

Coaching with horses: 'in service of life'

By Ruud Knaapen

INTRODUCTION The use of horses as an integral part of therapy and coaching is used worldwide. It is used as a method for different audiences and for a wide range of subjects; from individual topics to career development issues and team development. In the business arena, coaching with horses has now become common practice. So, as facilitators, what can we learn from horses? In this article I am pleased to share with you my insights from my systemic work with horses.

THE (INNER) HERD If you watch a herd of horses closely, you can see that the collective is constantly in motion and (re)arranging itself around different sources such as food, space and safety.

Every member of the group knows its exact place in the group. You can see one of these herds as a reflection of our inner and outer world. Our inner world is our 'inner herd' or better said, the 'holding space' of all our inner parts. However, the herd is also the group or the system to which we belong; the outside world.

When we truly connect to horses and the herd, we experience that there is something we need to give up as well as finding a deeper connection with our inner parts.

Because horses are sensitive to wholeness and order in the group, their subtle responses let us know if and in what way our inner herd is present and if we are in tune with the system to which we belong.

HELPING AND HORSES People often turn to a coach for help. You might say that that the coach exists by the grace of problems, or better said, symptoms that present itself. Hellinger writes in his book 'No waves without the ocean': 'You do not need a problem to work on solutions.' I shared this knowledge with a colleague who wondered how I found any work? My answer was sincere: 'If you ask me this question, what chance does a potential client of yours have to rid himself of his problem and of you?' What is the meaning of 'helping'? Who helps who? Why would I, as a coach, want to help at all?

For me, the answer to these questions came from an unexpected quarter: the world of horses. Truly helping someone else is actually not-cooperating with a pattern, in a loving way. The pattern in itself has the tendency to keep itself alive, repeat itself and to attract those 'helpers' that keep the cause of the pattern out of sight. Often the cause of the pattern is too painful to look at or something that had lost its place within the conscience of the family or organisational system. It is exactly here that horses become alert. Horses are interesting coaches because they seldom respond to the way the problem is formulated. They don't respond to analytical definitions of the problem. They respond instinctively and physically to what presents itself, in the present

moment. You could say that, when the inner herd of the client is no longer complete or the order has been disrupted, the horse instinctively responds to the system of the client. The horse will show certain behaviour (such as excitement, displacement activity or extreme withdrawal). The instinctive reactions of the horses to us, originate there. Horses see the world as a whole, even if we experience that whole as fragmented. It is this ability to experience the world around us, ourselves and the client system as a whole that makes room for a different way of helping or coaching.

As a coach, we can then look through the eyes of a horse to see where the (inner)herd of the client wants to be complete.

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE HORSE horses have been around for 65 million years. The time of man isn't even visible on the timeline of horses. It was only when an ethologist told me this for the first time, that I realised why I always experience such great awareness of order when I look a horse in the eye. The horses' eye has a visual field of approximately 350 degrees and can perceive even the smallest movement from a great distance. An eye with two focal points which allows the horse to be connected to the herd when grazing. A horse scans its vicinity fifty to a hundred times per minute to register what the rest of the herd is doing and to confirm that it is part of the group. A horse can only survive if the herd survives.

HORSES AND SYSTEMIC WORK If for what ever reason a horse can't connect, it causes stress. It is extremely important for horses to connect with a group and to know what their exact place is within the group. In its' interactions with humans, it instinctively wants to form a kind of mini- herd. The animal will respond to the degree of authenticity, in other words to what extent is someone in contact with his/her own source and/or destination and to what extent is the inner herd complete.

The instinct with which horses have survived for 65 million years, is an extremely refined precision-instrument that registers whether the entirety of the herd is at stake. It has a warning function. The horse works as an indicator for the wellbeing of the entire system. The horses' behaviour is an indication for when and where in the client's system, the systemic pressure changes in relation to the three basic needs described below.

This is more of a phenomenological approach that we also see in constellation work.

