



EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH HORSES

Dr. R. Dean Scoggins, Equine Extension Veterinarian, Univ. of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine
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Communication is the exchange or sharing of ideas between two or more individuals. Effective communication results when those ideas are not only exchanged but also understood. When we consider how difficult it is for two humans to communicate using the same language, given differences in sex, race and background, is it any wonder that problems arise when humans try to communicate with animals?

Most communication between humans and horses is not an exchange but is more apt to be the humans imposing their ideas on the horse. Not understanding where the horse "is coming from" results in the loss of at least half of the "conversation".

Humans, in general, like to be in charge. Most horses like to follow a leader. Horses with the greatest desire to accept and follow a leader are selected in most cases. The more important it is for the horse to submit to the human's desires, the more important it is to select submissive horses. Racehorses need a very different temperament from a child's mount. Dressage and reining horses must be willing to submit totally to the rider's will while putting a great deal of physical effort into their work.

With all the variations between individuals, both humans and horses, there are still some constants that will allow for a basic understanding. Because the human is the one who expects to be in charge of the conversation, it is necessary to understand what and how the horse learns. It then becomes the human's responsibility to effectively teach the horse what it needs to know. It is equally important to not reward the horse for inappropriate behavior.

Humans by nature are a predator species. They evolved as hunters and gatherers. Instinctively, humans act and react like predators. Aggressiveness, binocular vision and being territorial are human traits. In addition, humans use reasoning and an awareness of time in planning an activity.

Prey species (horses) show little ability to reason, no sense of the value of time and no ability to plan for the future. They live in the present and depend on instinct and past experience for survival. They react to circumstances as they occur.



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Horses are claustrophobic by nature. Small, enclosed spaces potentially hold danger. An extension of that claustrophobia is the tendency to fight any restraint that creates pressure. The natural reaction of the horse is to move against pressure. The result: pulling back against a halter, crowding the wall of the trailer or chute, or reacting to a saddle girth, are all expressions of the same response, --resisting pressure or claustrophobia.

Restraint of any kind inhibits the horse's ability to escape danger. In order for the horse to accept restraint, it must understand that the person and/or equipment will not harm it. Tying the horse up and then whipping it does not effectively convey the idea that accepting restraint is a reasonable thing to do.

Horses communicate principally by interpreting and reacting to body language. They are very sensitive to subtle changes in posture, movement and expression. This is what allows them to survive in the wild. Horses react to perceived danger and some overreact. A piece of plastic or newspaper, a strange object on the ground, a rock or log may hide a predator. Because of poor depth perception, the horse has no idea how deep the mud puddle is and therefore is hesitant to walk through it

The instinct for survival is strong in horses, stronger in some individuals than others but uniformly strong as a species. Horses attempt to escape danger. If unable to get away they become defensive and strike, bite or kick when it is in their own best interest. There is always a warning before it happens. Sometimes the warning and the retaliation are very close in timing. However, in contrast to the human, they never lie.

It is usually safer to treat or work on a horse without it being tied solid to an object. Without the perception it can escape, if necessary, its only choice is to submit or fight and many won't automatically submit.

It is the responsibility of the handler to gain the trust of the horse. Once obtained, this allows the handler to introduce new situations while minimizing resistance by the horse. The end result is a softer, more responsive and willing attitude.

The handler must recognize how the horse is about to respond before the response occurs. If the desired response is apparent, there are three options: 1. Stay out of the way and let it happen, 2. Support the response, or 3. Direct the response. Most important is to recognize the smallest try and reward it.



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If an incorrect response is about to occur then recognize that possibility and utilize one or more of the following: 1. Block the response, 2. Increase the level of effort needed, or 3. Allow the horse to run into its own pressure. This helps the horse learn to make choices and recognize there are consequences for actions. There is no right or wrong, win or lose. It is not a contest. The horse will soon recognize that some actions are more appropriate, but only if given choices. Then it is important to provide a reward for the appropriate choice.

Discipline and/or punishment are appropriate as long as it does not become abusive. A horse pushes into pressure, whether lead rope, bit or spur. The pressure that results is the punishment. When the horse gives to the pressure, remove the source immediately. The reward is the removal of pressure. Once this is achieved, the application of pressure should obtain a response. Every response is rewarded. Eventually, the suggestion of pressure results in a response. As long as every try is rewarded, refinement can be built in.

The following are signs of acceptance of a situation or request:

1. Lowering the head and neck.
2. Relaxing of head, neck, topline and tail.
3. Licking of the lips and/or chewing movements.
4. Stepping towards the handler when requested rather than away from the human
5. Responding to requests in a smooth way at an appropriate level rather than simply reacting without any appreciable level of control.

Remember

1. Recognize the slightest try and reward it.
2. Make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy.
3. The only way to cause a change in behavior is by making a change in attitude