

10 Leadership Secrets

Whispered by Horses

Tips to Help You Become a Better Leader

By Jay Koch



Testimonials

I found this book both entertaining and thought-provoking. Subtle and savvy enough for horse people, this book is still easy to understand for people without any horse experience. Koch's ability to draw connections between business leadership and the finer points of horsemanship seems effortless. Reading this New Mexico-based writer is kind of like eating a green chilé chicken enchilada... fun to eat, but it sticks with you.

*Mary Beth Folia
Writing Instructor
Central New Mexico Community College*

This book is packed with some of the most insightful tips about leadership I have ever read. Jay is spot-on in the parallels he draws between leading horses and leading people, and whether the people you are leading are employees, children, or your friends and family, reading this book is guaranteed to improve your relationships.

*Cindy Bidar
www.FiveToNineOfficeSolutions.com*

Admiring a field of horses as I drive by in my car is a beautiful sight. Reading or listening as Jay tells his real life stories with his horses is mesmerizing! Jay takes his daily and often simple interactions with these amazing animals and explains how they are much like us. We learn horses are certainly worth listening to and learning from. Whether you read for the horse stories or for the leadership lessons learned you will thoroughly enjoy this compilation of Jay's life experiences on his horse farm.

Terry Allison
www.TeleSeminarManager.com

Jay Koch is a reader; he reads horses and he reads people. Then, drawing from his observations, he relates how surprisingly similar good leadership techniques are for both horses and humans. Simple and effective leadership is what we all strive for. You'll want to read what Jay has to say about handling your end of the lead line.

Doug Emerson
www.ProfitableHorseman.com

Living the lessons...

This is what defines a great teacher...

This is Jay Koch.

*Ponet
Literary/Artist
USA*

Jay Koch has learned a tremendous amount since he started living with horses 13 years ago. Most importantly he's learned "One of the big mistakes that people make when working with horses is assuming that a horse thinks like a human." This understanding is the basis for successful horse/human relationships.

*Katherine Blocksdorf ALB ACB
www.kblocksdorf.com*

Jay Koch tells a good story. Each story Whispered by Horses drew me in, took me to my own history, and then took me to a better future. I love it when passion and skill teach lessons for leadership and life that draw you in and make you want more. Jay, you have learned the secrets to lead horses, to lead men, and now to write a book people will want to read.

*Edward Philipp
www.TeleSeminarWebFolk.com*

Jay has nailed it with this book! The lessons he learned from working with his horse have given him insightful leadership, better management ideals and a deeper understanding of things we often overlook and take for granted when trying to get our own way. It is so well written, it could be a business book or an equine book, but it is both! You can't beat the price.

BIG Mike McDaniel
HorsebackRidingArticles.com

10 Leadership Secrets Whispered by Horses
Tips to Help You Become a Better Leader
Jay Koch

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"Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true.

-- Supposedly said by Tim O'Brien"

-- Reportedly seen on a T-shirt at Sewanee Writer's Conference.

Most of the anecdotes and stories in this book actually happened. Some are composites of different events that took place in other places and times with other people. I make no warranty that any of these stories happened the way they are written, but I believe in the truth of the lessons. However, it's up to the reader to determine if the lessons ring true.

The intent of this book is to entertain and maybe teach something. If it helps you become a better person or make a lot of money, great. But, don't come running to me if none of that happens. This is a liability free zone.

I'd really like to blame any errors on someone else, but I can't. Any typographical or content errors that make me look like an idiot are all my responsibility. Blame me. That's OK. I can take it. Just don't sue me. It's not worth it.

--Jay Koch, April 2009

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Introduction

I discovered my love of horses in 1996. When I started riding horses at age 38, I had no idea how much they would change my life. Yes, have I learned to communicate with these big and wonderful creatures, but more importantly I have learned much about myself.

My study of horsemanship has taught me to be more patient and understanding of others. As I learned to be an effective leader for my horse, I learned how to be a better leader of people. Before I knew horses, I always got along with people just fine. I was affable, but I was easily overrun by stronger personalities. I often did a lot of work for little money because I allowed people to take advantage of me. As I learn more about horses, I get along better with people.

