



## 5 Ways Horses Bring Teams Together

What's that? Horses bringing teams together? How in the world does this work? Believe it or not, we humans have lots to learn from our four-legged friends. Its official name is Equine Assisted Learning (EAL). Quite a mouthful, but if you just consider the words, it is exactly what it sounds like: Learning that takes place with the assistance of horses. There's no need to know anything about horses or have any experience with them at all. In fact, there is no riding at all. The activities are done on the ground. You're not learning to ride a horse, but learning *from* a horse. EAL is utilized for a variety of reasons from personal growth to professional development, team building, leadership and more. What does your business have to gain from some time with Trigger and his friends? These 5 reasons are just the tip of the iceberg.

**1. Build a stronger team.** A herd of horses is an example of excellence in teamwork. Although the lead mare may be the primary decision maker for the herd, she relies on the other members of the herd for the vital information that goes into making that decision. Even the lowest horse in the herd hierarchy has an important role to play in the survival of the herd. Where the horse herd mirrors the human team is when we recognize the value that each member contributes to the success of the team. Who is the "lead mare" on your team? Who is the best communicator? What team dynamics are working for you and which ones might be hindering your success? Working with horses, you'll gain insight into issues such as these, be able to practice alternative solutions and determine the best course of action in the future.

**2. Foster greater trust.** How open are you with your teammates? Are you equally comfortable sharing your strengths as well as your weaknesses? Successes AND failures? How about what

makes you tick? According to Patrick Lencioni's bestselling book [The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team](#), "Trust lies at the heart of a functioning team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible." So now you must be wondering how horses help teams build trust. Horses are honest creatures that are incapable of acting differently from how they feel. People, on the other hand, often feel one way but act another. With a horse the feedback you receive is honest, immediate and non-judgmental. They are not impressed by fancy cars or clothes or that you were tops in sales for the past 3 years. They see and respond to the "inside" you. While this vulnerability may seem a bit unsettling, keep in mind that your colleagues are encountering the same mirror of honesty for themselves. It's amazing to watch the horses elicit the honesty between team members that they share within the herd. When everyone believes in the best intentions of their teammates, trust is created.

**3. Enhance communication among colleagues.** "Communication," according to well-known horseman Pat Parelli, "is defined as two or more beings sharing and understanding an idea." We humans tend to forget that last part sometimes and assume that just because we said something that the people we were talking to heard us and understood exactly what we meant. Horses share and understand ideas almost exclusively non-verbally and are experts at reading body language. Consider the herd of zebras grazing on the savannah. They are keenly aware by his body language whether the lion walking nearby is out for an afternoon stroll or an afternoon snack. Although we humans are more verbal than horses, studies have shown that the large majority of our communication still happens through body language. The way we stand, how we hold our shoulders or the tilt of our head all say something to the person we're talking to,

whether we are aware of it or not. In an EAL session we pay a lot of attention to body language of both the horses and the people. How aware are you of body language? How accurately do you read what the horses and/or your teammates are really "saying?" What do you choose to do with this information? How does this reflect what happens at the office?

**4. Increase individual and group confidence.** Confidence grows when we take risks and challenge ourselves. Spending more time outside your comfort zone will cause it to stretch and grow larger resulting in increased self-confidence. Motivating a 1000-lb. animal to do what you ask it to do would be considered a challenge for most, right? In an Equine Assisted Learning session you'll be asked to complete various activities which will stretch your comfort zone and challenge your current beliefs about limits to your abilities. You'll be given space to explore various ways the exercise might be accomplished. Since there is no right or wrong answer, your creativity comes alive and you'll discover ways of thinking and being that are new and effective. Practice these in the arena, then apply them in the office and even at home. It's amazing what moving a horse around can do for your self-confidence.

**5. Have fun while learning something new!** The last of the top 5 reasons to try Equine Assisted Learning is

that it's fun! Studies have shown that people learn better when they are enjoying what they are doing. Getting to know your teammates outside of the office is rewarding and builds that trust we were talking about a few paragraphs earlier. You may have tried ropes courses and paintball, but the living, breathing, moving horses add a whole new aspect to your sense of self-awareness. They require that you relate to them in order to accomplish anything. It's unique and different and it's outside instead of being stuck in an office. Best of all, you get to move around and work out all your cobwebs that are currently in your head as well as your body.

Teamwork, trust, communication, confidence and fun. And that's just the tip of the iceberg! Equine Assisted Learning is recognized around the globe with companies such as BMW, Disney and Volkswagen as a valuable tool for business. Horses have a lot to teach us if we are just willing to open our minds to the possibilities.

*About the author: Kathy Taylor is the owner of HerdWise, LLC where she finds it endlessly fascinating to watch horses show her clients exactly what they need to see in order to work better together. She and her herd provide half-day and full day experiences for team learning and leadership development. Please visit her website at [www.HerdWise.net](http://www.HerdWise.net).*