

A photograph showing a group of four people interacting with a dark horse in an outdoor setting. The horse is standing in the center, facing right. A woman in a purple shirt is reaching out to touch the horse's nose. A man in a light green shirt and a woman in a blue shirt are standing to the left of the horse, looking at it. Another woman in a black shirt and green pants is standing further back on the left. The background consists of dense green trees and a clear sky.

## CONSCIOUS LEADERSHIP – THE PATH TO AWARENESS AND WELLBEING WITH HORSES

Canadian leadership consultant and global speaker on Conscious Leadership [Joanna Barclay](#) describes a new coaching modality, co-facilitating with horses. Known as Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), this technique can help create a workplace culture of human connection.

The decision to become an Equine Facilitator and learn how to develop conscious leadership through co-facilitating with horses was born out of my passion for horses which began as a teenager in Northern Ireland. During the two years I spent in the United Kingdom, I learnt stable management, veterinary skills and became a certified British Horse Society Riding Instructor.

However, as a young adult I could not see a future for myself, servicing someone else's luxury and earning just £50 a week after room and board was deducted. I returned to Ottawa, Canada, went to university, and left the horse world behind. My soul cries every time I remember this life-changing decision. Clearly there is a message here!

Fast-forward to two years ago. A colleague in the field of organisational development introduced me to Equine Facilitated Wellness and Learning (EFL). From this moment onwards, my inner world transformed. I had found the coaching modality I wanted to use in my leadership development practice.

### WHY IS THE HORSE/HUMAN CONNECTION SO POWERFUL?

It has been said that a person can achieve more personal transformation working with a horse in two days than they can achieve in months of talking therapy<sup>1</sup>. Having now led several EFL workshops, and been witness to several participant experiences, I can readily support this statement.

In working with horses as co-facilitators, I have discovered another level of impact that I refer to as 'magical', (the description of an emotional experience which is very difficult to put into words), which happens using the invitational approach to working with horses. When we see, feel and think about horses as sentient beings, when we ask instead of tell, and facilitate instead of command, the result is a deep sense of inner connection, a healthy positive life-affirming attitude, and greater self-responsibility.

## HOW DOES ALL THIS HAPPEN?

Horses connect to humans through the energetic field of our hearts.

Working with horses is a journey into heart energy. A horse's heart is five times the size of the human heart and creates an energy field that is pure, vulnerable and authentic. Horses are a medium to our self-awareness. They see past all our baggage and help us to connect with who we really are, our authentic selves. When we have clear vision of ourselves, the world takes on a whole new perspective. We make better decisions, which has a positive impact on the world around us.

When we work with horses using an invitational approach, one of the things they respond to most effectively is our level of congruence and authenticity in how we show up. If we aren't in sync with ourselves or others around us, the horse demonstrates this lack of coherence by not responding to a simple request such as walking together.

Working with a horse on the ground may be the first time in our lives we have experienced inner balance and heart coherence. Barbara K. Rector's research on heart-rate variability shows that equine-facilitated learning increases heart rate variability, immune system functioning and improved self-esteem in all age groups. This inner balance and heart coherence is literally a heart-felt experience. It is a pathway to connecting to a place where we experience pure happiness, joy, connection, and peace.

Experiencing these feelings by being with horses allows us to bring the same experiences into our lives at work and into our relationships. Thereafter, when we aren't living in alignment with what is most important to us we know the difference because we have had the feeling of connection and wellbeing 'with horse'.

Equine Facilitated Learning fosters these qualities by bringing leaders on an inner journey to explore the conscious leader in themselves, connecting to their inner self, others and nature. It builds skills in compassionate and aware leadership EFL, mindfulness, and coaching on values, through the lynchpins of self-expression, connection and contribution.

During the groundwork with horses, participants often experience the fears which are blocking and holding them back from realising their full potential. Horses show us what is possible through heart connection, love, and trust. With the help of the horses, participants self-discover how to move past their fears to a place which offers them greater possibility and self-responsibility.

Horses are perfect for this, being role models of servant leadership. They are both vulnerable and powerful, loving and strong, controlled and free. All it takes is our conscious invitation to be mindful, fully in the present moment with them, and experience the relationship 'with horse'.

**The point about horses helping leaders to be more authentic and real is 'spot on' and we see great potential for integrating this practice into leadership development. As the world is getting more dependent on technology, I observe that we humans need to reconnect with and learn from nature and rediscover who we are. Trying to exercise more dominance and control over our environment (both in and outside of work) is taking us humans in the wrong direction and rarely works. My husband worked with horses with his management team and observed that those members of the team who displayed dominating and controlling characteristics really struggled with building rapport with horses and couldn't get them to cooperate. In my limited interactions with horses I sensed this energy but did not realise there was science to it. I guess this is a great point for those who like facts and figures.**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joanna Barclay is CEO of the Culture Leadership Group, a corporate leadership consultant, keynote speaker, author, and media columnist to the Business Times. With extensive experience in organisational change, she is passionate about facilitating conscious leadership, team, and cultural transformation, giving people a voice in the process of change, resulting in engaged, high performing, values-driven organisations.

Joanna trained with Kylie Peters, in Melbourne, Australia, in a methodology called Adventures in Awareness (AIA) developed by Barbara K. Rector, Tucson, USA, to become a Certified Equine Facilitator.

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1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/feb/26/horses-therapists-stress-autism-addiction>