

Communication & Leadership Exercises (Part 4)

I would like to open part 4 with a repeat note about the value of using pressure-release cues: Horse owners & riders should not underestimate the value of accomplishing groundwork for the application of pressure-release cues. The communication and understanding gained with pressure-release cues goes a long way in building understanding between you and your horse.

Body Work Communication Exercises - from the Ground

When you are working to apply pressure for cues on the body, try using your fingertips or the bend of your knuckle joints to apply the pressure-release movements. One exception can be to use the flat of your full flat fist to mimic the feel of your calf, on the sides of the ribs or barrel, if you are intent in using your calf for pressure rather than your heel or spurs. When riding, I advocate the use of heels or rounded spurs ***in a scratching movement rather than a pressing movement*** as that avoids the claustrophobic reaction horses can often feel and exhibit and is much softer on them.

Once the requested action is achieved (*from ground or saddle positions*) or even if just an honest effort to comply is exhibited by the horse, then cease the applied pressure as an indication of your recognition of their effort. By rubbing the spots you had just applied pressure to (when doing ground work), you will be furthering your teaching them to “soften to the rub” as another aid/cue that is very handy when tacking up or moving small distances for specific tasks from the ground and is handy for holding static positions via our cues from both ground and saddle, etc.

An important point worth repeating in each different exercise using the application of pressure-release, is the importance of the horse recognizing “your recognition” of their compliance. This may seem to be a mental loop of sorts but the timely cessation of pressure from us is very important communication for them. This can be effectively established via the consistent use of **rhythmic "Non-Static" "pressure release"** (*never very efficiently via jerking on ropes and/or reins or via static pressure*) followed by the cessation of pressure once the horse makes the slightest attempt or shows any honest inclination to comply. Therefore, be quick to recognize & release pressure in a timely fashion. The communication / reward for the horse is the quick release.

Initially, ignore errors made by your horse so long as the horse "gives" (even slightly or makes an honest effort to comply) and does not oppose your cues by going against the cue pressure. This 40 million year old engrained reaction of opposition is known as "opposition reflex" and is what we are trying to overcome ***as long as we are not applying "static***

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pressure". Any errors (other than opposition reflex) in efficiency of movement /direction can be corrected in due course. The following exercises are "not an exhaustive listing":

- Incremental exercises:** (in more than one point along each body part)
1. from side of the face, request movement away from mid jaw and/or nose.
 2. from the front of the face, apply pressure to the bridge of the nose about half way between the nose and eyes to ask for backing up movement.
 3. from side of the neck, request movement away to the side (in more than one point along the neck).
 4. from the middle of shoulder, request movement away to the side.
 5. from ribs or barrel, request movement away to the side.
 6. from middle of hip, request movement away to the side.

Entire body movements::

- a. using pressure release at the points of chin, neck, shoulder, ribs and hip ***simultaneously*** (side pass), requesting movement away from your pressure (horse crossing over legs in due course). When doing this exercise *initially* - allow forward or backward movement so long as the body moves evenly to the side and not exhibiting opposition reflex, make corrections in due course.
- b. **Lateral bending** of the neck is a very important exercise. Whenever you may (urgently) need it in order to redirect energy - the horse must already be familiar with the movement and your capability to require it. From ground work, via a rope halter or from the saddle via a rein and bit the use of pressure release is a must.

Closing reminders

A closing reminder regarding mounting safety: whether you are mounting from a mounting block, portable stand or having someone give you a leg up, it is important that you use your outside rein and bend the horse laterally around towards you. You should then hold that rein tightly in your forward hand & on the front of the saddle until you are completely mounted and have both feet in the stirrups (leaving the offside rein longer to relieve opposite direction bit pressure). In this way, should something occur that spooks the horse, the only way he can turn is around you. In this direction the centrifugal force will be helping you stay safe as opposed to holding the reins together (in equal length) allowing the horse to run forward which leaves you in a dangerous position or worse away from you. Once you are mounted, you can begin the brief leadership exercise I explained in the May issue , always remembering to use pressure release movements throughout.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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