

About Leadership:

Following the holidays (when folks are away generally) and as we are still living with poor riding weather, folks typically can fall into an increasingly common occurrence of lacking confidence from their horses. If one has allowed their horse to "rest" during such periods, many believe that the period of relaxation would produce a more compliant horse. They believed their horse may have a better mental balance. Then they are surprised, when they take up riding again only to be reminded, often starkly, that their horses are far from more compliant and that their own riding confidence has somewhat waned when they realize their horse's lack trust in their rider's leadership has decreased. This nervous state of mind then transmits back and forth between their horse and themselves generating problems becoming more amplified.

Many riders, who have had problems with their horses prior to winter time periods, are actually unconsciously have been previously repeating rider and leadership errors, which exacerbates forgotten or overlooked existing problems. These errors will contribute to causing their horses to continue losing more confidence in them as competent "leaders", as well as generating outright confusion.

I have seen folks send their horses "away" for retraining with the erroneous assumption that the horse alone is the problem. They expect a trainer to solve the problems and return the horse in a much more compliant state. This generally fails to work well, as once the horse returns; the repetitive human errors begin undermining the situation once again. One solution to this error is to attend the away sessions regularly (and participate) so that you can learn what the trainer is teaching. Another solution is to have trainers attend the home of the horse (again with the rider in attendance).

What is actually needed is a combination of improving rider's leadership skills via non-confrontive, albeit firm methods, including ; (a) generating safety control via non-confrontive "redirection of horse energy" (b) improving clear communication between horse and rider (c) being more patient rider / leader and allowing the horse sufficient time to digest requests / lessons (d) making cues more clear and consistent and (e) improving overall leadership skills *from the ground* as well as when in the saddle.

Some Riding Perspectives:

Avoid "Aggressive" methods : Use of overly aggressive action, whether riding, training, leading or loading, only serves to trigger the prey animal or right brained instincts of your horse, rather than eliciting desired pragmatic or left brain thinking capabilities. Thereby blocking, defeating your intentions.

Importance of "Consistency in Leadership": All riders should remember that that communication / leadership exercises need to be practiced regularly. This applies to both ground work as well as saddle work. Horses, in their own world and without our presence, tend to try things out on one another often (and for most of their lives) in order to make sure who is who in the herd (no matter how small that herd might be) in the pecking order. So, don't be surprised when they do the same thing with us. Therefore, if you do not continue reminding them, in a firm & benevolent manner, from time to time, you will begin to lose their trust and respect allowing problems ensue.

Absorption time: When riding and/or training horses you must allow sufficient time for them to absorb each segment of a lesson and/or instruction before going on to the next. Lessons should also be broken down

into small segments in order to make it easier for them to focus and absorb. One of the clear signs of their absorption & understanding is *licking and chewing*, which generates endorphin flow in the brain and feelings of comfort, indicating positive results.

Fast learners: Horses generally learn relatively quickly, if we are clear in our instructions, however they do not learn in as intricate a fashion or in large input amounts as we can without becoming confused. It is important to break their lessons/instructions down into easily understood portions and sequences. As they learn the individual parts, the result will generally be more positive. This often takes two or three repetitions and doesn't take as long as you might think, so keep in mind to "Feed them small bytes".

Direction focus: Help them move their feet for correct departures and turns, without looking down at the legs when asking for a specific lead. Look where you are going at all times and keep your weight centered in the saddle.

Avoid contradictory rein cues by holding them too tight when asking for departures: Remember to allow sufficiently soft reins when asking for an increase of speed, whether this is into a canter or even a faster walk, trot or gallop. Don't ask for forward motion without softening their rein pressure. This doesn't mean to let the rein go, just to relax it a bit so they recognize.

Avoid leaning forward into any departure: When you lean forward, you add weight to the shoulders of the horse making it more difficult and uncomfortable for them to carry your weight and move especially into a trot or canter departure. By adding your weight this way, you can also cause them to unduly speed up in trying to keep their balance when executing your request. Therefore, stay centered, with weight on the balls of your feet and only very slightly (if at all) lean forward if you wish. Your legs and pelvis position will then keep you in better position, helping you to remain in better control of your balance in case of any sudden variance.

Use of too much cuing and missing their responses: Some riders impatiently add too much/heavy leg and foot pressure without trusting the horse to understand the cue. Give them time. Be sure to soften the cue once they begin to reply and never kick them, which can also startle them. Asking clearly but less frantically will work well. *Avoid nagging them whilst waiting on their reply or it can be understood as a form of your impatience. It also can be understood by your horse that you are not listening to their replies.*

Releasing cue pressure at appropriate times: When applying cues, ask steadily and consistently until the horse begins to comply, then be sure to soften the pressure. Be sure to release/soften the cue pressure at the instant of compliance so that the horse realizes your recognition of their actions,

Closing Reminder:

Before riding out on a hack remember that your horse needs to be calm, trusting and respectful of your leadership at the least inside a ménage, etc. If not, then you cannot really expect them to trust you and behave well on the trail. If you cannot walk, trot and canter "on a soft rein contact" as well as bend, stop and soften them, in the arena you will not likely be able to succeed on a hack. A horse's lack of confidence in you as leader inside the arena can be expected to be worse out on a ride.

I hope this information is helpful in application.

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