

EXECUTIVE PURSUITS

A Classroom Where the Teacher Really Wants That Apple



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

Shanda Steenburn takes a management seminar at the Horse Institute.

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THE gelding we nicknamed Big Brown, in honor of the Kentucky Derby winner, loped off to the far corner of the arena as if he were looking for a place to hide. I exchanged frustrated frowns with my teammate, Shanda Steenburn, a tall, curly-haired nurse and hospital pharmacy manager.

We were participating in an introductory exercise at the Horse Institute in Ancramdale, N.Y. Our assignment was to catch Big Brown, slip a halter over his head and hook him to a lead line.

Our seemingly simple task was proving to be more daunting than either of us had expected. Shanda knew a lot about handling medications for humans but next to nothing about handling horses.

My previous experience with horses was limited and not especially pleasant. I'd taken fewer than a dozen riding lessons during my youth in Texas. The last time I'd been on a horse as an adult, I'd suffered a back injury that took three months to heal.

To make matters worse, Big Brown shared the arena with three other very large and very wary steeds: a white one, a second brown one and one with a mottled brown and white coat, a breed called a paint. Three pairs of nurses who worked with Shanda at Columbia Memorial Hospital in nearby Hudson, N.Y., were simultaneously trying to catch and halter those horses. But instead of cooperating, the paint, the white and the second brown kept darting away and huddling with Big Brown.

Suddenly, Big Brown separated from the herd and walked toward me. I patted his neck and stroked his face, cooing sweet nothings in his ear for at least a minute. Shanda handed me a halter. As if on cue, Big Brown bolted away again.

"Darn," I muttered. "We were so close."

I looked across the arena and saw Marie-Claude Stockl, the executive director and co-owner of the Horse Institute, flash a knowing smile. "Horses are like people," she said. "They introduce themselves at their own pace."

That was just the first of many insights to come from my executive pursuit of "equine-assisted learning." Unlike a dude ranch, the Horse Institute does not give riding lessons. Its mission is to give people who normally manage other people a chance to improve their communication skills, teamwork and creativity by observing and performing exercises with horses.

During my one-day training session with the hospital nurses, Marie-Claude, a former Bristol Myers executive, made striking comparisons between horses and humans that left me wondering which species was more intelligent.

"The biggest problem in the corporate world is that we don't live in the present," she said. "When we come to the workplace, we bring in grudges and things from the past and worries about the future. Horses live in the present. They don't hold grudges. They're happy to try something new, unlike many of us who remain stuck in the past. Living in the present works for horses. I think it works for humans, too."

In addition to Marie-Claude and the equine "faculty," the staff of so-called facilitators at the institute includes her husband, Larry Stockl, a former American Express executive; Caroline Carrington-Phipps, an experienced horsewoman doing graduate work in holistic health care at Columbia University; and Jerry Michaels, a psychotherapist who formerly specialized in the study of human phobias.

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Laurie Felpel, left, and Cathy Hurin slip a halter on a horse.

“The purpose of working with horses is to take you out of your normal environment and put you in an environment that makes you feel a bit uncomfortable,” Jerry told us. “Horses are big. They can be intimidating, but they can also be intimidated. Because the environment is unusual, you’re forced to be in the present.”

The Horse Institute, founded in 2005 on a 28-acre horse farm owned by the Stockls, is a specialized offshoot of the nonprofit Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. The association provides education and certification for professionals in the field of equine-assisted therapy.

But unlike therapists who use horses to treat people with mental disorders, physical disabilities or substance abuse problems, the institute focuses exclusively on training corporate and individual clients to cope with workplace issues. Fees for a one-day session, which can consist of 6 to 45 people, start at \$7,500.

The catch-and-halter exercise in which I was paired with Shanda was part of programs customized for Columbia Memorial Hospital staff members at the request of their president and chief executive, Jane Ehrlich, an accomplished dressage rider. The themes of the day were how to train new employees and how to retain and motivate those who passed muster during their three-month probationary period.

Rounding up the four horses representing our “new hires” wasn’t easy. At least 10 minutes passed before Shanda and I realized that we could (and indeed should) call on the expertise of the institute’s staff and seek help from the other pairs of nurses. The paint appeared especially unwilling to be caught, so we decided to focus our collective efforts on the others. We managed to halter Big Brown, the white and the second brown, but after another five minutes or so, we gave up on the paint.

Marie-Claude gave us deservedly mixed reviews. “You were fairly quick to ask for help, and you developed a strategy, which was to separate the other horses from the paint,” she noted. “But

one of you thought the exercise was a competition. As a result, the implementation of your strategy was a little rocky and lacking in teamwork.”

We moved on to “appendages,” an exercise that called for three-person teams to link arms and try to saddle a horse. The rub was that the so-called “brain” in the middle of the threesome could give instructions but not use his or her hands, while the outside links could use their hands but could not talk.

Other exercises included a relay race involving horses and eggs on spoons, a game of charades in which we had to figure out how to use horses to express various emotions and training a horse to complete an obstacle course without the guidance of a lead line.

I may live and write by touch and feel, but I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy. I’d secretly suspected from the beginning that the value of all this horse play would be minimal. But to my surprise, the group debriefing with Marie-Claude and the Horse Institute staff at the end of the day yielded testimonials that ranged from the predictably mundane to the sacred.

A nurse coordinator with more than two decades of hospital experience said she would literally start to look outside her box-shaped office for more creative problem-solving techniques. One of her longtime colleagues said she’d realized that “trying to make everybody happy is an impossible task.” Another nursing coordinator said he was now more aware of the ambiguous messages he had been sending to co-workers with his body language.

“The problem is, I’m 40 years old and I don’t know how I’m going to change after all these years,” he said.

“The reality is that all of us are changing all the time,” Jerry, the psychotherapist, replied. “I think all of us have this sense of, ‘Who are we going to be when we really grow up?’ Perception is literally the truth, and it has nothing to do with the facts. If you want to change the way you’re perceived, pick one or two traits to exhibit, not 9 or 10, and be consistent in exhibiting those one or two traits.

“Be like a horse,” my former partner, Shanda, interjected. “Live in the moment.”

Marie-Claude flashed another knowing smile. I kicked at the floor of the arena, silently counting the ways in which I ought to emulate Big Brown.

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