

# HORSES

A man with a grey beard and hair, wearing a dark jacket, is riding a white horse in an indoor arena. The horse is facing forward and slightly to the left. The background shows the wooden walls and floor of the arena.

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# Awareness

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With so many techniques and methods being sold these days as ‘natural horsemanship’, I’m not surprised there are so many confused horses and riders.

Confusion leads to misunderstanding, lack of trust and respect and therefore poor training, no training – or both.

The result is undesirable behavioural problems.

I think of my training approach not as a ‘method’, but rather a ‘philosophy’ that makes sense to horses – and humans.

It’s a simple concept, but it’s the foundation for absolutely everything I do with horses:

### **CCKL = TOR**

and it stands for using **C**onfidence, **C**onsistency, **K**indness and **L**eadership with your horse to help you gain the **T**rust, **O**bedience and **R**espect you need in your relationship with your horse.

I borrowed this concept from the horses themselves – and that’s why you don’t need to memorise or follow a series of steps or use lots of expensive tools to get results. When you understand the concept, you will understand how to respond as new situations arise.

Just like you and me, your horse is an individual whose training program may have to be continually adjusted to suit his or her learning ability and speed. *Don’t make your horse fit the program.*

Over the years, I have come across hundreds of horses that have been forced to fit a program. While most of these horses, because of their forgiving nature, may adjust, along comes the horse who, whether by disposition or previous handling, is not as forgiving. In time, that horse becomes like a grenade.

Slowly, the safety pin comes out and, sooner or later, that horse explodes. That’s when I hear “Gee, my horse has never done that before!”

What the philosophy I use does require of you is that you must have a great relationship with yourself if you want to have a great relationship with your horse. That means becoming fully aware of your thoughts and actions, what your body language is saying and what you choose to focus on. What are the questions you ask yourself? More importantly, what are the answers you give yourself.

They all have an effect you – and therefore on your horse.

I know many people speak of ‘feel, timing and balance’ when working with horses, but I believe you must first have awareness of your focus, thoughts and beliefs; body language; and internal voice before you can recognise and develop ‘feel’, which in turn gives you the sense of how your timing and balance affect your horse’s movement.

Awareness is everything when you’re working with your horse. Awareness, gained through using all the senses, is what has enabled the horse to survive for more than 50 million years.

Awareness is what will give you the skill to notice when your emotions affect your own mindset and how you look at things, as well as when something is causing your horse to get stressed or defensive.

I always say, emotions equal motion and horses pay attention to every single, tiny movement. Humans are renown for constantly moving our hands, head, arms and posture. Like us, horses tend to switch off if we use too much movement, particularly hand movement. They become desensitised to it and as a result, there is a tendency to use force or to label the horse sour or difficult.



## Focus, thoughts and beliefs

Whatever you choose to focus on, that's what you are going to believe. Even though it may not be true, it will become your reality. You will move towards whatever you're focused on.

Beliefs create the preconceived notions we have and the excuses we make for not being successful with our horse. They colour how you view your horse – do you recognise any of these:

- 'I don't like mares, they're moody'
- 'My horse is just stupid'
- 'My horse bucks and bolts'

It's the main reason I see so many people sending all the wrong signals to their horses. Think about it – if you focus on your horse's previous problems (like bucking or rearing), you'll be robbed of the ability to focus on the goals you want to achieve, let alone any challenge at hand. You're not in the present with your horse. Even if you don't realise it, your horse will.

So change your focus.

Don't waste time thinking about questions like 'why is my horse doing that?' or 'what have I done to make my horse do that?' You need to focus on the situation and *what you need to do* about it.

When you are aware of your horse's actions and the environment around you, and understand how your horse behaves, you've taken the first step to gaining true control. After all, it's your responsibility to understand your horse – not the other way around.

Limited beliefs will get you limited results.



Picture 1

If I were to focus on the behaviour of this traumatised horse on the ground (picture 1) I would never have helped him to achieve such elegant, precise movement (picture 2), let alone done so within the same training session.

## Body language

Emotions determine your body language – fear, anger, frustration, stress. The movement you get from your horse will reflect your state of mind and level of awareness.



