses (ie, staff, clients) around you and to know when to be assertive and when to be soft,” Cindy says.

There are many potential applications for this work; Cindy has, for example, designed a program for teenage girls based around body image. She would also like to work with people with autism, dementia and depression. To meet the growing interest from community service organisations, Cindy has set up a mentoring program. As part of their training, the mentees co-facilitate workshops and events with Cindy which makes them more affordable for community service and not-for-profit organisations.

Cindy facilitated a one-day workshop at a local prison for 12 inmates, many of them sex offenders. Although she told the men to meet and greet the horses without touching or talking, all the men patted, hugged and talked to the horses. During the debriefing, the men recognised that the way they imposed themselves on the horses was the very same behaviour that had landed them in prison. Equipped with this new awareness, they repeated the exercise showing more respect towards the horses. Picking up on the shift in the men’s attitudes, the horses crowded round to support and validate their new behaviour.

Although broken in, the horses at Free Rein Australia are never saddled up for riding. Masters at deciphering energy, their work is much more demanding than if they were being ridden. “People brighten up around the horses



because the horses absorb negative energy,” says Cindy. “On one occasion we worked with a group of counsellors who deal with drug addiction. The horses all lay down mirroring the exhaustion of the counsellors.”

Unlike traditional therapy between coach and client, there’s no chatting around a problem. Unimpeded by language and the analytical mind, the horses get to the heart of the matter very quickly and give instant feedback, whether it’s part of the plan or not. It’s not uncommon for the horses to hijack the agenda of the program. A team might think they need to focus on leadership but the horses could mirror and highlight some other issue that has been hidden and festering for months. “The horses are the therapists,” says Cindy. “My role is to co-facilitate.”

For more information on personal and business coaching and workshops at Free Rein Australia go to www.freereinaustralia.com.

Above: Teaming horses and humans together for a group leadership exercise.



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