

## DEVELOPMENT

# Knocking a little horse sense into managers

Executives who saddle up on a leadership course learn skills to take back to the office

BY NORVAL SCOTT, CALGARY

Carol Mosig was having trouble. Uncomfortable with horses at the best of times, the deployment manager for Telus Corp. couldn't understand why her bright-eyed animal was pawing the ground and whinnying relentlessly, while everyone else's was standing calmly.

"While the other horses were all nodding off, mine was eager and ready to go," she recalls.

"It turns out I was standing tall on the balls of my feet, making me look excited – and the horse was following my lead. It really made me see how my body language can affect the energy of others."

This life lesson didn't come about from a ride in the country but, rather, from a leadership program that attempts to instill a little cowboy spirit into city slickers whose own management and leadership skills just might benefit from a little horse sense.

Organizers of the "Horse Sense" course, run at a stable just outside Calgary, say, for instance, that the animals' heightened reactions to body language can teach attendees to understand how their own management style is interpreted by others – and how those perceptions can be improved.

"Being with a horse improves your communication skills," says Nancy Lowery, principal of the Natural Leader, the Calgary-based firm that runs Horse Sense.

"You can't physically control the animal, so you have to gain the authority to lead it through gaining its confidence, and that's what you want in the workplace."

The one-day course, which costs \$595, has been running in Calgary since 2004. Canadian companies including Telus, Suncor Inc. and ConocoPhillips Canada have sent teams of



Nancy Lowery, principal of the Natural Leader: 'Being with a horse improves your communication skills.' CHRIS BOLIN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

executives to learn straight from the horse's mouth, while the University of Calgary has incorporated the program as part of its Certificate for Emerging Leaders, a continuing education program, with the first session running last month. The Calgary course is now fully subscribed, with a waiting list for classes scheduled for later this year.

"You can't underestimate the impact that a leader's style has on their team, and we want to look at courses that give people an insight into that," says Shannon Taylor, human resources director for Telus, which has encouraged some of its managers in Alberta to sad-

dle up.

"This kind of course can give managers an extra string to their bow, and, if a company builds better leaders, then that can only help in attracting and retaining talent."

The Horse Sense course itself consists of theory and practical elements. Students observe how a horse herd is governed by a strict top-down management hierarchy, similar to most companies, and how the lead horse commands others through its own actions. Then they enter the paddock and are handed the reins of a horse, which they learn to lead through a series of exercises that illustrate the effect their

own body language can have.

While the human participants are, at first, understandably uncertain – and the horses noticeably frisky – man and beast are soon doing everything from running backwards to dancing in circles, with the horses responding readily to the unspoken commands of their leaders.

The interaction gives participants an increased understanding of how to demonstrate hard-to-teach intangibles, like trustworthiness and decisiveness, that contribute toward being a good leader, says Sharon Quarrington, lead facilitator at Participative Designs Inc., a firm separate to,

although associated with, Calgary's the Natural Leader, which has run similar programs for executives in a stable in Freelon, Ont., since 2004.

"Clients really get to understand the difference between management and leadership," she says. "Leading a horse around with its reins from A to B is just management, but getting it to follow you willingly – without equipment – is a leadership skill. Firms come to us to show their staff how to put that into action."

The Ontario course, which operates full-time, is a regular part of some Fortune 500 companies' management development programs, she says.

Participants benefit from getting out of the classroom and into an environment where their leadership actions receive immediate feedback, says Fred Jacques, an instructor in continuing education at the University of Calgary, who helped to develop the Calgary course.

"If horses sense someone is trying to be in a leadership role, but that person lacks confidence or clarity, they won't co-operate. That tests people's reactions, and you get the chance to try out different leadership strategies."

There's a direct parallel with how horses and workers behave when faced with challenges or tasks, Mr. Jacques adds.

"People will comply with what management wants them to do, but they won't necessarily buy in to an idea."

"In the same way, a horse will only really work with you effectively once it's willing to accept your leadership. Coercion won't work – success only comes through influence and co-operation."

Ms. Mosig was an, umm, "neighsayer" on the course's value before trying it last fall. But she says that having some horse sense instilled into her has made a big difference in the way she interacts with her team.

She says it has shown her how to allow herself to get her message across more effectively but also pick up on the reactions of her team more rapidly, improving her management style and giving her techniques in the office that she still uses today.

"I didn't realize how my energy was affecting the people around me, but changing my physical style improved the whole process of communication," she says.

"It's had a profound impact on how I interact with people."