

What the horse whisperer taught the CEO about leadership

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Peter Williams



Carlos Tabernaberi with one of his horses. **Photo: Mark Avellino.**

Growing up near the famous Flemington Racecourse in Melbourne, the first sound I heard every morning was the clip clop of hooves as trainers led their horses to the track.

From about the age of eight, I started hanging around various stables; mucking out, feeding and riding horses. I continued doing this until I was about 18, when work and university started to take up all my time. I loved horses, though I had seen a broad spectrum of both good and bad ways people treated and worked with horses.

As my career developed I ended up in many leadership roles, most of which were related to leading teams doing innovative and experimental work. This

included starting up an eBusiness Consulting Group in 1996, and becoming the CEO of Eclipse Group (a subsidiary of Deloitte that specialised in web and mobile development and was the foundation of Deloitte Digital, which now operates in more than 20 countries).

This meant encouraging people to go outside their comfort zone, sometimes standing behind them and supporting them, and other times standing in front of them and protecting them.

In 2012 I moved to a country property in Victoria and “semi retired” to working three days a week. At the insistence of my younger sister, who had continued with her love of horses throughout her life, I provided a home to a couple of retired thoroughbreds.

I decided to get back into riding but I wanted to take up Natural Horsemanship, having been influenced by my reading and watching movies about Horse Whispering. Serendipity intervened and my sister told me about Carlos Tabernaberi, who in her opinion was the best in the business, and as luck would have it lived only five kilometres from my place. Carlos hails from Argentina from a family with a long tradition in working with horses.

Carlos is known worldwide for the remarkable results he achieves, whether handling foals, starting young horses, improving the performance of competition and pleasure horses, or rehabilitating abused horses. Carlos has been described as the ‘next generation of horsemen’ and the ‘gentlest horseman yet to touch a horse’. He’s also been described as the ‘only horseman who truly puts the horse first’.

As Carlos grew up in Argentina, he watched the “traditional” way of “breaking in” horses, as it is called. Saddened by this approach, he decided he wanted to follow the horse, his master teacher. He became passionate about schooling horses by establishing a sound foundation through understanding and trust, not force. He learned from the horses themselves and, in return,

made a moral contract with them to be their tireless advocate and to share this knowledge.

Don't scare the horses

In my first lesson with Carlos, he explained that horses see themselves as a prey animal and humans as a predator. He said it wasn't really natural for horses and humans to interact but by following his philosophy of Confidence, Consistency, Kindness and Leadership we could forge a partnership with our horses based on trust, obedience and respect.

Over time we continually discussed how what I was learning from Carlos and my horses could be transferred to the corporate world. The notion of prey and predator was analogous to the new employee coming in to meet the boss.

As Carlos says, both people and horses are a product of their past experiences. If they had worked in an abusive situation or had fears to overcome, it was our responsibility as a leader to help them overcome their fears to reach their potential. To do this we need to really understand our people and look at the world through the eyes of each individual.

Working with horses we avoid force and use gentle guidance, called pressure and release. Using our body language to engage the horse - since spoken language doesn't work that well - we work on an exercise. After each attempt we release the pressure, give the horse a little time to think and then acknowledge their effort. Over time we earn the trust of the horse and work together seamlessly.

Lead a horse to water and train it to drink

I often see people in the corporate world put under relentless pressure through KPIs that they want to meet but don't know what to do to achieve them. It is our role as leaders to expose them to experiences and learnings to

empower them, not just berate them to failing to meet the demands imposed on them.



Peter Williams with his two horses, Donny and Harley.

One of my horses had the tendency to panic at relatively minor events such as a branch falling or a hat flying off in the wind. He also had a fear of ropes, an indication that he may have had bad experiences in the past. I learnt that consistency meant never buying in to the panic but maintaining a consistent demeanour and reassuring the horse that he had no need to fear and that he would be all right with me by his side or on his back. We would work on gently exposing the horse to his fears for example by throwing my hat into the air near the horse, or gently rubbing him with a rope, until over time he had overcome the fear and built a new level of confidence.

Horses also tend to be natural followers, as they are a herd animal. They are willing to follow leaders they trust. I see this in the corporate world where people can achieve things beyond their wildest dreams and will put in extraordinary efforts for you, if you as a leader put in for them. Where there

is a breakdown of trust employees leave or disengage, causing problems for the business and those around them.

A lead horse takes responsibility for every member of the herd. The lead horse get the perks, such as first call on the food but also has responsibility for the safety and comfort of the herd. Something that the lead horse takes very seriously. As leaders we can learn this from horses.