

Motivation – A little Bit More About Learning

This article was written for Horsemanship Magazine and it appeared in the October / November 2015 issue. Below is the full un-edited version. Enjoy.



Horses and people respond well to learning through play. It is great way to bond with your horse, to learn their language and herd etiquette. Horsemanship is a shared relationship with a horse so it is personal, social and emotional. Learning using a shared language in play helps in forming a positive relationship where both parties develop mutual respect and trust. It enables interspecies understanding and communication. Through play horses develop cognitive skills, mature emotionally, gain self-confidence to make sense of the world around them. To maximise playing as a method for learning it must be pleasurable. The tricky part here for us humans is not to be too task driven or have goals, but to look for the intrinsic motivation from your horse. Play is very different to work. Are play sessions shaped by your horse's preferences? How and what does your horse like with play?

Learning via association, this is learning that two somethings go together. Extrinsic horsemanship uses this with either a positive or negative reinforcement associated with a training request. For me it is as simple as saying yes or no to the horse. Horses also learn without our input via association. Examples of associative learning include: Touching the electric fence results in pain. The sound of the feed room door opening food will arrive. A tight saddle and back pain. Learning what training cues mean for each task. Horses learn what behaviours are effective for the situation they are in, refine them so in turn it becomes a conditioned response. These can become ingrained into behaviour patterns.

The key to success is to use association to achieve desirable behavioural patterns and ignite self-motivation in the horse. I am a huge fan of using positive reinforcement to strengthen an association as being enjoyable and rewarding. Not so easy if the horse has strong associations that something is negative. For example the association of an ill-fitting saddle causing discomfort or pain. The horse will develop behavioural responses in relation to this. Over time the horse will perfect which responses work best to avoid the discomfort. If the rider has not listened, labelled the horse as naughty the behaviours can escalate to a downward spiral with a host of behavioural issues. Once the root cause of the ill-fitting saddle is highlighted to the rider and it is replaced with a correctly fitting saddle, and rehabilitation for the back pain is addressed the behaviour may well still persist. Especially if the association is deeply ingrained and become a conditioned response. The horse has to then go through a re-learning process.

Sensitization and habituation are two other learning tools in extrinsic motivation in horsemanship. We are either shaping our horse to be more sensitive or helping our horse to be desensitized. Here is an example from one of my clients Estelle: "Myself and my horse Simba were stuck in a rut where we were both demotivated with me constantly having to nag him and work really hard to get him moving forward. Additionally we both hated schooling and avoided it like the plague. He was fed up, unwilling and getting little enjoyment out of our hacks." Estelle had inadvertently desensitized Simba to the leg aids. The leg aids were no more than background noise. The leg aid had lost its meaning and Estelle was using spurs and more pressure to get the job done. Yes she had asked correctly, yes the horse understood, yes he can feel a fly land on his skin. Firstly we removed the spurs and I taught Estelle to ration her leg aids and to be soft. She was encouraged to only ask once and then react with either yes when he responded correctly or no when he chose to ignore the leg aid. Yes was a positive reinforcement a reward. No was a negative reinforcement. For no I got her to use low grade irritation, like an annoying fly until he gave her a try to which she was to stop the irritation immediately and reward generously. A bit like when you get in a car and drive off without putting on your seat belt there is an annoying pinging sound that only goes quiet when you put your belt on. By association of positive and negative extrinsic motivation the horse learnt to be sensitive to the leg.



The end result in Estelle's words: "Oh how things have changed! Vicki has revamped my attitude and riding completely resulting in a horse that now strides out, ears forward, takes an interest in everything that's going on. And all with the minimum amount of effort from me, no more tired legs and red face. Even in the school he is willing, anticipating the next request from me and genuinely trying with anything new that is put his way, I may even try a dressage test at some point, something I would never even have considered. On hacks his schoolwork really comes through, I think he knows how amazing he looks so likes to show off - that's the only conclusion I can come to because I don't even ask, he just offers. Minimum effort, maximum results and a very happy pony!"

Here is an example of how we may use habituation. When preparing a young horse to be ridden I habituate the horse to the equipment that will be used. For example a saddle cloth: Firstly letting the horse examine the saddle cloth, letting the horse touch it, then touching the horse with it, rubbing him with it, and placing it on his back for longer periods of time. This is to desensitize the horse, so it is comfortable, relaxed and I have permission to use the saddle cloth.

Making safe mistakes is another method we can tap into for learning. Many people I meet are keen to not allow their horse to make mistakes, so they micromanage their horse. The down side to micromanagement is the horse doesn't learn for itself. Safe mistakes are a great learning tool. In horsemanship it is our responsibility to ensure our own safety and that of our horse. So when using learning by mistakes it is essential the mistake will not cause harm. Never punish a mistake, allow your horse to cognitively process the mistake

and learn what works and what doesn't your horse will be able to learn what you want. It's the feedback we provide in response to the mistake that matters. This is extrinsic horsemanship, it gives your horse responsibility and it is empowering. Helping your horse with a mistake can inspire your horse. It helps your horse to learn what to do differently next time. Mistakes are golden opportunities to learn in works clothing.

This article is food for thought as I have only touched on a few of many approaches we can use in horsemanship to ignite self-motivation in our horses. Why is self-motivation so important? Being self-motivated comes from inner enthusiasm, desires, interest, with no need of pressure, prodding or supervision. It drives an individual to do things, gives a sense of fulfilment, builds more self-esteem and confidence and improves the quality of life. For me it's the essence of horsemanship.