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NUTS & BOLTS

Lessons in Conversation By COLENE VAN WINKLE

Nuts & Bolts is a monthly column that rotates between four different women each at a different stage in her life. Women's Magazine has asked these women to alternately contribute to this column and share the choices, experiences, and challenges (or the nuts and bolts) that make up who each woman is, where she comes from, and where she is going.



By COLENE VAN WINKLE

My horse slows to a trot as the majestic beauty of this high mountain meadow shimmers in the bright sunshine. Purple wildflowers are spaced lightly amidst the overwhelming yellow of the spring dandelions. The horizon in all directions includes snow-capped peaks all within a half-day's ride. For a fantasy moment I feel like a real cowgirl, free and alone with my horse.

Twenty-four business people from all over the country met one another in a classroom setting and then headed to the horses, where we were introduced to our hand picked companion for the week. The horse-riding skills in the group varied as much as the personalities.

Our host, Cowboy Ken, assuaged our initial awkward introduction. Ken explained the horse whispering foundations that were to be our guide throughout the week as we learned about human communication fundamentals from our horses.

Learning to communicate effectively can take a lifetime. How we occur to others—our family, friends, co-workers, potential employers, and customers is a function of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

The conference we attended was hosted by Conversant, a local Boulder consulting company that advises businesses on the tenants of meaningful and profitable conversation at work. Conversant teaches and promotes effective communication based on (among many conversation tool sets) a conversation meter that begins with Pretense, moves to Sincerity, then Accuracy, and finally the optimum conversation: Authenticity.

Initially, my city-scripted drive for efficiency whispered in my ear, "This lesson could be learned in less time." However, eventually my horse, the environment, and the awe of truly paying attention quieted this urgent internal dialogue.

One thing we looked at was how our own conduct affects others' performances and behaviors. Interestingly

enough, tentativeness on my part prompted tentativeness from my horse. If I got frustrated and my body language and demeanor indicated my frustration, my horse would shut down and literally start backing away.

Conversely, if I focused on what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go while simultaneously respecting my companion, there were moments of a seamless and effortless working relationship. Sound familiar in a management position with your working team, children, spouse, etc?

The lesson I learned was that force and tentativeness produce like results, while confidence and respect accelerate the participation I seek with others.

Another lesson we looked at was that our energy level is the leverage point for communication, and that our energy can influence others on purpose and by accident.

These lessons were all part of the course outline, “Conversant’s Horse Sense, The Art of Natural Performance Improvement.” When working with our horses, we were listening to our head wrangler give us instructions about our next activity. Then we gave our horses the verbal and non-verbal communication necessary to complete the exercise successfully.

Horses, I learned, are extraordinarily intuitive, and mine could sense when I wasn't truly in the moment.

We learned to move the horses by just squeezing our legs tighter on their sides. We also learned that we could slow our horse from a canter to a trot and then from a trot to a complete stop by taking a deep breath and blowing it out. I was able to use persuasion when communicating with my horse just with my body language.

When I was docile and non-committal, my horse responded in kind. When I became frustrated, or tried to go totally against what my horse wanted to do, he would shut down or literally rear up.

The exercises we learned culminated at the end of the week when the 24 participants broke up into groups of three and we had to “pen cattle.” The exercise was meant to teach us to “Align, Act, and Adjust” (also part of the course outline). This entailed “persuading” a herd of cattle to run the perimeter of an arena and filter into a shoot at the end.

After getting the whole herd to move to the pen, we switched to herding just three of the cattle around the arena and into the pen. This may sound easy, but it is actually harder than pushing the whole herd. The cattle began to feel separation anxiety when separated from their group. They displayed a strong desire to escape and return to the group (and I saw an interesting correlation between people and the cattle that I was working with).

After my team “persuaded” the three cattle to the pen, we were each asked to herd one steer, by ourselves, into the pen at the end of the arena.

The teams convened (or “Aligned”) and strategized our optimum positions on the course. Planning a specific role for each of us was key.

The goal was the “Act” of penning the cattle without losing one, and doing this faster than any other teams.

During our practice, we “Adjusted” our plan as needed in order improve our time and still be successful. As we debriefed after our day with the horses, it occurred to us how similar this process was to working with professional teams at work.

After returning to every day reality, I contemplated all that I learned and how I can integrate those lessons into making my personal interactions more beneficial. I have started paying closer attention to my interactions. I am especially attentive to whether I am sometimes unconsciously “reacting” as I interact with my family and friends.

I have found that we can get much more accomplished when we first identify what we agree on or have in common, and then move to understand what our shared purposes are. If those I interact with sense I am interested in our shared purpose, we can move more quickly to building or creating. This is in contrast with an unconscious tendency that I learned about myself which is to move immediately to convincing them that my purpose is correct. We are now learning from each other.

What a week! The beautiful setting of The Home Ranch, the insightful teaching of the outstanding Conversant team the skill and patience of all the wranglers, and the interaction of the participants.

Oh yea, I won a ribbon that is now temporarily displayed in my kitchen. Wow!

By focusing on what we learned and putting that into action by concentrating on the task at hand, my team of three women won first place in the cattle penning contest. A Blue Ribbon! Additionally, I walked away with a fourth place ribbon for the individual cattle penning.

As one of my friends so eloquently put it, winning a ribbon of any color at our age is pretty exciting.