

October 7, 2020

BERKSHIRESTYLE®

IN AND AROUND THE BERKSHIRES - AN ONLINE RESOURCE



©Today's Veterinary Nurse

HORSE SENSE

by KATHRYN BOUGHTON

Horses are not noted for being chatty. An occasional whinny or snort usually defines their conversational range. So, what then are they doing teaching leadership and communication skills to senior corporate executives?

The answer to that question can be found in Ancramdale NY where semi-retired horses have found a new vocation at The Horse Institute. There, business groups engage in different interactive programs with the horses to learn new team dynamics and communication skills.

The program is the brainchild of Marie-Claude Stockl, a veteran of more than 40 years of providing leadership and communications counseling. French by birth, Marie-Claude is the daughter of a doctor, whose best friend was an orthopedic surgeon. "He told my father never to let me ride—that it was dangerous—but I was a horse-crazy girl," she recalled. "So, what would any self-respecting teen do—I would sneak to the barn."

She felt horses were her life's calling but life got in the way. She wanted to quit high school and work with horses; her parents insisted on college and graduate school. She fell in love, married, had children and lived in Manhattan where she had a demanding career. Her husband, Larry, worked in the travel industry and they traveled extensively.

But before long, horses began to sneak back into her life. "I had a 13-year hiatus from horses before we bought a little house in Woodstock NY, she explained. There was a little horse farm nearby and she began to ride recreationally. "I thought, 'Oh, my life is not what I want it to be.'"

Horses took over more and more of her personal life. "I was riding every day, competing, away on weekends. By then, we were in our early 40s and both pretty burned out."

Twenty-seven years ago, they bought their much-beloved property in Ancramdale but soon realized that college and private school tuitions for their children required more than a horse farm could deliver. "We thought, 'How do we swing this?'" Marie-Claude related.

They flipped a coin and she got to go back to work. "I still travel around the world doing executive training but I always come back here and love it here," she said.

Larry, who knew nothing about horses, got to stay home. "Larry did a lot of great work on the farm," Marie-Claude said. "It is Larry who knows the personalities of the horses."

"I get the pleasure of working with them every day," Larry he agreed.

It was only a hop, skip and a jump to the concept of The Horse Institute. The Institute offers a number of equine-based, experiential coaching programs, including *Emerging Leaders Development*, *Next-Level Communication Skills* and *Team Building Custom Workshops*. Which leads us again to the question of how horses can help expand communication skills.

The answer Marie-Claude says, lies in horse psychology. "Horses are prey animals," she explains. "They survive by reading body language. If they don't, they're dinner."

Participants in the Institute's courses are presented with challenges that require them to interact with the horses. The horses are like a canary in a mine shaft. "I don't even have to hear the conversation," Marie-Claude said. "If they are overdoing it, if their voices are too loud or their movements threatening, the horses just walk away. The team is not safe. But horses live in the moment—if the team calms down, the horses come back."

She explained that new business teams go through predictable stages: "Form, storm, norm and perform. "We get lots of teams that are in the storming stage, where they are all trying to show what they can do, but can't communicate with each other. When they are working with the horses, though, it's fun. It's not like you will be losing \$5 million. If something doesn't work, they try something else—they learn to work together."

It's unclear just how much of human language the horses understand. In one course involving moving heavy buckets of water, one participant complained about the weight. One of the horses picked up the bucket and tipped it over. "I thought it was a coincidence," Marie-Claude said, "but he did it again another time."

Courses range from one to three days. Before groups come, goals are set, deciding what the client wants to see from its team. Larry Stockl said that eight to twelve people are the "sweet spot" for maximum interaction with the horses. "If they change their intention, the horse's intention changes, too," he said.

As with many businesses, COVID-19 has hit The Horse Institute hard and the Stockls are changing with the times. "Ninety percent of business travel is down so corporate groups are not coming," she said.

"This year has been hard for people," Marie-Claude said. "We are going to have things the community can come to like play dates with your horse. On other weekends, for people who don't ride, we might have horse circles, where you sit in a circle with social distancing. It's going to be so hard this winter, people will need places to go and feel safe for 90-minutes. We're thinking of things so people don't feel isolated."

On the table is Working Equitation, a new concept popular in Spain, Portugal and California. "It's sometimes called 'dressage with a purpose,'" Marie Claude said. The sport showcases equitation techniques developed in countries that use horses to do ranch work.

The Stockls stress that theirs is a working farm and that they are hands-on owners. "Happy horses make happy teachers," Marie-Claude says. "Horses communicate volumes without ever speaking a word."

The Horse Institute is located at 21 Finkle Road in Ancramdale NY; 518-929-7202; Website linked below.



www.thehorseinstitute.com