

# THE KEYS OF LEADERSHIP

*by Emily Kemp*

During many of my clinics, I challenge participants with a blindfold game. Everyone pairs into groups of two. One of the partners is blindfolded, while the other partner's task is to guide the blind teammate through a series of obstacles on foot without speaking. The unblindfolded guide may only use their hands to lead the blindfolded person through the course. At the completion of the course, each partner trades places. Now the new guide directs the blindfolded person through another course. This time around there is only talking and no touching. Some of the tasks are things like climbing over a fence, small jumps, and sitting on a stool. To get from one obstacle to the next, participants may be asked to walk, run, or skip. At the end of these exercises, we discuss what we observed or learned.



I have noticed that the areas where people struggle in the obstacle course, both as the leader and the guide, are typically the same areas in which they struggle in their partnership with their horse. For example: Some guides become frustrated when the blind person isn't completing the task correctly or in a timely manner. Other guides are so shy or quiet that the blind person becomes nervous with the lack of confident direction. Other guides may continue trying the same thing over and over despite the fact that what they are doing is not working, because they struggle with quickly developing and implementing new ideas. Some guides are so focused on the task at hand that they become pushy or impolite with their requests and without recognizing their offensive actions. Occasionally the leader will misguide the blind person causing them to trip or walk into an object. It is very hard for the blindfolded person to regain trust in the leader after being led astray.

My point in taking clinic participants through the obstacle course is simple: The journey towards

becoming a horseman starts by pointing the blame finger back at yourself. At one time or another, many of us have made comments such as "My horse bites," or "my horse won't back up," "my horse is stupid," "I can't catch my horse..." Yep, I've heard your story. Your horse rears, runs away, kicks, won't stand for the vet or farrier, is spooky, is disrespectful, or dangerous...the list of problems can seem endless. If you really want to fix the problem, look at what you might be doing, or have done in the past, that is causing the unwanted behavior. If you can't recognize the problems on your own, ask someone with experience and patience to help you.

An obstacle course is not required to identify weaknesses in your leadership. If you lookback on any of the difficult areas in your life, you'll probably see a pattern in how you've dealt with tough things. This pattern is bound to show up in your relationship with your horse. For example, my personal pattern has been to focus on other things when confronted with adversity, blocking out the difficult issue. In some situations this pattern of mine can be helpful. But at other times, avoiding the issues can do more damage than good by hindering personal growth and honesty in relationships. Identifying and confronting challenges is the key to changing. Mistakes provide an opportunity to learn, and each learning experience reinforces the willingness to recognize and address challenges.

It is important to know what your "pattern" is in order to be a good leader for your horse. In addition to having a lot of knowledge about horses, you must also have an equal or even greater amount of knowledge about yourself. Are you quick tempered? Are you a chronic nag? Are you overly dominant? A perfectionist? A control freak? Insecure? Or is your ego big enough for 6? You need this knowledge of yourself, because, being a leader for a horse or human requires controlling your emotions, feelings, thoughts, and energy. Learning to be a leader is a rewarding lifetime endeavor.





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What does being a leader mean to you? To me, being a leader means that you develop qualities that others will want to follow. You are the initiator. You don't have to prove yourself. Your inner strength precedes you. You have the ability to teach someone a task in a way that allows them to feel that they learned it for themselves. You can be firm and disciplinary while leaving followers with a light heart. Many people assume a bossy, dictator role when they assume leadership of a horse, and make many requests or demands without conveying enough inner feelings and respect for the horse. We may expect our horses to relax when we remain anxious and demanding. We assume our horse should be brave when we are scared. We threaten firmness and nag to get things done, and then randomly lose patience when things aren't going as planned. We want the horse to do every task we dream up perfectly, yet we don't ask with perfection. We blame the horse for our shortcomings, when often the horse is doing his best in spite of us.



The horse is born a follower. Horses crave leadership. They mirror us in our emotions, behavior, and energy whether good or bad. We need to learn the proper timing for when to relax, how to be brave, understanding how to be firm and assertive in one moment, and then melt and have the softness of a baby in the next. Developing this kind of feel and timing requires inner change. Key to a good partnership between the horse and human is the human's ability to flex, bend and change to best accommodate each individual horse's needs. For one horse, you may need to master the ability to be soft in every situation. For the next horse, you may need to learn assertiveness while avoiding excessive emotions.. Another horse may need you to be brave and fearless, and other horses may require you to just reach into your heart and pour love onto them. This list could go on and on... every horse is different and an individual. They are all asking something of us. We have to be willing to give (which may require a change in our personal behavior) in order to impact a horse deeply enough to gain the animal's respect and trust.