As I grew as a horseman, I gathered stories and anecdotes about my interactions with my horses. Whenever I am in a difficult or uncomfortable situation with a person, these horse lessons come back to me. The lessons I learned from horses taught me to deal

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with people better. The lessons that I share in this book have become a big part of the way I look at the world. Since horses have given me these lessons, I want to share them with you

I know that not everyone loves horses. But, everyone loves to do something. Many of the life lessons I learned translate to other endeavors. I want to share the universal lessons that I learned in the particulars of horsemanship. Others can then translate them to their own loves. For me, the universal is found in my particular love for horses. I hope that you can grasp the universal lessons in these stories and bring them to your own particular love.

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Secret #1: You can lead with force, fear, and intimidation, but eventually, you'll get bucked off.

Running a business, or being in any leadership position, for that matter, is a lot like riding a horse. A horse is bigger than you are. If you are leading fifty people, they are bigger than you are. It is possible to handle a horse with force, fear, and intimidation, but eventually one of two things will happen. Either the horse will shut down and not perform, or he will buck you off. The same thing would happen if you are leading people. If you continually tried to bully them, they would stop working for you, or they will buck you off and find another leader.

When I was just beginning learning to work with horses, I was often unintentionally unfair to them. One example was when I trying to teach my horse, Baby, to cross water. It was a shallow ditch no more than a foot deep, and only about ten feet across. Baby was refusing to go into the water. I was getting more insistent. My strategy was to apply more pressure by swinging my rope toward her when she moved away from the water, and

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taking it off when she moved toward it. I figured I was offering her a pretty good deal. Do what I ask, or you get popped by the end of my rope.

I actually had no idea how unfair I was being to Baby. First, because a horse's eyes are on the sides of her head, she has very poor depth perception, especially with things that are close to her. She could not tell the water was shallow. It could have been ten feet deep for all she knew. Second, when she stepped into the mud, the softness and squishiness were very uncomfortable and scary. What I perceived as lack of respect for my authority was actually fear. And when horses are afraid, they aren't afraid they will get hurt. They are afraid they will die. It's part of their prey animal instincts.

When Baby finally got tired of my nagging and insistence, rather go into the water, she decided to try to go over it. And for some reason, when she jumped, I was afraid she was "getting away." She was finally doing what I asked, and I grabbed as hard as I could on the rope. Within seconds after the rope zipped

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through my hands, the learn burn blisters were forming on my palms and fingers.

What I have learned in the years since then is that if a horse is refusing to do something, it's not because she is impertinent. It's because she is afraid or believes she can't do it. Now when I teach a horse to cross water, I use approach and retreat. We get close to the water, then back off. We'll circle back around and come a little bit closer each time. I'll let the horse stop and sniff the water. We'll take all the time it takes to make sure she is comfortable, and eventually, she'll step into the water calmly like it's not big deal, and it was her idea.

The same strategies work with people. It's possible to get results by yelling a people or threatening to fire them. But those leadership tactics create resentment in addition to the fear. Under those circumstances, people will learn to be subversive and quietly resist. If things get really bad, they will revolt. They will buck off the boss, so to speak.

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It's much better to find out how to motivate followers by using respect and understanding. Not only will they appreciate the understanding, but if they believe they are safe, they will walk through the water willingly.

Secret #2. Give them an "A"

When the veterinarian stepped into the pen to help our ailing horse, her first words were,

"OK, Bitch, let's see what you got."

I was thunderstruck. Georgie was one of our beloved horses, and to have anyone call her a bitch was insulting. On the other hand, I can see how a vet needs to be always on the defensive with horses she doesn't know, especially a horse in pain. They can move quickly and powerfully, and a 120 pound woman is no match for an upset 1200 pound horse. The vet is also working under a time constraint. She can't always take a slow, easy way of working with the horse. She has to get in, get her work done, and get out, and sometimes that means being a little rough. But, calling the horse a bitch? I don't know. There has to be a better way.

In *The Art of Possibility*, Benjamin Zander describes how he got more effort and joy out of a graduate class of music students. In

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this Interpretation class these students were to explore the "art of musical performance, including the psychological and emotional factors that can stand in the way of great music making." The problem was that the students were so anxious about being graded and evaluated that they would be afraid to make a mistake and would not take any chances. One semester, Zander decided to give every student an A before the semester started. The only requirement to get the A was to write a letter within two weeks dated the end of the semester that described how they expected to have earned the A. With the performance and evaluation anxiety gone, the students allowed themselves to grow, to make mistakes, and to create exciting music.

