

The Importance of BODY LANGUAGE

GROUNDWORK FOR FOCUS AND ENERGY

Many people associate horse riding with giving their horse a cue to elicit a response, but how do riders get on with a horse that hasn't been trained to respond to cues, or with a horse they want to take further in its education?

Riders can greatly increase their ability to teach in a way that a horse can understand, without it having had any previous exposure to what is being taught. They can also work in a manner that does not over-stimulate their horse, reducing the likelihood of eliciting a rushed, unbalanced or reactive response. This will help them to be able to direct their horse with the appropriate amount of energy, whilst maintaining a relaxed composure.

WHAT DO HORSES ALREADY UNDERSTAND, WITHOUT TRAINING?

"Horses are born with, or develop early in their lives, a natural ability to read the focus and body language of another horse, and that of other animals, developing an understanding of their physical intent.

I guess we don't think about it enough at times but so much of the horse's natural behaviour patterns are related directly to their evolution as a prey animal. While selective breeding over the years has changed this for some, many breeds have built on the natural qualities of their ancestors for speed, agility and alertness. Reactions that would have been a huge advantage for prey animals to evolve with would have been an ability to 'read' and process the places where a predator's attack may occur and manoeuvre accordingly to avoid this.

The horse's ability to 'read' the intent of other horses would also be helpful to avoid collisions if they happen to be

running fast in a large herd. You only need to see a foal running beside its dam when they are startled or run in fear, to see how it mirrors the mare's movements and direction, appearing to be attached by an invisible cord. Consider how quickly and accurately they must process this information to avoid collisions and attacks.

When you see young horses being sent-off by older herd members for apparently no, or very little, reason, it makes sense that it is because that is how they learn to avoid a potentially fatal attack at some time in their future. An older horse always seems to gain quite a reactive response from a younger herd member and many believe it is all about respect of a more alpha horse.

I believe there may be a much more critical reason than has become accepted by many horse people. It makes sense to me that it's more to do with the longer-term well-being of the herd and that it's an evolved mechanism to assist in the learning of how to avoid becoming the victim of predators.

Nearly everything that has naturally evolved in the animal world is about the betterment or future survival of the species.

HOW DOES KNOWING ABOUT THIS HELP US TRAIN OUR HORSE?

Having some understanding of the nature of equine body language and intent gives handlers the ability to direct their horse during the process of teaching groundwork and to understand how they may conduct themselves in order to lift up or lower energy levels or gain responses without directly chasing their horse.



BY IAN LEIGHTON

PHOTOS BY LEONIE KABLE

Let's take a horse learning to follow a feel on a lead-rope as an example.

One of the most common problems I see in ground work at the many workshops or clinics I teach in, is an inability for people to control their horse's energy when asking it to move off during ground work.

Often handlers will ask by leading out with the rope and then chasing the horse away with a flourish of the flag or stick or the end of the rope, causing the horse to take flight in an erratic or rushed way. For overly desensitised horses, their reaction may be to ignore the handler and stand their ground. It can be even more confusing for a horse that has been totally desensitised to stand still to a stick, flag or rope swinging and then it is expected to move from those very same things.



To help the horse understand where we want it to go, focus and energy can be increased, thereby using our presence like another horse would.

Some horses may even influence the handler to move away in this situation by moving toward them or by making apparent their annoyance to this.

The problem is that the horse doesn't understand how to respond to a stick or flag or rope swinging at them where the handler is showing no underlying physical body language or intent associated with the action. Horses have not naturally evolved to have an understanding of these implements or actions.



The Importance of Body Language...

Step 1: Ian starting with low energy and focussing away from the horse on the side where he doesn't want it to go to.



Step 2: Moving his focus more toward the horse's head, neck and shoulders as he lifts his energy.



Step 3: Ian raising his presence to correct a horse that is crowding him during ground work.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP OUR HORSE UNDERSTAND?

To help our horses understand we can use our focus and energy in a way the horse already understands. Taking the same scenario, we could lead the horse out and focus on the place where we don't want it to be and lift our energy, body language or intent, like we are going to move into that space.