HORSES AND SYSTEMIC PRESSURE In systemic and phenomenological work, the horse works as a signal for systemic pressure. This means there is a potential movement in the system of the client that has been interrupted or obstructed.

Systemic pressure arises because one or more of the three principles of the herd is being affected. You can see these principles as the needs of the herd or the system.

- **Connectivity or the need to be complete, The clients' inner herd or system is not complete.** This happens when for instance in a family,

family members or painful events are excluded. In an organisation, the founders' original leading principles or parts of the client system may be completely out of the picture.

- **Order.** The order in the clients' system may be disrupted or the client himself may have ended up in a place in the system that is not his/hers. For example: a child that has become the parent of the parents or an employee who unconsciously gets sucked into a conflict that doesn't belong to his/her job.
- **'In service of life'.** The client and/or the system is no longer in resonance with its destination, no longer 'in service of life'. This, for example, happens when we are preoccupied with events in the past or with a task that is not ours.

Throughout the centuries, these principles have been absolutely vital to horses. When, for whatever reason, these principles are disturbed, the behaviour of the system becomes unpredictable and unsafe for the horse. This immediately gives stress and the horse will try to reduce that stress.

The horses' responses in relation to the client's system give the coach a starting point for interventions in connection to one of the three principles. An interesting fact about this way of working is that a horses' movements are sequential. The horses' first (and strongest) reaction is to the pressure in the system and thus where most urgency is felt. Because the horse perceives beyond the limits of what we can see with our eyes, it is important as a coach who works with horses, to have the courage 'to follow' the horse. Often, the coaching session will prove to be completely beyond any expectation.

"I will follow you my sweet child"

Before the programme started, she pulled me aside to tell me that she didn't want to go ahead with the coaching session. Yes, there is a specific topic, but she doesn't want to look at it today; not in front of her colleagues. I tell her that as far as I am concerned this is okay. Then somewhere during the day, after three people have been in the arena already, I ask who wants to be next. A client raises his hand and sits next to me. This is how we usually start a session; a short introductory interview about the topic that the clients want to explore.

In the mean time, the horse moved towards the rope directly opposite the woman who had decided she didn't want to work with her topic today. I see it happening from the corner of my eye but decide to respect her wishes and continue to work with the client at hand. Against better judgement, I invite the client to go into the arena. The horse doesn't move and remains focussed on the woman.

I look over to where they are and see that an exchange has started between them. The exchange is well on its way and the other participants move their chairs to make room for this process.

The client in the arena now also realises that the horse isn't available for her question(s) at this time. I ask the client to leave the arena and suggest that we resume our session later.

The woman by the side of the arena seems to be opening up to what is happening between her and the horse. It is an impressive sight: the horse at half a foot length, behind the rope, completely silent and still and utterly focused on the woman. The woman sitting on her chair with her hands folded in her lap and her head arched forward just slightly. The following sentence comes to mind; 'When it is my time, I will come too, dear child.' I have only just heard these words in my head when the woman quietly whispers: 'I have seen it. I see it now.' She looks at me and nods, indicating to me to move forward with the group. Afterwards, she tells me how grateful she is that the session spontaneously came about and that she was able to give her son who had passed away, a place.

WORKING WITH SYSTEMIC PRESSURE How do you work with systemic pressure when facilitating with horses? The three principles mentioned earlier, together form a dynamic field to which the horse responds. Disturbing this produces three different ways of systemic pressure that in turn, horses respond to in a different way. For the sake of the readability of this article, I will leave it at this, it would take too long to elaborate on these differences here.

As mentioned earlier, horses respond sequentially to systemic pressure and it is important when facilitating the connection between horse and client, to be able to go along with this. The perception of the horse is so refined and the horses' reactions are sometimes so fast that the facilitator can do nothing but follow. Facilitating then becomes accurate teamwork of a deep understanding of this force field and the courage to accept what presents itself through the horse. This proves to be possible only when the facilitator gives up any desire to help or what his own inner images show to be helpful. Interventions more likely will come from the field than from the personal knowledge and experience of the facilitator. To illustrate this, in essence phenomenological, attitude as a facilitator, I have added a case from the perspective of the facilitator.