If the students made a mistake, they were taught to say, "How fascinating!" One of my favorite horsemanship instructors, Linda Parelli, says "How interesting!" when a horse does not do what she wants to him do. In both instances, they take a perceived mistake or flaw and use it as an opportunity to grow or do better. They also release any negative feelings about the perceived failure.

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I can't remember which of my horsemanship instructors was the first to explain to me, "At any given moment, your horse is just trying to be the best horse he knows how to be." I try to give my horses an A every time I go out to play with them. I make the assumption that they are trying to understand me and trying to do what I ask. If I don't get a proper response, "How interesting!" I try to figure out what I did wrong that the horse did not understand. Actually, horsewoman Lee Smith says, "There is no right and wrong way, just effective and ineffective." So, I try to figure out how I was ineffective at communicating with my horse.

There was one time I was teaching a mare named Ellie how to load into a trailer. I got her to the point where she was no longer afraid of the trailer, and she would walk right up to the trailer and put her head in. Her front feet would be at lip of the trailer, and I would ask her to keep moving forward. Ellie brought her hind legs closer, but would not put her front feet in. I have seen people get a horse in this position and then start beating on her to get her in the trailer. That "OK, Bitch..." attitude usually doesn't work. I decided to give this mare an A and assume she

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was trying to figure out the problem. I knew she was trying because she would stretch her neck into the trailer and bring her hind feet forward.

It took a while to figure out why I was being ineffective at helping Ellie get in the trailer. After trying several tactics, it struck me that the mare did not believe she could make the step. I looked around the arena and fashioned a small platform half the height of the step into the trailer out of boards and plywood. Away from the trailer, I asked Ellie to walk onto the platform. When she was confident with that, I moved the platform next to the trailer. She already knew she could step up on the platform, and when she got to the lip of the trailer, Ellie stepped right in like she owned the place. It's hard not to anthropomorphize, but she did look pretty proud of herself. Once she was comfortable going in and out with the platform, we took it away, and she then had the confidence to hop in without it.

I find myself saying, "How interesting!" when I give people an A. I recently asked a friend to post some items on one of my

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blogs. He didn't do it quite like I expected, so I had to figure out how I was ineffective in communicating with him. When we discussed it, he was able to redo the project the way I wanted him to. Since, I did not have an "OK, Bitch..." attitude and assumed that he was doing his best, neither one of us had bad feelings about the project. How interesting!

I know that the veterinarian has probably gotten shoved around by horses and she learned to be defensive and have the "OK, Bitch..." attitude. However, I wonder if she approached the horses by giving them an A before she enters the pen, if the horses would respond to her in a different way. Those horses are probably trying to tell her that they are just trying to be the best horse they know how to be.

Secret #3: It's Not Just What You Ask, but When

The task our clinic instructor gave us was to ask our horses to back up, then turn a quarter turn on the hind end. A well executed quarter turn to the right would mean that my horse would rock back and plant his right hind foot, and I would ask him to move his front feet only to the right. If we had been backing up facing north, we'd end up facing east. I knew the right cues: left supporting rein, right direct rein, left foot forward with a little pressure, and right foot off the horse.

It wasn't quite working. Sometimes Cody would step over nicely, and sometimes not. Sometime Cody would keep his weight on his front end and swing his hind end over. Rather than being crisp and clean, we would stumble through the turn. I knew that Cody was trying to do what I wanted, but he couldn't because I was not asking correctly. It seemed to me like I was asking the same thing each time, but I was getting different results.

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When I expressed my bewilderment to the clinic instructor, she watched Cody and me a couple of times. She asked me to dismount. "Stand with your weight evenly distributed over both feet," she asked. "Now, change your weight so that most of it is on your right foot." I dutifully complied.

"Lift your right foot."

I had a choice. I could either not comply with the request or shift my weight off my right leg.

"What you are doing with Cody is sometimes asking him to lift his right front foot to the right when all of his weight is on it. You are asking with the right cues. You are just asking at the wrong time. Ask him to step over to the right just before his right foot leaves the ground."