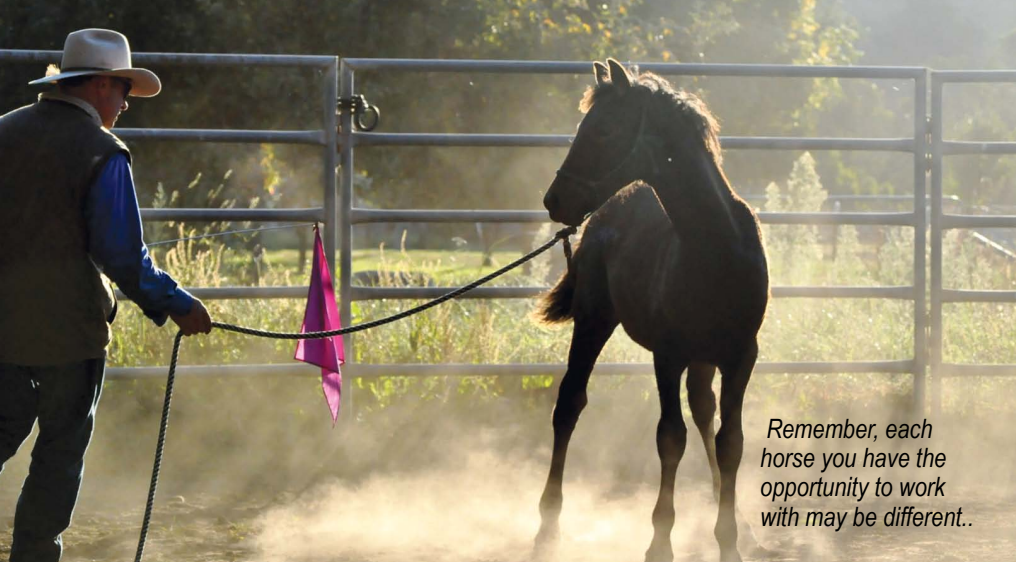
Instead of going after the horse with the flag or stick or the end of the rope we could just use it to make us appear to grow even bigger than the extent of our natural body language allows. This enables us to use our presence like another horse would by using body posture, energy and intent to influence a response.

What are the advantages?

The horse already understands this type of behaviour/body language. It allows us to use what we have observed from horses interacting with each other to influence a response as another horse would. The horse is not offended or confused by this as it is us acting as another horse would.

The amount of energy to our focus and intent can be dialled up so that the horse only responds with the amount of energy

Continued...



Remember, each horse you have the opportunity to work with may be different..

we require . . . just by the handler growing bigger or smaller as required. We can drop this energy completely for the correct response, letting our horse know - without any confusion - that it has acted as we would like.

We can give our horse some of the confidence in us that they require to allow us to direct them by proving that we are easy to understand and that we are assertive enough to keep them safe in a worrying situation. This will help our horses make a connection between our energy and their own during ground work, which has a direct benefit when progressing to ridden work.

Directing our horse in a gate way, confined space or high-risk environment can be done without gaining a reactive or erratic response, which encourages the horse to maintain mental and physical comfort and relaxation.

Small amounts of pressure can be added in a place where the horse is worried or uncomfortable, like float training or crossing a bridge, avoiding an over-reaction.

As our work with the horse goes on, if we are consistent we will discover that it takes less from us to ask the horse to move until just the feel of the rope, and the focus of our eyes and intent is enough to gain a suitable response.

Working on how handlers can lift and lower their 'presence' can be a real game changer for those having trouble with groundwork and it's worth the effort to experiment with it.

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I find I can use my body language and energy to encourage and direct a dull horse more easily than if I were to actually use the flag, stick, or swinging rope on it. You can lift or lower your presence by standing taller or relaxing more.

You can vary the focus of this presence by looking and moving toward areas around the horse or directly at parts of the horse.

When asking a horse to move off by directing the shoulders away first, try leading off with the lead rope and looking where you DON'T want him to be. Make yourself appear to grow taller and move your focus directly at the horse's head, neck and shoulders. If the horse does not respond or does it without purpose or enthusiasm then add lifting your energy and moving toward him. If you have a flag lift it to increase your height - don't go directly at the horse with it. If you chose to swing a rope instead don't swing it at the horse but in a way that makes you appear bigger.

If you are consistent you will find that the horse will move with less and less effort from you. He won't do it in a fearful manner but will be relaxed and business like.

Try not to go at the horse with your flag, rope or stick to ask him to move. Remember these tools are an extension of your own body language, and can be useful to help you increase your own presence. Using them this way will prevent your horse becoming frightened of these tools.

Beware of focussing in front of the horse or in the place you want it to move to. This confuses and blocks the horse and although in time it might learn to deal with it, it is far better to train yourself to avoid doing this. With every horse, we have to learn how to discover just how much, or how little, applies due to the variations



IAN LEIGHTON HORSEMANSHIP

Ian Leighton is one of Australia's most experienced and popular clinicians.

He describes his work as Horsemanship without any prefix and works toward a soft horse that works with a more classical way of going. He has a lifetime of experience with problem horses and young horses and their owners from all genres and levels.

Ian works continuously on how he can demonstrate and train in a way that is easy for others to understand and delivers his clinics in a non-judgemental and congenial style.

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in upbringing and previous experiences of the individual. Remember, each horse you have the opportunity to work with may be different, and it is important to adjust how you approach your interactions accordingly.

Practice your ability to focus and increase or reduce your presence in a fluid way that fits the responses from your horse. This could be, in part, a definition of feel when working with a horse if we can get past the idea that feel is just about the reins and your hands when riding.

Humans do not have a monopoly on how to recognise a soft look or a hard look and often I think horses are far wiser than us on these matters. When I ride I like my horses to regulate their speed and energy based on the energy I convey through my body and general presence. It's a real advantage under saddle if your horse makes associations with your behaviour on the ground, especially if it has learned to not fear your energy or movements but to allow itself to be directed by them."