Leadership

Let a horse lead you to better management

An ‘equine coaching’ course helps leaders understand how their behaviour impacts on others

From my vantage point inside a paddock on a cold and windy day, it is not immediately obvious how horses can help business leaders to develop new skills. But David Harris, who runs the Equine Guided Leadership Development programme, is confident that working with these herd animals will convert the sceptics.

How does it work? It is about presence, trust and respect, says Mr Harris. His background is in high-pressure corporate jobs. Nearly 20 years ago, feeling stressed and burnt out, he decided to get a horse — his daughter was a good rider, but he had less experience.

“What I realised was that this horse was absolutely reflecting back to me how I was,” he says. “I was scared, I was feeling vulnerable and feeling alone. And every time I was with the horse this got reflected back to me.”

He felt strongly there was something to be gained from working with horses and wanted to
help others to benefit from the same valuable insights. After participating in a specialist course, Mr Harris left his job and in 2003 set up his own business. While equine therapy is well-established in programmes treating addiction, among other problems, Mr Harris focuses on coaching people in corporate life.

The business world is much faster moving and more unpredictable than in the past, he says, and that creates stress, so one of the first things Mr Harris shows people is that they can choose how to breathe, how to see and how to be. When you have that choice, he says, “you can select the appropriate type of energy for what it is you’re doing. What this comes down to is mindfulness and presence”.

The course encourages people to step into a horse’s world: they are prey animals, so to allow them to accept new humans into their space they have to be approached in a non-predatory way, from the side.

To begin with, I stand with the horses so we can get used to one another. The horses may come up and sniff me and I pat or stroke them.

Then boundaries are set: if the horse brings its head too close, Mr Harris suggests gently but firmly pushing it away. After a couple of times, this behaviour will stop. He adds this lesson can be transferred to people. A leader should set boundaries early in order to avoid unnecessary conflict.

We then work on becoming “present” — thinking about breathing, and being grounded because we are literally digging our feet in the dirt. This is then transferred to the horse as I place my hands on one and stand quietly, in a state of light meditation and reflection.
Similarly, horses reflect back the behaviour of people, so these exercises — along with others which culminate in leading a horse around the school without a rope — show how our own behaviour impacts on others. A horse will not comply with an aggressive person, so if this is a problem the programme will help them to become self-aware and implement a more positive approach.

Companies that have sent employees on the course include Direct Line, the insurer, and Cisco, the technology group.

Tina Gundersen, director of global sales at Cisco, says that on returning to the office, she held lots of one-to-ones with her team members. She wanted to just listen and “maybe take a different view of what they were talking about”. Normally one-to-ones “would be about fact collecting and how we turn that into the next action.

“You just don’t stop in a corporate environment — [you’re] very focused, very driven in terms of what the goal is and what everybody is supposed to be doing.”

The technique is one of a number of unorthodox ways to help managers and executives
As soft skills and creativity become more valued, business schools in particular are offering management training that taps the arts — such as literature and music — and even therapy sessions. These methods offer a fresh take on developing new ways to lead teams and tackle business challenges.

Paris-based business school HEC has offered equine coaching as part of its English Global Executive Coaching programme for 14 years, which is aimed at strengthening team cohesion. In 2018, it introduced coaching with sheep to two of its programmes to help participants gain awareness of the complexity of organisations and the impact of their behaviour on a group.

Mr Harris says that his course helps people to understand that not all leadership is the same. “Sometimes we need to step in front, sometimes we need to be able to show people the way . . . at other times we need to drive them,” he says. Then “there’s the collaborative part of leadership, knowing and understanding people”.

But isn’t this all a bit wacky? Ms Gundersen concedes that it is unusual but the horses allow you to see your impact on other people. “If you’re presenting yourself in a way that is incongruous the horses kind of go, ‘Well I’m not necessarily going to engage with you because you’ve sort of got muddled energy that’s coming at me’. And I saw that several times.”
She also learnt from other people’s experiences. Ms Gundersen participated in the course with a group of six, so they were able to observe each other. “You could genuinely see if somebody was a little bit nervous, the difference in the reaction of that horse. The same horse then would act in a very different way for another person. So not wacky at all actually — really surprising.”

Mr Harris adds that since a horse’s world is constantly evolving due to factors such as the weather, they are masters of “sense and respond” — they notice something is happening and they respond to it immediately. “That’s one of the really great skills people can learn from this,” he says.