

# 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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## A leading question... What does your horse think of you?

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Carlos Tabernaberi

*A good leader inspires others with confidence; a great leader inspires others with confidence in themselves.*

unknown

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 the years of experience a person may have with horses. Horses 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 exactly how he will behave under saddle. If he lacks respect for you on the ground, he will not hesitate to be the same when you're on his back. Many people I work with believe this is due to how much the horse respects them, but respect is just one element and leading is a very simple way to see what your horse thinks of you.

Respect comes *after* you have established trust with your horse and shown yourself to be a worthy leader – a leader your horse wants to follow. Using Confidence, Consistency, Kindness and Leadership with your horse will help you gain his Trust, Obedience and Respect. It's a simple concept that is the foundation for absolutely everything I do with horses. I explain it to people as an equation:

**CCKL = TOR**

Because unless you demonstrate all the behaviours on the left of the equation (CCKL) your horse will not demonstrate the behaviours on the right (TOR). While I could talk at length about the important concepts of confidence, consistency and kindness and how they're critical to leadership (there's another three articles!), let's focus on leadership and the impact that can have on your relationship. But know this – the concepts are interdependent. If you are consistent and kind, but not confident, your horse may trust you but he will not respect you or see you as a worthy leader. If you're not confident in your own abilities, why should he be confident in your ability to help him? On the other hand, if you're confident and consistent, but not kind, your horse may obey you and follow you because he must, but he won't trust you because your leadership would be based on fear and intimidation.

That's why the concept of leading your horse goes way beyond a halter and a leadrope.

*I am open to the guidance of synchronicity, and do not let expectations hinder my path.*

Dalai Lama

Over the years, many people I work with have observed something of which I was not consciously aware, because I don't watch myself work! It's been called 'mirroring', 'resonance' or 'synchronicity', or even 'entrainment', which I'm told is the tendency of objects or beings, moving in a similar pattern and tempo, with similar energy, to align with each other.

This 'law of entrainment' was first recognised by Dutch scientist Christian Huygens more than 350 years ago when he set up some pendulum clocks of different sizes, started one at a time, only to come back a day later and find the pendulums had synchronised their swinging to that of the largest clock.

In daily life, it is thought this concept can be explained in terms of our human circadian rhythms being 'entrained' to the earth relative to the sun (why we experience jet lag) and appears to be part of the animal world's highly attuned biofeedback mechanism. In short, we all have an energy field that affects everything with which we come into contact. In the case of animals, this mechanism remains unclouded by negative perceptions or expectations and is clearly highly attuned to the environment and those around them. We humans are susceptible to the clouding of this sense by the distractions of the focus and beliefs that we hold.

We become what we choose to focus on. When our focus and beliefs are negative – like a focus on our horse's previous problems, our own fears, uncertainties, anger or frustration – we send the wrong energy or signals to our horse. Sadly, my experience has been that most of the time the cause of the problems in a horse-human relationship is the human.

Pay attention to the questions you ask yourself – and the answers you give yourself. They become your reality. You won't find the answers from those around you – the can only



come from within. From our body language, the focus of our thoughts and beliefs, our own internal voices.

If you are able to be fully in the present with your horse, there is only time for experiencing that sense of synchronicity with your horse, where you think and move as one. That moment in time where you understand each other and there are no limits to what you can achieve together.

## Leadership is influence.

John C. Maxwell

Through the eyes of the horse, there's a big difference between being a leader and being a boss. I believe good leaders demonstrate what they want, are confident and assertive, not aggressive. They lead by example and makes sound decisions, without hesitation. A boss, on the other hand, merely demands. While a boss may be decisive, it is frequently through force that instils fear.

To me, leadership is about building confidence by consistently showing your horse that you've got what it takes to learn from him, as well as to help him learn. If you build confidence through understanding, by correcting (not punishing) your horse if he demonstrates undesirable behaviour, you will automatically build your confidence in your horse and your horse's confidence in himself.

