

## Business lessons from the horse's mouth

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SAVVY is described as knowing what to do, when to do it and why you are doing it. Seeking then to preface the term leadership with savvy becomes something of a no-brainer. With this understanding, what leader today would not want a savvy leadership style?

To get to grips with the issue, we need to turn to an unlikely source the world of horses and the horse-whispering technique Robert Redford made famous in the movie *The Horse Whisperer*.

Quite simply, horse whispering is a technique horsemen use to get results from their horses, using alternative, more natural methods than those traditionally employed; approaches which would often involve using force and breaking the spirit of the horse as the means to the end.

The term horse whispering was coined because of the passive and gentle approach undertaken and the seemingly silent communication happening between horse and trainer. In reality, however, there isn't a verbal language, but rather a shared body language that creates the incredible understanding between a horse and a savvy natural horseman.

Fourteen years ago, natural horsemanship was unheard of. Although the Native Americans were probably the first whisperers, the formalisation of the technique was developed by individuals born with a gift for getting the best out of their horses.

Horses mirror people's energy levels, leadership and communication skills and above all, they are brilliant at judging the authenticity of a leader.

By using savvy horsemanship, it's possible to get horses to perform amazing feats; the same is true of a savvy leader.

The basis of horse whispering is built on the assumption that there exists a better way to work with horses than by demanding compliance and using force to ensure control and obedience. It is based on developing a relationship with the horse based on mutual respect and trust.

In horse whispering this means knowing the temperament of the horse and taking time to play various games through which a relationship is developed. Without spending time in this space, getting the performance from the horse would simply not be possible.

The parallel lessons from this in developing a basis for savvy leadership are obvious.

In an emerging connection economy, relationship and the return of relationship is all important. Trust and respect cannot be assumed and require intentional time and effort.

Interestingly, in the process of horse whispering there is a role and place for discipline. A lack of co-operation on the part of the horse is interpreted as a lack of respect. This does not always mean that the

horse is not complying with the given instruction, but the way in which it goes about the given task could indicate a lack of respect.

In the past talk of moving from a command and control style of leadership to one that is more cooperative and cultivating, has often been met with concern by leaders, who assume this means there is no place for discipline.

Co-operation and cultivating suggests Thomas Malone in *The Future of Work*, should not be seen as an opposite of command and control when it comes to styles of leadership. Malone suggests both are supersets, in that they include a whole range of possibilities, without excluding appropriate discipline measures that are necessary in developing relationships based on trust.

Horses are nature in its finest form. They can run like the wind, have the power to gracefully lift their 700kg of body mass into the air, they can buck and toss their heads in play or discipline. And yet they would choose to stand quietly and allow their human partner to stroke them and to prove their leadership qualities as being worthy of respect.

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For further information on a savvy leadership horse-whispering experience, visit: [www.tomorrowtoday.biz](http://www.tomorrowtoday.biz) or contact Keith Coats on 083 262 5015.

1. Reference: Thomas W Malone, *The Future of Work*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston 2004 (ISBN1-59139-125-3)