Picture 2

It is my mastery of my body language that lets me do the absolute least to get the most out of the horse. In doing so, I can use the slightest of cues, recognise the smallest of 'tries'. I don't claim to be a master of horses – we can only ever be students. We teach them so little, and then only tasks that serve our purposes. Compare that to what they teach us about ourselves and about forgiveness and generosity of spirit.

We can only ever master 'who' we are and gain an awareness of how we work with our mind, body and spirit. And if we master ourselves, we will be able to become students of the horse.



*In this photo, you can see how my body language is saying to the horse – move out of my space. My hand is raised (the only time I will raise my hand is to move a horse out of my space) and as I stepped towards him, much as an alpha mare might do, he moves away.*

## Internal voice

When you think too much or too long, you start to ask yourself questions. And you'd best pay attention to the answers, because they will become your reality. We become our thoughts.

I call these the 'What if?' questions that will sabotage your relationship with your horse. 'What if my horse bucks or kicks?' Have you given your horse a reason to buck or kick? If not, why would he? Don't jump to the conclusion your horse will behave badly – that will trigger undesirable behaviour. It may also keep you from considering whether your horse has a physical problem contributing to undesirable behaviour and will certainly keep you from focusing on what you're going to do about the problem.

You will only find the answers to these 'what if' questions from yourself. Each one of us must develop the skills to find our own solutions. It's up to you – it may be easier to hold onto preconceived notions and make excuses than to work on change. It's always easier to do the things we like, but it's often the unpleasant things that are the most beneficial.

## Become what you want your horse to be

Like anything we want from our horses, we must first become it ourselves. So if you want your horse to be responsive, be responsive yourself. Want your horse to focus on you? Focus on him. Want a soft and supple horse? Then become soft and supple yourself. Suppleness to me starts in the minds of horse and rider and that leads to suppleness and softness in their bodies.

The awareness you gain will alert you to your own reactions and those of your horse. This will let you make positive training adjustments to suit you both. Emphasise a stress-free approach and you will create calmness and positive results, avoiding possible wrecks. Recognise when your horse makes the slightest try, whether on the ground or under saddle. Allow your horse to make mistakes along the way because you will make them too. And don't focus so much on the end result. It's so much more important to quit doing something at the right time than to achieve an end result. This is how you will keep your horse calm and able to learn.

## Experience awareness

Close your eyes. Rely on your other senses. Have someone hold your horse on a lunge rein or lead rope and drop your reins. If you're comfortable, do this bareback. Focus on how your horse feels beneath your seat and legs. Think about asking for a back up. Focus on that. When you're ready, have the person holding your horse ask him to take a step backwards. Can you feel the point where his weight first begins to shift back? Do you know which foot moved first? Second? In what sequence do his feet move when he is backing up (it's actually diagonal pairs). Remember that feeling each time you ask him to back up and think how you can apply this same principle in other tasks to help you develop awareness and feel.

I will never tell you my way is the way, because my way is simply the horse's way. I learned by looking at things through

the eyes of the horse. If you are also able to think about things from your horse's point of view, adjust your approach to be those of your horse and put your requests in a way your horse understands, I know your horse will thank you for your efforts by being a willing partner.

## A leading question – what does your horse think of you?

I asked a woman at one of my clinics to lead her horse for me – she wondered why, when she had been riding since before I was born. I told her I just wanted to see what her horse thought of her and her experience. When this woman stopped leading her horse, he not only kept going, but stepped behind her, dropped his nose and head-butted her so hard she ended up with a bruised ego and a mouthful of sand.

So why this story? It's just a way of illustrating how irrelevant it is how many years of experience a person has with horses. They don't read résumés. They're on what I call 'horse time' – in the present, the now. What matters is what you achieve each and every time you work with your horse.

How your horse sees you on the ground shows you how he will behave under saddle. If he lacks respect or dominates you on the ground, he will not hesitate to do the same under saddle.

See what your horse thinks...



I lead in front, just like an alpha horse. I don't want the horse walking directly behind me, but off to one side so that he's visible in my peripheral vision (being careful not to look back at him). I want my horse to walk on a soft rope and follow the feel of my feet and body. When I stop, I look for him to stop with his ears roughly at my shoulder, just as he would with another horse. If he moves past me, I may ask him to back up or redirect him onto a circle, putting myself in the lead again. In this photo, the young colt is so focused on my body language he is following my feel backwards. Look at the softness of the rope and how the movements of his hind legs – and mine – mirror each other.