

Learning From HorsePlay

By Leah Juarez

When the executive team at Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital embraced their mission to take “health and healing beyond the boundaries of imagination,” they probably didn’t imagine that this would include facing the outdoor elements of cold November winds, muddy pastures and having to side step an occasional pile of horse manure. But, embrace it they did, by participating in a professional leadership-training program in which horses are the main instructors.

The program, facilitated by professional business consultant and coaching group, Pitts-Aldrich Associates (PAA), is called HorsePlay, and it provides an example of the latest role that horses are playing in the lives of humans – that of an executive business consultant.

“Horses have a lot to teach us,” explains PAA President, Christina Pitts. “They’ve existed for 55 million years. That’s a lot longer than humans have been around, so they can teach



us a great deal about thriving in all aspects of living.” She continues, “Horses are born leaders. They trust their senses, know their purpose and take clear action. They are social animals who live in a community, and their herds thrive by developing leadership skills and responsibility shared by all members.”

PAA Partner, Lynne Aldrich continues these same thoughts, “We learn extraordinary things about ourselves through these experiences. Horses mirror what humans think and feel in the moment. They teach us to focus on intention, behavior and communication.”

This is exactly what the team from Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital experienced on that cold November day. President and CEO, Gerard van Grinsven explains that his expectation of the program was to refresh and re-emphasize the values and principles that the team adheres to: trust, respect, dignity, inclusion, empowerment and mutual support. “This is what we know best and what we do best,” van Grinsven continues. “We had an extraordinary start with the opening of Henry Ford West Bloomfield, and recognized that this was an essential opportunity to regroup as a leadership team to face future challenges. This was the time to focus on continued growth as the team of executive leaders, and to enhance the talents of each individual member of the team - all to support our vision.”

Through various experiences, the horses helped the participants make necessary transitions into new mind-sets such as less-equals-more, slow-equals-fast, and small-equals-big. This led to the ability for them to “Pause – Reflect – and Choose” in order to bring the body and mind into an optimal state that can help them determine their best performance on the job.

“The team’s morning experiments, and reflection upon their experience, enabled everyone to accomplish, in the afternoon, challenging horse-partnered goals which required

innovation, influential leadership and team cohesiveness,” describes Pitts about the executives from Henry Ford. “The exhilaration of lessons learned and relationships deepened was phenomenal. The learning experience was described by the HFWB team as ‘successful beyond expectation!’” she shares.

Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital is well known for its leadership and innovation for good reason. Their wellness care programs offer patients therapies such as massage, acupuncture, yoga, nutrition counseling, health coaching and fitness programs in conjunction with traditional medicine.

They even have a 2 year old black lab, Henry the Therapy Dog, on staff as an official employee of the Volunteer Services/Greeter Department. Therefore, the executive team’s participation in the HorsePlay program is simply another example of what makes this hospital unique.

“This leadership workshop clearly exceeded our expectations – beyond the boundaries of our imagination!” describes van Grinsven. “This was more than a unique setting, with horses in a pasture. The herd actually taught us leadership influence and team cohe-

sion principles. The result for the HFWB team was honest, transparent, meaningful discussions based on our horse-learning, which shows how strong this leadership team really is. We have the exceptional talents and re-energized motivation to go ‘back to the barn’ and continue to drive excellence in everything we do. Our learning with the horses was exhilarating, powerful and unique. We discovered different ways to develop and expand our ‘high performance’ capacity and cohesiveness, and our learning from the workshop continues to support this team. We clarified and revitalized key goals to be achieved at every level, to ensure that we will continue to deliver to patients and the community health and healing beyond the boundaries of imagination.”

For more information on the Pitts-Altrich Associates HorsePlay program, visit PittsAldrichAssociates.com. For more information about Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital visit HenryFordWestBloomfield.com.

Leah Juarez is the President of Equesse, and produces the Equesse Channel for women who love horses. Leah has developed a long list of projects designed to help people enrich their lives through a passion for horses. Leah's personal mission is to make a positive difference in the world through a love of horses.



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