I had not been paying enough attention to Cody's feet when I asked him to step over. If I asked when his weight was on his hind feet, his front feet would step over lightly. But, if I asked him to move his front feet when it was impossible to do so, he

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would move his hind feet. He knew what I wanted, but he could not comply. And the quarter turn looked and felt ugly because I asked for a front end move and all he could move was his back end.

When I started paying attention to Cody's feet and I asked at the right time, we got near perfect turns each time.

A good leader knows not only what to ask of his followers, but when he should ask. A good coach knows when his team is getting tired and worn down. He knows that if he pushes too hard at the wrong time, his team will resent him. On the other hand, that same coach knows when it's time to push his team a harder than they want so that they perform beyond what they expect they can do. If a boss asked an employee to take on a big, important project two days ago, it may not be a good time to ask him to take on another top project. He won't know if he should shift his weight to the other foot or ignore your request. Worse, the boss will lose leadership points in the eyes of the employee. "Can't he see I'm already busy here? Which most important project is most important?"

Secret #4: Ask, Don't Tell

I used to get into the biggest trouble with my horses when I would assume they could do something. Now, when a horse refuses to do a task, I ask two questions: What can you do that is close to this task? And, what can I do to help you figure it out?

"C'mon, Baby, you can do it."

All she needed to do was pick up her back hoof four inches and place it on the other side of the log. Appaloosas have reputation for being stubborn, and this mare was being particularly so. Or, so I thought.

The task I was asking Baby to do was back over a small log about the size of a 4x4. Should be easy, right? If she refuses, she is deliberately flouting my authority. I was standing at her head with my hand on her nose, applying backward pressure telling her to back up.

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When I was just beginning to learn horsemanship, this was when I would get my "By Gods" up. "You will back over that log, BY GOD!" My insistence would escalate into a struggle that neither one of us would enjoy.

As my horsemanship improved, I learned that if a horse refuses to do something I ask, it's usually because she believes she can't. Now, rather than telling her to do something, my first question is, "Can you do this?" If she can't, then I find a task that she can do. In the case of backing over a log, first we walk forward over the log to show her she can lift her feet. Then, we go forward over it with two feet, stop, and back up. When this is easy, we step over with the front feet and one back foot before we change direction and ask her to take that one back foot behind the log again.

We slowly build her confidence and our relationship because I constantly am asking, "What can I do to help you figure this out?" When I take the time to figure out what she can do, and help her expand what she believes she can do, she believes in me more.

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It's easy to tell when a horse can't accomplish a task, but it's not always obvious with people. As a boss, I used to tell employees to go do a task, then be upset two weeks later when the task wasn't done or was done incorrectly. But, now, because I learned from my horses, I will assign a task, then start asking questions to make sure that my employee knows exactly what is needed. And if he doesn't, I must supply the knowledge and tools to help him get it done.

Fortunately, horses have a near infinite ability to forgive. Baby didn't hold against me all the times my "By Gods" came up, but she was just relieved when I figured out how to ask rather than tell. And because Baby and my other horses are such good teachers, I am better at dealing with people.

Secret #5: The More Quietly You Ask, The Better They Pay Attention

One day I was teaching Sharkie, a Percheron/Appaloosa cross mare, how to drop her head on command. If a horse mistrusts you, she will keep her head high. As you develop more trust, she will relax and drop her head more readily. While I was trying to teach Sharkie this task, she taught me an important lesson about asking quietly and politely.

My goal that day was actually to prepare Sharkie for the farrier. She needs to be able to lift her feet and stand quietly while the farrier trims her. In between working with her feet, I would do other tasks so that the whole session was not just about her feet. The variety help keeps her mind busy, and removes the pressure from focusing on that one task.

I was asking Sharkie to drop her head by applying pressure with my thumb and forefinger on top of her head between her ears.

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When she dropped her head, even a little bit, I would release the pressure to tell her she made the right move. I noticed that she would drop her head on command, but would bring it right back up. I acknowledged that, but didn't pay a lot of attention because the feet were my main point of interest for the day.