If you look at horses in the paddock or in the wild, you will see that they willingly follow a good leader horse – a horse that has proven he has the right qualities and confidently and consistently demonstrates those qualities every single day. But the leader horse is certainly not always the biggest or even the most aggressive, although some horses prove their rank by force. I believe they can do this because they are a horse and look like a horse. If we who are, and look like, predators, use force, we only prove to the horse that we are as dangerous as we look and are not to be trusted.

Think about it. If we are either a hesitant (unconfident) or aggressive leader, and our horse is attached to us by a lead rope or controlled under saddle, what choice does he have except to do what is natural? If we don't provide good leadership, he can't follow, so he will try to take the lead. If he has a strong-willed temperament, he may fight if he can't flee or he may seek the support of other horses. If he's a bit shy or unconfident, it will destroy his confidence in himself – and you.

What we see as disobedience is, in reality, a lack of leadership on our part. Does it mean that our horse could still be unwilling or disobedient if we are good leaders? Possibly – but such attitude or behaviour will quickly change if you are able to demonstrate confidence, consistency and kind leadership in such a situation.

By showing your horse a better way, your horse will learn to pay attention to you always, wherever you are. That's called focus, and it's key to achieving success with your horse. And you need focus if your horse is going to learn to follow your feel. And that's the secret to developing – and maintaining an incredibly light and soft horse.

## The intuition of free will gives us the truth.

Corliss Lamont

Leading demonstrates the very basics of what I mean by 'following my feel' – by achieving that synchronicity I seek with all the horses I work with. That's why I lead in front, just as an alpha horse does, using the horse's own language. From

this position, the horse can follow my feel, moving when I move, changing direction with me and stopping with his ears about level with my shoulder when I stop, just as he would in the herd (pictures 1 and 2) because he understands and because he is willing.



Picture 1



Picture 2

If the horse stops in front of me (picture 3), I will gently apply an on-off pressure to the rope at the centre of his chest, asking him to back up (picture 4). If he doesn't respond, I will turn to face him and use that gentle on-off pressure on his shoulder (picture 5). That is as 'forceful' as I will get. I want my horse to remain calm and focused, and learn to back using his hindquarters. That won't happen if I yank or, worse, shake the rope. It simply causes the horse's adrenalin to rise with his head, hollowing his back. I also want him to know that, just as a lead horse would do, I will ask him to yield or back up if he pushes into my space.



Picture 3



Picture 4

The lead horse always walks ahead, knowing where he is going and not concerned whether the other horses are following. So often, I see people making the mistake of looking back to see whether their horse is following – it's a sure sign to the horse of an unconfident leader. The horse following stays slightly behind and to the side, not directly behind the lead horse's blind spot. That's exactly where I want my horse to be – especially from a safety perspective. If he spooks because he is scared, or is simply pushy or disrespectful, he won't be running into my back.



Picture 5

These principles apply whether the horse pushes into my space or would rather eat grass. There should not be any rushing, pushing, or lagging. I want to be able to squeeze the rope gently, get the horse focused on me, so that I can cluck him up and he can follow softly.

The tendency, however, is often to yank on the rope or, worse, to start walking back towards the horse.

If I squeeze on the rope and the horse doesn't find that softness, I will turn my right shoulder to him and drive him from the girth, using the end of the lead rope. If he goes past me, I will redirect his hindquarters and put myself in the lead again. If he pushes past me, I can redirect his hindquarters if he's moving past with a fair bit of energy. If he's pushing into my space, I can either back him up, drive him forward and redirect his hindquarters or even do a hindquarter yield. Eventually, he will learn that when I squeeze the rope and cluck he will follow softly.

I want my horse to follow my body movement, my feel. I want him to come with me because being with me is a good place for him to be. If I use a tightly held rope, I'm forcing him to come and that's not consistent with the other work we do. It would be cheating him. When we stop, I want him to stop next to me, with his ears roughly at my shoulder, just as he would do with another horse, whether or not there is a rope attached (pictures 6 and 7).