It is a personal journey that will be different for every person. It's up to you to decide what areas you need to work on. In my own personal life, I'm always continuing to learn about horses. I ride continually with a lot of great trainers. I try to watch every video, read every book, and magazine article that I can get my hands on. I've learned frustration comes where knowledge runs out. So it's important to me to keep a steady flow of new information coming in all the time. I also know that practice, and experience gives you ownership of what you've learned. So I ride a lot of different horses and learn what I can from each of them. Being physically fit is important to. Having good balance, reflexes, flexibility, and endurance, can really help you. I am currently taking Tae Kwon Do classes. These classes stretch me in all of the physical areas mentioned above and then some. You don't have to go to this extreme. Working with horses is my profession and destiny in life. It may not be yours, so YOU choose your path of progress. It may be that horses are your hobby and you want to learn as much as you can about them in a limited amount of time, and on a limited budget. That's great too. The path of progress is yours to make!

Some people are able to coax their horses to do all sorts of things without ever developing good leadership skills. It is possible to teach a horse without simultaneously learning about yourself. Unfortunately, some "horse trainers" prioritize quick results over an optimal relationship between horse and human. Optimizing the horse-human relationship is what separates "trainers" from true horsemen.

What makes a Horseman?

Have you ever known someone who thinks and acts a lot like you? Someone who can finish your sentences for you? A person who understands how you feel because they've been there too? Have you known someone from whom you can easily take advice because you value and respect their sense of integrity and morals? Individuals you trust and respect may be a husband/wife, a friend, a role model, a teacher, a boss, brother or sister. Regardless of who it is, this kind of oneness with someone is a rare. The unity, togetherness, and respect that you feel for this



person is what gains your trust and respect.

Conversely, imagine being with someone who annoys you, someone who makes bad choices, is irresponsible, argumentative, arrogant, selfish, or bossy. Instead of feeling respect, you may feel stress or aggressiveness. Ideally, you learn from each experience and increase the time you spend with people you trust and respect.

Horses have proved far more capable of enduring and forgiving than people. It is this attribute that gives horses a unique quality of nobility. Think of the horse that has been either intentionally or unintentionally mistreated for years. I am often amazed that an abused horse, given the chance of a better way, often puts the abuse in the past and moves on to what is new and better.



I attended a Ray Hunt clinic once and at the end of the day heard Mr. Hunt answer a question with a comment that remains with me. He said "We humans tend to not have enough regard for the horse. If you put a knife in a horse the same thing would come out of him that would come out of me....life... and yet we think we are better."

All of the best horsemen I've seen have had one thing in common: The horses they handle respect and relate to the horseman. This rapport causes horses to try harder at every request and put heart and desire into the task at hand. Ray Hunt once said "You should be able to ride your horse up a telephone pole or down a badger hole..." While it may not be possible to ride up a vertical pole or into small holes, Ray's point is that the partnership between the horse and human should be so strong that the horse will willingly try, regardless of the difficulty of the task at hand.

How does a human gain respect from and develop rapport with a horse? The first step is giving the horse what you are asking of the horse, respect.

Sharing respect develops rapport. Until you can honestly view the horse as equal or superior, you won't have much to offer that they will value in their hearts. One of my favorite quotes by Pat Parelli is "Your horse does not care how much you know, until he knows how much you care."

Can you imagine what it would be like if your horse thought you were brilliant? Just think of him meeting you at the gate everyday not for a cookie, but because he finds you interesting and provocative! At this point you might be saying "Yeah right Emily, sure your horses love being with you, but you haven't met my horse. I don't have enough time to spend. I don't have the talent." I'm telling you it's possible to achieve! Yes it takes time and dedication, but you can go at your own pace, and achieve it as slowly or quickly as you want. Believe me; your horse will thank you someday.

Horses want to be with someone who can provide them with their needs of safety, comfort, and play. They need leadership from us without our predator motives. Like humans, horses love to be around someone who can understand them and who thinks like they do. Someone with savvy, good judgment, and a lot of heart.

Good luck to you and your horse!

*-Emily Kemp*

