

Horse whispering

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But some people jib at the appeal to animal instincts.

Futurists often tell executives that the days of command-and-control leadership are gone. They also warn that relationships are more important than power in a highly networked world.

Leaders often respond to this by conducting self-introspection. They begin to search for ways to unlearn deep-set patterns of leading and relating to people in organisations.

Tudor Rickards, professor of creativity and innovation at Manchester Business School in the UK, has published on the concept of "horse-whispering". The film *The Horse Whisperer* created public interest in this practice.

Rickards was interested in the departure from the usual methods of breaking a horse, which might use harsh and even cruel physical mechanisms to achieve obedience and compliance.

The horse-whispering approach, he says, is founded on the instinctive desire of a foal to be part of a herd, to belong and to co-operate. Using this approach, previously wild and unriden animals accept being saddled and even ridden much more readily - often within half an hour. The whisperer adopts a certain stance, strokes the animal gently and whispers words into its ear.

Rickards argues that such techniques are relevant to the management of innovation. If they can create a rapport between human and horse, by gently winning the trust of the animal, they can be transferred to trust-based leadership styles.

Resistance to these kinds of techniques has been experienced, though, as some executives and employees have questioned the methods for allegedly using manipulation to create docility in the workforce, or to break the spirit of workers. It's argued the technique too easily equates human behaviour with animal behaviour.

However, some corporates in SA are drawing on the concept of horse-whispering to fine-tune a collaborative, trust-based leadership ethic. They include BoE, Standard Bank and CBW, a wholesaler that is part of the Massmart Group.

One of those taking corporate teams through the experience with horses is Keith Coats, director of TomorrowToday.biz, an organisation based in the KwaZulu Natal midlands and set up to advise on change strategies.

"Talk of moving from a command-and-control style of leadership to one that is more co-operative is often met with concern," Coats says. "Some leaders assume this means there is no place for discipline.

"But co-operation and cultivating should not be seen as an opposite of command and control when it comes to styles of leadership."

Coats says the relationship between trainer and horse was once surrounded by mysticism, secrecy and silence. He believes the first horse-whisperers were probably Native Americans, but legend has it that one of the first was a man called Dan Sullivan from Mallow in Ireland. Sullivan would tame vicious and stumpy horses by whispering to them. The horse would undergo a personality change and follow Sullivan's lead. Sullivan is said to have learnt this technique from a soldier who had been taught by a mystic in India.

Whatever the truth of origins, horse-whispering is about achieving leadership through the creation of a relationship of trust. Body language, personal temperament, patience and real affection have been woven into the technique. Discipline, focus, observation and learning are also key components.

Horses mirror people's energy levels, Coats explains. He says horses are excellent judges of the authenticity of a leader, and the metaphors and skills involved in horse-whispering are amazingly accurate for a variety of business contexts.

"The lessons are as profound as they are numerous," he says. "In an economy of emerging connections, relationship is all-important. Trust and respect cannot be assumed and require intentional time and effort. What works with one person will not work with the next. Savvy leaders are able and willing to adapt as the context requires."

Melanie Letcher of SimonSays Communication, who has experienced this form of training, says change is constant. "Like people approaching change, horses approach the horse box differently, for it represents a threat. What I found fascinating is that in horse-whispering, there are distinct rules about how to handle the fear of change. Avoiding the horse box by going down either side of it is not an option."

She explains that making the external environment more uncomfortable than the horse box makes entering the horse box more attractive. Knowing how and when to coax the horse and when to apply pressure rests on the levels of trust between the horse and its leader.