Picture 6



Picture 7

Leading on a loose rope tells me much more about how willing the horse is to follow me than if I led the more traditional way, by holding the rope on the clip under the horse's chin. That only makes the horse feel trapped with no option, but to follow. If you try to lead a stallion or very pushy horse that crowds you, soon you will find yourself being shoved around by his shoulder.

As you can see in the pictures, many of the same principles apply when you asking your horse to back up by following your feel. What's important to remember here, though, is that you want to encourage your horse to keep his head low and use his hindquarters to back.

I will take a step or two forward, then step back, dropping my seat slightly just like I want the horse to do (picture 8) and then move backwards, giving him the chance to follow my feet (picture 9). If the horse doesn't understand, I will repeat the cues I gave in picture 4 (and picture 5, if necessary), using an off-off pressure and being sure to keep the rope in the centre of his chest so he can back straight. No pulling. No jerking. No shaking the lead rope vigorously – that simply causes confusion, reaction and a loss of trust. There is no learning when the horse is not calm. Shaking the rope will cause his head to rise until the shaking becomes unbearable and he backs up, head high and back hollow.



Picture 8



Picture 9

As soon as the horse even slightly shifts his weight backwards or takes the smallest step, stop. Remove the pressure and praise him. That may be enough for the first session. End on a good note and you'll be surprised at how quickly your horse will respond the next time.



Picture 10



Picture 11

And again, once the horse understands your request and is focused on you, a rope will not be necessary (pictures 10 and 11). That, to me, is true 'liberty' work. I think the term 'liberty' has been over used – possibly misused. To me, true 'liberty' work means my horse has the freedom to go where

he wants, when he wants. He has the The right to say 'no' without fear of punishment.

*If liberty has any meaning it means freedom to improve.*

Philip Wylie

Finally, there's another yet another good use for these leading principles – working a young horse from another horse. In this case, I'm working an 18-month old Thoroughbred colt from another young horse, in this case a six-year-old gelding. Not only does it help in socialising the horses to become used to working near each other, it clearly demonstrates the language of leading – through the eyes of the horse.

In picture 12, you can see the young colt demonstrating a submissive posture, mirroring the licking and chewing of the gelding. In picture 13, even though we are cantering, the colt is careful not to move in front of the older horse. Look closely at pictures 14 and 15. Look at the synchronicity of their leg movements, the colt's position in relation to the gelding. Then look even more closely – there's no lead rope.



Picture 12



Picture 13



Picture 14



Picture 15

Believe it or not, this was the first time I had ever worked this colt from another horse. I do not show you these photos to impress you, but to impress upon you just how good our horses can be.

*All that we are is the result of what we have thought.*

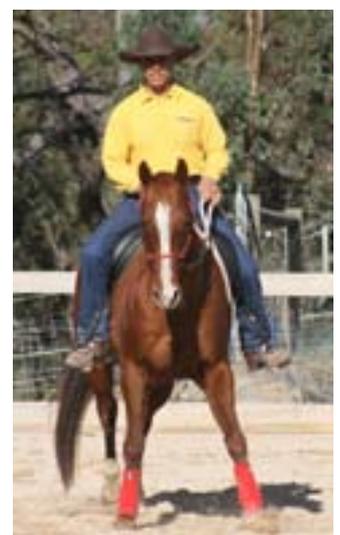
Buddha

As I said at the beginning, how your horse sees you on the ground is the way he'll see you under saddle. So if you don't get it right on the ground, it won't happen under saddle. If your horse understands your requests and can follow your feel on the ground, you'll be set for success.

To give you an idea of what I mean, have a look at these photos. Here, through the position of my seat, legs and hands, and my mental focus, I am asking my 14-year-old quarter horse mare to leg yield.



Picture 16



Picture 17



Picture 18

I hope this is a simple, yet dramatic illustration, of what can happen when you have achieved that mind-body synchronisation with your horse. Again, I want to impress upon you just how good you – and your horse – can be, together, when you are able to provide the confident, consistent and kind leadership they deserve.

God bless.