

Horse Sense

by Betsy Barbieux

Your office staff is just like a stable full of horses! Really! Alex Hiam, noted leadership development author and consultant says so in his book, *Making Horses Drink*.

Imagine a stable full of stalls. Each of the stalls has a horse in it, and those horses are powerful beasts. (After all, that's where the term "horsepower" comes from.) But most of the time, those horses are doing little or nothing. Left to its own devices, a horse likes to stand around and munch hay. It doesn't look for heavy carts to pull, races to run, high fences to jump, steer to rope, or people to give rides to. . .

Organizations are like that too. They may have a great bunch of people on their payroll, a winning "stable" if you will. But without the right touch on the reins, the business produces little more than a stable full of horses. (In fact, like a stable, it actually consumes in its resting state. Anything it produces is waste product, to put it politely.)

So if managing people is similar to harnessing the energy and power of a horse, we could probably make some leadership analogies using "horse" cliches.

Horsepower. Equals man or woman power. You and your staff make a team, just like horse and rider. The horse has the power; the rider has the reins. You can't do your job without involving others, whether that is staff or vendors and contractors. You're only as good as your man or woman power.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Horses respond to kind, encouraging words. They enjoy a pat on the neck or a vigorous scratch on their withers. In other words, be grateful for the team you have and let them know. Be sure you speak kindly to them and about them. You shouldn't pet or scratch them, but a little praise goes a long way. Be sincere and don't go overboard or you'll scare them.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Just like the horse trainer, you, as the manager, are responsible for adequate training, correction when needed, reasonable pay and incentives (food and water), and a safe workplace (stable). If, after a reasonable time of orientation and training, your employee doesn't handle her job adequately, you have either the wrong person in the wrong position, or you have a discipline problem. Some horses were born for the fast track, others for the slow mountain trails. Hopefully, you have skill assessments in place so you hire the right person for the right position in the first place.

Don't put the cart before the horse. Too much responsibility too soon, coupled with too high expectations too soon, only makes for frustration in both horse and rider. Sixty five percent (65%) of your employees will need more time and instruction to "get up to speed" in their position than the other 35%.

Horse sense. Horses are like people. Some are smarter than others. Most all horses have enough sense to shy away from snakes. But come to a stream, some horses jump over it, others walk through it. People are the same. No two horses have the same "horse sense" and make the same decision. Similarly, your employees don't have the same "common sense" as you. They'll never "figure it out" the way you do.

Going to the waterhole. Sometimes it's just time to go to the barn and start over tomorrow. A productive day should be rewarded with adequate rest and socializing. Both are essential for a productive day tomorrow. There needs to be time to stop everyday; a quitting time.

The grass is greener in the other pasture. Horses always want to eat the grass on the other side of the fence. Despite the fact that it's awkward to crane her neck around the boards and wire and despite the fact her long silky mane gets rubbed off, it's her nature to think things are better "over there." You'll always have a few employees who can't wait to leave for imaginary greener pastures. Unlike horses, you can open the gate and let them go.

He's feeling his oats. Horses have attitudes. They have good days when they are full of energy and will respond willingly. They surprise you with what they'll do. But they have bad days too when all they do is nip, stomp, and kick. Much the same with employees. A wise manager knows how to read the moods of his employees and can wait until a better time to press for performance. If the bad mood persists, you'll need to explore if it's a medical problem or a discipline problem.

No use flogging a dead horse. For whatever reason, some horses just aren't useful. Seems the same with some people. They never become productive members of society. They are that percentage of our population we, the taxpayers, take care of. Hopefully you have hiring practices in place so this type is spotted BEFORE you employ them.

Turned out to pasture. In their spare time, most horses would rather be in the pasture munching on lush, green grass, feeling the sun on their backs, taking long, cool drinks from the stream, and enjoying a bucket full of molasses and oats every night. One of the rewards of a productive life is to be able to relax and do what you've always wanted to do. Hopefully, your employees have worked hard, contributed to the success of your association, have been adequately paid, rewarded, and recognized. They are fulfilled, but now it's time to move into the pasture of retirement.

You don't have to have a masters degree in management or organizational behavior to be a great manager. All it takes is a little horse sense.

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