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VOTED **BEST BUSINESS MAGAZINE FOR START-UPS**

HORSE ASSISTED COACHING IS NOT JUST SOME FAD....

BY JULIA FELTON

...it's a really profound way for both individuals and teams to engage in experimental "full body learning"

"There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man".
- Winston Churchill

These immortal words of the late, great Sir Winston Churchill are as apt today as they were some 100 years ago when he spoke them. So, what is it about a horse that is good for the "inside of a man" and why is Horse Assisted Coaching such a powerful way to develop individuals and teams? Well as Sir Winston Churchill recognised horses can teach us a number of lessons that can help us in life, whether in the barn or the boardroom. Some life skills that horses can teach us include leadership, communication, teamwork, relationship building, authenticity, congruency, and how to build trust and respect with others.

Over the last three years the world has experienced a paradigm shift. The current social and economic climate is providing us with some of the most challenging times ever - both on a professional or personal level. Within business a spate of downsizing and cost cutting measures means that we have team members in roles that some are ill-equipped to fulfil. Team dynamics have changed and yet we expect our people to deliver even more. For individuals this can cause stress and anxiety.

Innovative, forward thinking companies have realised that traditional training and coaching methods are no longer cost-effective in helping develop systemic change in their team members, so a new approach to coaching, learning, training, and development is required - one that engages the team members, challenges, and helps them reflect on their skills and attributes. Horse Assisted Coaching is a new field of action-based learning in which individuals develop their own style of leadership through a variety of interactive exercises with horses. Absolutely no horsemanship skills are required to engage in Horse Assisted Coaching programmes and all the work is conducted on the ground - there is no need to ride - which is why this coaching appeals to all types of people and their organisations.

So what is different about action based or experiential learning? The expression "hands on" is commonly used to describe this type of learning and teaching and it is fundamentally based around learning by doing which is the way that humans learn best, as it engages all the senses. It accesses your ability to learn concepts through three channels:

- kinaesthetic learning - through physical activity;
- metaphorical learning - through symbolism and comparative conceptual application;
- metaphysical learning - through core energy connections

In other words, it accesses your body, mind, and spirit to internalize what you learn. Research in 1999 by Smolowe, Butler, and Murray estimated that we remember only 20 per cent of what we hear and 50 per cent of what we see but retain fully 80 per cent of what we do.

This is why activity-based or action learning experiences have greater sticking power and result in more systemic change in individuals than traditional-style training where students sit and receive information in a lecture style format.

The famous Chinese philosopher Confucius once said in c450 BC, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand".

So, how and why is experiential learning, for example Horse Assisted Coaching, such a powerful experience for people? Well, its power lies in the fact that learning occurs at a limbic level in the brain rather than the neo-cortex level. It is because learning happens on an unconscious level that the results of experiential learning can be profound and why these types of programmes provide a greater return on investment for companies compared to programmes that focus on a verbal, classroom (neo-cortex) approaches.

A somewhat overlooked but very important facet of experiential learning is that it involves growing a person from the

inside out, whereas conventional teaching and training is the transfer of capability into the person from the outside.

Experiential learning is adaptable for individual style, preferences, strength, and direction and as such it is more likely than conventionally prescribed training to produce positive emotional effects, notably confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of personal value and purpose. The primary driver of experiential learning is to help the individual grow, learn, and develop their own direction whereas in conventional teaching and training the needs of the business are the primary driver of the learning content, design, delivery, and assessment.

Until recently, the notion of developing people as individuals was regarded by many employers as less efficient and effective than conventional training and teaching. Yet, the paradigm shift that has happened, combined with the advances in technology, particularly social media, is changing all this. In our "networked economy" partnerships, strategic and tactical, customer and supplier, personal and organisational, are essential to competitive effectiveness".

Horse Assisted Coaching has been prevalent in the USA for many years and although a relatively new modality here in the UK, it is rapidly growing as companies and individuals realise that profound shift that can occur in them during a short session with a horse. Clients have reported increased co-operation at work, clearer communication, and an improved awareness by individuals of the impact that they have on others. So, what would you rather invest in today? Send your team on a classroom leadership course where statistically they will retain about 20 per cent of what they learn or opt for an experiential learning programme where full body learning through activation of the limbic brain is likely to result in an 80 per cent retention rate. I know which one has the best ROI for me.

Julia Felton is the author of Unbridled Success - How the Secret Lives of Horses Can Impact Your Leadership, Teamwork and Communication Skills.