

What can dental teams learn from horses? You may be surprised to find out, as **Caroline Holland** discovered.

Equine assisted teambuilding

According to Native American folklore, the red horse has spiritual powers. Their influence lives on in Great Britain thanks to management consultant and coach, Beth Duff. For five years she has been running a programme, **the red horse speaks**, and hundreds of participants have already benefited from her training.

According to Native Americans the red horse reminds us of the need to balance work and place and that learning is more effective when it is fun. Is it really possible to learn from a horse? Do not doubt it. Equine Assisted Learning is now established as a powerful form of personal development and Beth, a facilitator and coach who has worked around the world, is in the vanguard.



the red horse speaks is a programme which offers professional groups teambuilding and personal development sessions during which colleagues learn how they can become more effective in the workplace as well as having a day away from the practice. The horses are not all chestnut – or red as the Native Americans would say – but they have the skills required to work with people.

The sessions take place on the ground and participants are given tasks which involve working with the horses. But first there is an introduction to horse language. Beth explains: ‘Participants are often anxious about the horses and so we teach them some “Pidgin horse” so that they can begin to understand how horses communicate.

‘For example, while humans put out their hand as a gesture of friendship, the horse’s way of saying hello is to come forward with their nose. If the horse’s head is raised, they are excited and if it is down, the horse is calm. The ears are also expressive. People think that if they

go back, they are angry – but it’s only if they are flat back that there is a problem. Horses are creatures of flight which also makes them safe to work with. We reassure participants that if horses do not like a situation, they do not stay and fight but rather move away. In fact, people often find the biggest challenge is to get the horse to be near them!

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‘For healthcare teams, particularly dental practices, it can be a useful reminder that anxiety manifests itself in many ways and how you respond to that anxiety can make all the difference. Working with horses reminds our participants they have to learn to be more adaptable.’

Beth tailors the training she offers to suit the profession or practice. Just recently she trained a medical team and the doctors were asked to lead the horses around the arena, with ‘consulting rooms’ in each corner where the doctors

had to perform a very simple check on each horse (eg running their hand over the horse’s shoulder or picking up a hoof). This involved the doctors having to manage their patient (the horse) during the process – including the inevitable queues and bottlenecks – just as their staff need to do on a daily basis.

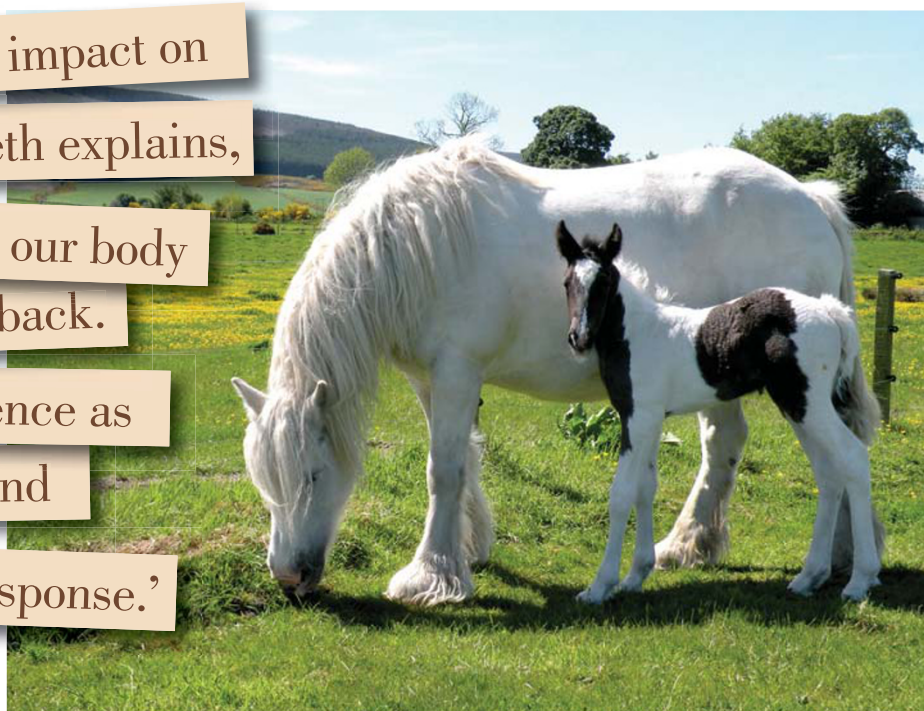
Horses have a strong impact on human behaviour, Beth explains, because they can read our body language and mirror it back. She uses her experience as a coach to identify and interpret the horse’s response. A staff training day can become revelatory as individuals witness the effect that they have on the horse with which they are working.

