

Leadership Lessons from the Saddle

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by Nancy Koehn | [Comments \(16\)](#)

Note: This is a "rider's" perspective. The lessons are the same as HorsePlay^{PAA} "ground work:" what we learn with horses as guides applies to all aspects of human endeavor.

Since I was a little girl, I have been afraid of horses. They always seemed so big and so powerful, especially when I saw them galloping and heard the pounding thunder of their hooves on the ground. And so it was a real challenge coming to terms with that fear when I began riding horses and competing in the [show jumping ring](#) some years ago. In the process, though, I realized that many of the lessons I learned on a horse have strong relevance and application for leading and motivating a team in pursuit of a worthy mission.

As in any sport, riding is about more than just the technical, physical aspects; it absorbs you emotionally and intellectually. What I've learned in the saddle can be applied by any leader looking to become more effective and engaging on all those fronts. Here are some of the most important lessons:

1. **Be aware of the frame you are in: emotional awareness and confidence are critical.** Your state of mind determines your horse's performance. If you're nervous getting on a horse, it will sense that. Horses and people are not that different; your internal sense of foreboding, optimism or confidence has an impact on the people around you whether you realize it or not. Being emotionally aware allows you to consciously choose how to respond in any given situation. For example, in 1915, when the Antarctic explorer [Ernest Shackleton](#) was trying to keep his men alive on floating ice floes after their ship sank through the ice, it was critical that he not evidence his own fears and doubts to his team. He had to sort through this anxiety himself and then choose to act from a different, calmer, and more pragmatic set of motivations than his own fear.
2. **Your energy is contagious.** Energy passes through you to your horse. To ride well and connect to your horse you need to learn how to use that energy. The same goes for leading an organization. Leaders don't control most of a business's projects and activities. As a leader, what you can control is the energy in a particular situation — be it a meeting, public forum, or around the company cubicles. All eyes are on you, and your team will sense if you are scared or uncertain or frustrated, and react accordingly. By harnessing and shifting your energy, you can use it as a resource to imbue the people around you with a sense of trust and calm and focus.
3. **Be mindful of non-verbal cues.** Your body is a crucial instrument for communicating with your horse; everything right down to your posture matters. The same holds true with people. Whether you acknowledge employees in the hall or while on your BlackBerry, how you sit in a chair, the way you hold yourself during a conversation — these mannerisms matter because they send a signal. People notice all kinds of unconscious cues. Be aware of how you conduct yourself; your demeanor is an important tool in your leadership toolbox and profoundly influences the message you're trying to get across.
4. **Lead from your core, it is your most important asset.** The most important piece of equipment a rider possesses is not the saddle or the bridle or a pair of spurs. Instead it is his/her core. When I began riding, I realized I had more strength than I knew in my core, and with that, the ability to control my horse's speed and course. As a leader, your most important asset is the faith you have in your core mission and your own ability to love yourself and lead your team toward achieving the mission. When tested, take a deep breath and go back to the plan you put in place for your organization. Your underlying conviction in what you are doing and why you are doing it is more powerful than you think.

5. **Use deftness and forbearance before acting.** Horses, like people, are complicated and nuanced when it comes to taking cues from a leader. We are tempted to act out of anger or frustration, but the immediacy of most [gut reactions](#) is not very productive. Practice restraint and think things through before you respond — once you send that e-mail out you cannot take it back. If you want to be an effective leader, remember: the more turbulent the situation is, the calmer you have to act.
6. **Empathy is key to motivation.** There are two ways to motivate a horse: carrots (positive reinforcement) or sticks (negative reinforcement). The most effective "carrot" a leader can use is empathy. When your horse spooks, the fastest way to get it to behave is to understand what is bothering it. Ask yourself, "what is going on here and why is it happening?" Take a step back and think about the possible factors influencing a situation before you react; it will prevent costly mistakes and help you keep your employees motivated to succeed.
7. **Satisfaction comes from the quality of the work, not from being well-liked.** The surest way to lose a horse's respect is to spend your time worrying if it likes you rather than if it's doing a good job and comfortable in this enterprise. Horses, like people, feel a sense of worth and fulfillment simply knowing they are doing meaningful work. If employees are invested in the work at hand and in their role in that work they will feel an abiding satisfaction as part of a functioning and productive team. Overcoming the need for people to like you will help you focus on being a more fair and effective leader.

Over the course of my six years in the saddle, I have learned that when you set specific goals and stick to them — whether they are geared toward riding or running a company — you learn a lot about how to lead and motivate. On top of that, you learn some things you never knew about yourself.

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