

## **WALKING YOUR WAY TO CONFIDENCE AND LEADERSHIP**

I believe we are given the special opportunity when working with horses to test ourselves as a person and find out about our own inner strengths of character and awareness of our surroundings.

Horses are a prey animal with an instinctive herd mentality, born with an enormous awareness of their surroundings and perception of those around them. For us as humans to have any real success as a handler, rider or trainer, we have to learn how to read and respond to our horse through body language and then encourage them to work alongside us to achieve the desired goal - which is ultimately connection and harmony with the horse, no matter what form of training, riding or competition you take part in.

Successful leadership, whether with people or horses, does not come about by being either a dominant bully or by bribery with gifts (or carrots!). Think of someone you know or a famous person who has earned the respect of others and you will find the common key elements or character traits that cause them to be admired and looked up to are through their calm acceptance of their surroundings, a self-assured manner that speaks with fairness, knowledge and truth, as well as a sense of both humour and boundaries to help guide those around them.

A true leader does not need to brag or purposefully seek popularity, instead their actions become a way that resonates with others that simply makes them want to listen or spend time in their company.

Think about when working with your horse – whether you are just bringing them in for a groom or planning to ride at a competition – does your horse show you signs of respect, friendship and a keenness to work alongside you or are there moments where you feel out of control, anxious or worried about your safety?

To me good leadership is all about finding that self-confidence from within so that we feel able to face whatever life, or our horse, throws at us. (Preferably not a pair of kicked up heels!). We can learn this quality from working with horses and take it into our everyday life.

Of course we all have moments that are “scary” and require us to step outside our comfort zone or reassess our approach - that is the only way we can grow - but by building as strong foundation as you can of good basic habits and thought processes, it will give you a lot of security and ability to work through problems and difficulties to the best of your experience when they come up. And believe me, they will ALWAYS come up! That is life and that is how we all develop, learn and grow.

So how do we get confident? Confidence begins with awareness of our thoughts and a determined focus to improve followed by consistent actions which we then repeat as many times as possible until those behaviours and thoughts become automatic.

Remember, once upon a time you did not know how to walk and had to fall down many times before you mastered one step, then two, then learnt to run and jump. What drives a child to walk? They are surrounded by others standing on their own two feet, they are learning by example. Once we have learned to walk we all completely dismiss it and never think twice about the early struggles and failures and difficulties we had.

What we are talking about here is repetition of behaviours and actions that lead to complete acceptance and self-assurance that we CAN do it. Wouldn't it be amazing to reach that same feeling of self-confidence in all walks of life? When we become confident in one part of our life, that same feeling tends to flow through into other parts too.

Some people, and some horses, are naturally a lot more confident than others, however that doesn't mean they don't still make a lot of mistakes. Most people who are lacking self-confidence are simply too worried about making a mistake in the first place so prefer not to even try. This is the sort of situation where finding a suitable "leader", a person who reflects the qualities or abilities you admire and want to emulate yourself, is important so you can take opportunity to spend time with them and learn what they have learnt... and then practise, practise, practise!

There are some horse riders out there who get into the habit of becoming a "control freak" and monitoring their horses every tiny move, yes the small things are very important but it is just as important to realise that your horse too must also be allowed to make a mistake to be able to learn, and to be very aware not to confuse when your horse is "trying" to give you the right thing – you might have muddled your aids or cues and he is in fact giving you exactly what he thought you asked for! Being clear, specific and consistent is what we need to achieve ourselves so we can offer this and then work towards seeking the same response from our horse.

True confidence and leadership is quiet not loud, humble not arrogant. Do not mistake the person who talks the most and the loudest as being the one who has the most knowledge or feels the bravest. True confidence goes about its way quietly and consistently doing its thing and does not require a whole lot of pats on the back or recognition from others to be proud of achievements.

Horses also seek confidence and leadership, it is one of their natural instincts required to survive. They are much happier when they know their boundaries and feel safe because someone else is looking out for them. It means they can relax and not worry because those duties are off their shoulders, leaving them in a calm state of mind that is essential to give attention to learning and doing things.

A pushy, rude horse that walks over top of you does not have any respect for you or your personal space. An anxious jumpy nervous horse is often only this way because it does not trust others so has taken on full responsibility of "survival watch" and is ready to flee at a moment's notice, but probably wishes they didn't have to take on this role because it is pushing them out of their comfort zone. Can you relate?

What about your own feelings when you are faced with a situation you aren't sure about... do you find yourself getting grumpy or angry and placing blame on others (offloading your insecurity onto others in an attempt to make yourself feel more in control) or do you freeze and forget to breathe and find yourself getting swept along with the tide against your wishes?

Can you be strong and confident to put your point across without being intimidating or angry? Can you be soft and loving without being too vague or wishy washy in your intention?

As a horse owner, you are also instantly his trainer. From the moment you approach him in the paddock till the moment you put him away again after your workout, and every interaction you make in between, your horse will be looking to you for potential leadership which also means testing boundaries.

We need to make sure that WE can feel OK being outside of OUR comfort zones so we can then support our horse when he is feeling out of his. Sometimes you can show the way to your horse, other times he will show you the way – IF you are prepared to listen. This is where our horse can be an amazing teacher and guide to us as a person and our approach to the whole of life. All you have to do is ask yourself, are you interested in taking that first step?

*Article written by Diana Jamieson, Chester Farm. [www.ChesterFarm.co.nz](http://www.ChesterFarm.co.nz) | [www.Facebook.com/ChesterFarm](https://www.Facebook.com/ChesterFarm)*