

# Horse sense

Equine exercises shed light on managers' leadership style



Participants at the Spirit of Leadership program try to guide a horse backward through an L-shaped course | RALF HOLZAPFEL

BY BAILA LAZARUS

In a bizarre twist of nature, across Europe, and now into Canada, a trend is growing where horses are used to train humans. Call it equine education, horse whispering or, as Ralf and Karina Holzapfel call it, the Spirit of Leadership.

Adopting locations that are out of the ordinary is not unusual for many training associations. Climbing through rope courses, walking on coal beds and paddling in a dragon boat are just some of the out-of-the-boardroom locales. And now horse corral can be added to the list.

"It's common in Europe; it's not anything you think twice about," says Ralf Holzapfel.

The training is based on the idea that the human-horse interaction will bring out the best and worst of a manager's leadership style.

"Horses are very intuitive," says Holzapfel. "They will react to your energy. And they show very quickly whether they trust you."

At the Holzapfels' ranch (currently near 100 Mile House, but they are looking at moving to the Lower Mainland in 2013),

participants in the Spirit of Leadership training watch as the Holzapfels run through a series of short exercises, such as getting a horse to run around them in a trot or canter.

Participants enter an empty corral one at a time, standing in the centre as a horse is brought in and left to walk around the corral. Participants have to complete the exercises by themselves, with some coaching from the Holzapfels.

"Sometimes the person in the middle ends up running around the horse to get it to do something," Holzapfel explains.

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"Their colleagues are watching and thinking how they would do it differently, but then they get inside the corral and have the same problem. It can be because they are too aggressive or they are impatient."

An ideal size group is about six, says Holzapfel, so people don't have to wait too long to take their turn.

Ralf Schmidt, president and CEO of engineering firm MTU Maintenance Canada Ltd., took the workshop at the Holzapfels' ranch.

"I was right into it because I recognized that my dog was doing the same thing as the horses do, the way Ralf explained it," says Schmidt. "I knew exactly what he was talking about. So I was caught right away."

Schmidt says it was clear that the exercises did, in fact, mimic what the employees did at work. And it was a source of amusement for them.

"Watching our colleagues, we were joking that we saw exactly how it reflected what

he was doing in the job," says Schmidt.

"For example, we had our quality-control guy, who is usually calm and slow. He was trying to convince the horse to do something and the horse just lay down on the ground.

"We laughed so hard, like we hadn't laughed in years. But we weren't laughing at people, but with people."

But Schmidt is quick to acknowledge that besides the enjoyment of connecting the dots between what happens in the corral and what happens at work, there is a serious side. The manner in which the horses behave could have a lesson for the way people react to employees at work.

"Maybe when people are listening to details of quality control, they feel the same [as the horse]," Schmidt says. "So he recognized that he needs to be more energetic. Maybe that's why on the shop floor, the [employees] aren't understanding what he's saying. ... So I said, maybe you need a sales guy to help."

When Schmidt himself got into the corral, he had a few lessons to learn, as well.

"I thought I was able to be calm, but the horse didn't slow down," he explains. "So I learned I really have to show more that I'm cool and calm. On the other hand, I thought I was pretty successful overall, so it reinforced what I knew. There was a trust and there was no fear. I did need a little more patience than expected."

Schmidt was so convinced of the value of the program, he sent 15 team leaders to complete it after the first group.

Besides individual training, the Holzapfels have created exercises for work colleagues to do in small teams, such as having participants ride blindfolded while two colleagues guide their horses; in another, a group of three have to manoeuvre a horse backward through an L-shaped course.

After the groups have completed the exercises, they head inside to debrief on the day's activities. ■