Violence

I am facilitating a workshop in Sao Paulo (Brazil) and am sitting with my back facing the arena. Behind me is the horse and in front of me the group of participants. I just picked up the horse from the fields. Together, we walked to the outdoor covered horse arena, the 'picadeiro', for the first session today. For me as a facilitator, this walk is essential as it gives me the opportunity to connect with the horse. I don't come in 'with the horse' but we come in together. From that moment onwards, the connection remains constant, like a direct connection with the field. Even now, as I sit with my back to the arena. Behind me I feel peace and calm, in front of me concentration and within me the readiness to welcome what wants to present itself.

The horse is still completely calm as I focus on the participants and ask them to make an inner connection to their issue today. At that moment, as if stung by a bee, the horse goes completely ballistic. The animal runs from one end of the arena to the other, pounding up and down with its head up high. 'Violence', is the first thing that comes to mind. I look at the group and ask who has access to the topic of violence. Nobody is surprised and a handful of hands go up, one after the other.

Behind me the violence continues undiminished. This leads me to suspect that there is possibly someone else connected to his topic. Something tells me not to work with the people who have their hands raised. I wait again. Then, slowly, the last hand goes up. The field behind me changes immediately. The systemic pressure drops and there is less noise and movement behind me.

For me, this is the signal to say: 'I will work with you.' And: 'is this okay for you too?' The man nods and joins me, his posture a little arched. We both take our time to 'tune in'. The horse has come in closer behind us and with all its restlessness, is tuned into the topic at hand and the entire group. I ask the participants to make an inner connection to what is happening behind us without giving it words or asking anything specific. I look to my side and see that the man next to me has closed his eyes. I watch him make an inner movement towards this topic. His face changes, he is struggling. Pain, desire and fear seem to be fighting for precedence.

Behind us, things become calmer. I suggest to slowly turn around. I ask him: 'Were there many victims and deaths?' He nods. A sentence comes to me. A sentence that could bring clarity to the confusion that the dynamics of 'perpetrator and victims' brings. Sometimes the dynamics lasts for generations and victims and perpetrators keep changing positions.

I ask him to express the following sentence inwardly: 'Dad...Daddy... me too, just like you.' It feels as if the horse is moving into a smaller field, closer to us- as if the tension is diminishing. The movement is inclusive. Next to me the process continues to progress and after a while I ask him to express the following sentence: 'Violence will always be part of the history of our family.' There is silence. I ask him if it is okay to stop. Two clear eyes look at me; his face has changed. I say: 'Maybe you should take him back to his herd.' He nods.

IN SERVICE OF LIFE Looking at the reactions of horses during these sessions, an important question arises that seems to be related to the third principle of the herd; 'being in tune with the destination of being 'in service of life.' Where, as client or as facilitator, do I stop repairing the mistakes of previous generations? Of course, acknowledgement of what happened in the past is important to the client. Beyond good and evil and in full awareness of the price that was paid. This reduces the systemic pressure immediately. At the same time, there seems to be a message contained in the third principle that says something about the order between the past, that which we were given and that which calls to us from the future. Horses don't allow us to stand reversed for too long. We as

facilitators, almost against the flow of life, want to find a good solution for our clients. Often in a situation like this, you see the vitality of the session diminish; the session becomes slow and heavy. Horses usually respond to this in a loving and merciless way: they withdraw from the session and continue to graze. This is in itself an invitation for clients as well as facilitator, to make the same movement. Horses show us that there may be more vitality for transformation in the conscious decision to leave (parts of) the past unsolved as opposed to finding solutions. It is important for the client to face what is unfinished and to truly let it be. It can be because we acknowledge the past as it was, sometimes unfinished and exactly as it was passed on, that we find the potential for a new movement. In this way the client is immediately connected to his past and can turn around and surrender to what wants to unfold in the future - 'in service of life'.

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