Very often, Beth says, she does not need to comment because the horse’s reaction is so powerful. ‘Just recently I saw the horse dancing at the end of the rope in response to a manager who is tough and target-minded. He turned to his team and said: “Is this what I do with you?” and they replied, “Yes you do.”’

Later, the same manager acknowledged that he had a problem retaining people and he left knowing he had to stop micro-managing and invest more trust in his team. Said Beth, ‘The pennies do not so much drop as clang.’

Horses require confident leaders so it’s clear when participants need to work on their leadership skills. ‘Horses are a bit like children and they know if you mean what you say. As facilitators, we can then encourage the participants to be more assertive and they can see how well it works.’

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The optimum number for group training is 12 – although much larger groups are equally possible. Beth is doing a PhD measuring the impact that horses have on people and she is using client evaluations to measure how much her training improves well-being as well as learning (see panel).

She said: ‘I have collected quite a lot of data which show that horses help us learn more effectively. Because the experience is memorable, it helps the learning stick.’

The name of the programme, **the red horse speaks**, is inspired by the personal journey Beth went on when she acquired her chestnut mare, Chelsea. At the time Beth was an established trainer and coach, and the horse was purely intended as an interest and relaxation.

Chelsea had done show jumping and dressage but had been overworked, probably injured and as a result had had four or five homes in the year before Beth bought her. Beth, who says she is not a strong rider, had to work hard to form a trusting partnership with Chelsea. But once she had, she realised how much she had learned from her horse and she began to investigate Equine Assisted Learning (EAL).

This took her on a number of courses, including several in the States, and as she learned more about EAL, she adapted it to fit in with her professional background in personal development. EAL is now an integral part of the services she offers. Last year she helped launch a course in Australia and she has been to the States to speak at several conferences. She also teaches others who want to enter this field of work. Her own centre is near Aberdeen but her equine connections mean that she can provide the training at different centres around the UK.

‘Horses know when they are listened to. They tune in to the human beside them and what

happens next is a metaphor for what might be happening in that person’s day-to-day life. We make a lot of use of metaphor to get people thinking. Horses embody so much of what we have forgotten. I believe that horses generally

have much to tell us about ourselves, but we only hear them when we are ready to listen.’

<http://www.theredhorsespeaks.com/home/welcome.asp>

Measuring the impact of horses on humans

From the very first workshop in 2004, informal feedback showed that participants on **the red horse speaks** programme learned a lot, remembered it, applied it - and enjoyed themselves along the way.

But Beth wanted to measure the effectiveness of her programme and start to create a body of evidence for this style of learning. A feedback form was designed using Kirkpatrick’s model of evaluating learning and development.

She has now collected measurements for 155 participants from a range of organisations across all sectors and these are the learning outcomes:

	A lot (%)	Some (%)	A little (%)	None (%)
Enjoyment	93	6	1	0
New learning	46	48	5	1
Usefulness	48	48	4	0
Effect on performance	39	54	7	0

This evidence collected so far confirms that learning with horses as delivered by **the red horse speaks** appears to be effective for people of all ages and experience. Additional work has been done which shows that the programmes are enjoyed and effective across all personality types, which is unexpected given that experiential learning is usually preferred by extroverts. Another unexpected benefit is that people attending **the red horse speaks** programme report an increase in their overall well being, which possibly explains why the programme is effective. Beth is continuing her research which will form the basis of a PhD. She also wants to develop best practice guidelines for EAL programmes.