Late that evening, I wandered out to the paddock just to be with the horses. I often do that just to feel their warm breath and share some quiet time together. Remembering the problem with head dropping, I figured I would make a game with it. I applied the lightest possible pressure between her ears. When she moved down, I rubbed her and tried again.

Sharkie was suddenly into the game. Her demeanor changed from "Yeah? Whaddaya want?" to "This is interesting. What are we doing?" She changed because I changed from telling her to asking her. And we played together to see how lightly I could ask and get a response. Soon, Sharkie was dropping her head to the ground and keeping it there with just a slight suggestion from me.

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I am sure that there are a lot of leaders who don't realize that they are shouting at their followers. I was asking Sharkie with what I thought were polite requests, but she was getting defensive. By bouncing her head back up, she was telling me as much, but I wasn't listening. It may be harder to detect that reaction in people, but a good leader will know when to slow down and communicate more quietly. His followers will return the favor by paying more attention, responding more quickly, and appreciating the better leadership.

Secret #6: Bosses/Riders Have Different Agendas/Needs/Desires than Employees/Horses Do

One of the big mistakes that people make when working with horses is assuming that a horse thinks like a human. As a matter of fact, horses perceive the entire world differently than we do. If we acknowledge that fact, and try to understand that, then we can communicate more effectively with horses. And, if we can understand that not all people see the world in the same way, we will be more effective at leading them.

A horse is a prey animal. He is built to stay safe in the wild. His eyes are on the side of this head so he can see almost 360 degrees around him. Those eyes are also a long way from his mouth so he can see farther when grazing. But, most of all, a horse is programmed deep in his bones to run away from a perception of danger. It is easy to make a horse afraid because it is in his nature to be afraid. For example, because a horse's eyes are on the side of his head, he doesn't have very good stereoscopic vision or depth perception at close range. He can't tell if a

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puddle or stream is 2 inches deep or 20 feet deep. If you ask a horse to cross a small stream, he may balk. To our eyes, it should be simple to see that it's just a little water. The horse doesn't know that and may refuse. It may seem like the horse is refusing because he is obstinate or disrespectful. But, in reality, he is afraid. And he's not afraid he'll get hurt, he's afraid he will die.

As humans, if we approach the issue as if the horse is being disrespectful and refusing to obey, there is a danger of the episode escalating to something ugly for both parties. However, if we acknowledge his fear and understand his perspective, we can work with the horse to show him that the stream is nothing to be afraid of. Our understanding of his point of view makes all the difference.

When it comes to people we assume that others think like us. I once had a boss who would call people on Saturday morning because he had a great idea, and then wonder why they weren't happy about coming into the office. The boss thinks about his business all the time and how to make it better. The employee only wants to do her job from 8:00 to 5:00, Monday through

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Friday, then go home to her family. If the boss doesn't understand this difference of perspective, it can lead to friction and resentment in the relationship.

Imagine a horse running around a set of barrels by himself. Or jumping a series of jumps. Or separating a calf from a herd. He would not do it. He would rather be in the pasture grazing. That's his agenda and desire. With proper leadership, he is happy to do those jobs. Conversely, a person could not run a barrel pattern in 17 seconds nor jump a set of six foot fences. And a person would not have the strength to hold a roped cow. With the rider's vision and desire coupled with the horse's speed and strength, together they can do something that neither can do separately.

My horses have taught me to try to understand everyone's point of view and that not everyone has the same perspective I do. When we understand each other, we can work together.

Secret #7: Followers Need Structure

One of the primary functions of a good leader is to provide an environment where not only the goals and objectives are clear, but the limits and restrictions are as well. People need to know they have enough freedom to do their jobs, but the limitations can be a comfort as well. If there is no deadline for a job to get done, the job can seem amorphous and disquieting. A deadline helps define and focus the project.

I was reminded of the importance of defining limits a few days ago when I was bringing the horses in for dinner. For the last few weeks, our neighbor has allowed our horses to graze on his pasture. We bring the herd home every night and give them a little bit more hay for the evening. The horses have to cross a driveway to get from the pasture into their home paddock, and sometime there are unfamiliar items that scare them. One time, there was a big, blue tarp that was flapping in the wind that we eventually had to take down before the horses would come home.

