



LASTING CULTURE CHANGE

How an organisation in the automotive sector worked with horses to develop a relational approach to leadership based on trust, respect and emotional intelligence

“For the first time I truly understood the power of emotions and how, if I am not afraid of them, I can use them to enhance my leadership experience” - Head of Learning and Development

Context

Equest were invited to design and deliver a leadership programme focussed on changing leadership behaviour, values and style to support a significant culture shift required to meet long-term strategic performance targets. The brief required the programme to be delivered to the three most senior layers of management over a period of 6 months.

The programme

Through detailed consultation the following aims were agreed for the 2-day programme:

- To develop a relational rather than functional approach to leadership
- To build communication and trust between levels of management and between functions and business units.
- To build a respectful culture in which people were heard and felt able to contribute
- To reenergise the leadership to influence the broader organisation to let go of old, unhelpful patterns and embrace change positively.
- To help each leader access their own unique potential as a leader and to apply this within their own context.
- To build the confidence of leaders to conduct and share in difficult conversations.

What Happened

It was quickly apparent to participants that in order to be able to influence a half-ton of horse, they would first have to establish a strong relationship which was both respectful and trusting in equal measure. Individuals and groups were challenged in every kind of way during the process. Some struggled with fear and anxiety, some with establishing trust, some with showing authority, some with countering frustration, some with defeat

when they felt that they were stuck, others were just not even noticed by the horses.

But what emerged in the ongoing process was a real courage to determinedly find a way of leading the horses effectively and sympathetically, and to access personal strengths, which would help them to do so.

“The most important learning for me was that I can be my natural self *and* be a great leader. I trust myself, and therefore others, more as a result of this programme”

Constructive dialogue instead of competition

Clients discovered that a tight, forceful hold is the *least* effective way of influencing a horse to move. On the contrary – a soft, grounded and relational approach worked much better. The gentleness and compassion which was found in relation to handling the horses rapidly crossed over into the way in which participants related to each other. Competitive, critical behaviour was gradually replaced with constructive dialogue and respectful feedback.

“I discovered a side of me I didn’t think I possessed. I realised my current style was not working and that by being more respectful and positive I could build a great relationship not only with the horse but also with my team.”

Results

By working with the horses in the moment, participants were able to learn how to identify and understand their emotions as they arose in the body, before the emotion manifested as a behaviour. By doing so this helped them to make a conscious and intelligent *choice* about how they interpret the emotion arising and more importantly what they do with it, or about it.

Perhaps one of the most striking outcomes for this tired and burned out leadership population was how they were re-energised by their learning process. Engaging with the horses and connecting with nature put huge smiles on every face. Even in the cold rain. Finding this return to an “inside-out” happiness, and learning how to manage stress more effectively and be playful again revived and replenished energy resources, creativity and helped people engage more positively with the tough changes which the organisation was facing.

“On the 5-hour drive home I didn’t stop smiling the whole way. This sense of liveliness and energy has lasted a long time and reminded me that work should be fun”.

Making the change stick

In the months after the programme the changes in leadership approach and behaviour, which were discovered and rehearsed on the programme, were enduring in the workplace. So often, culture change initiatives fail because whilst employees and managers might cognitively understand what is required of them in the new world, they are not able to make the big leap to *embody* that change. They know the “what” and the “why” but don’t know the “how to”.

The Equest horse-led approach enables people to gain a real, “felt-sense” of the new behaviour or attitude, which engages the whole person – the mind, the body and the spirit. By having this felt experience the neural pathways which govern behaviour are affected. The “muscle-memory” stores and recognises and can repeat the new way of being. This is why this behaviour change process worked for this client – and why the impact lasted.

“I can honestly say that this programme was totally unique. I have gone through lots of " boring " management / leadership training over the years (which are instantly forgettable) this was a completely different experience which I won't forget.”