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But, a few days ago, a wind storm blew down a dead branch from a cottonwood tree. Fortunately this branch, which is about 30 feet long and a foot in diameter landed where no damage was done, but to the horses, it looked strange and out of place. They were wary of coming home, and lined up about 30 yards from the gate. I could not encourage them to come closer to the scary dead branch. I went home and grabbed a halter and lead rope. I figured I would lead them home one at a time if I had to.

I caught the closest horse, which was Leo. His head was high, and his wide eyes were focused on the scary branch. But, an odd thing happened when I put the halter on his head. Leo sighed and dropped his head, and started moving toward the gate with any further prompting from me. As we walked through the gate, and around the downed branch, Leo was calm. The other horses followed us home. I guess they figured if the killer tree didn't eat Leo and me, then it wouldn't hurt them.

What struck me is that Leo felt safer when he was constrained by the lead rope. I had asked all of them to follow me around

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the tree, and when they had the freedom to run, they did. But, once I put a halter on Leo, he turned the leadership over to me and he felt safer. I had thought that maybe I would have to do some insisting to get him past the tree limb. I thought I might have to pull on the lead rope to encourage Leo to scoot past the perceived danger. He surprised me by walking calmly beside me, albeit with me between him and the branch. Leo felt comfort in knowing the limits and knowing someone else was in charge.

Human children are like that, too. Of course, they push the limits of parental control, but they are happy to know where the limits are. Teenagers who have curfews know their parents care about them, and the teens with no parental limits may feel adrift.

In a business, the leaders at the top set the vision and direction for the company, and then hire and inspire people to work toward goals. Sometimes, at the outset, it is not certain that the goals can be reached, but it's important that the employees know that leadership at the top supports them. The limits that are placed on the company may not be as visible as a halter and

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lead rope, but they may be as real as a budget or a deadline. The limits are as important and comforting as the freedom to do the work.

Secret #8: Set the task, then let them do it.

In the summer of 1998, I spent six weeks at Pat Parelli's International Study Center in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. In addition to all of the horsemanship I learned in that course, I learned some things about leadership and management. One lesson came from riding up a mountainside.

The ride would start out pleasantly enough. We'd ride up a path to the edge of Pat's property, then follow a forest service road for about a half mile. Then, we would leave the road and head up a ravine. The path would give way to a rocky creek bottom that got narrower and steeper as we went higher. The first couple of times I rode up there, I got off because I was afraid my horse would fall in the steepest parts. There were a couple of times when she did go to her knees on the rocks while I was on her back.

Over the course of the six weeks, we probably went up that path six or seven times. Although I sort of got used to it, I was

cursing Pat under my breath most of the way most of the time. I remember the misery, but I also remember how wonderful it was to get to the top and look out north over the San Juan River valley around Pagosa Springs and south to New Mexico. That hardship also taught me to not be afraid of climbing steep or narrow passages. Several times since that summer, my wife and I have been on rides that others thought were scary, but to us, they were nothing compared to the rides Pat took us on. So, for every time that I cursed Pat I have thanked him a dozen times since then.

But, as usual, the biggest lesson I learned from those rides was about my relationship with my horse. At first, I would decide each step Baby would make. "Go to the left of this rock. Step around this log. Be careful: this rock looks loose and slippery." Some time after we had made this trip more than once, I realized that Baby knew better than I do where to put her feet. My job was to decide where to go. Her job was to figure out how to get there. If she wanted to go to the right of the rock, rather than to the left, she knew the best way to get there. Her innate

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abilities to choose the best path was much better than anything I could learn to do. They are her feet, after all.

So, I often just dropped the reins and let Baby follow the horse in front of her. I think she appreciated not being yanked on so much, pulled out of balance, and allowed to do what she knew best. And just maybe she was watching the horse in front of her to learn where to step. Sometimes we took the same steps as the horse in front, and sometimes we didn't. But, it was Baby's decisions that got us up and down that hill.

Looking back, it was when I began to understand the difference between being a manager and being a leader. I was managing Baby when I told her the path to take. I became a leader when I set the agenda and let her choose the path.

Secret #9: If there is a problem, fix it

I have noticed that people accept mediocrity in their relationships with their horses. Rather than fixing a problem, they will just accept it and live with it. Unfortunately, some leaders also do the same with their followers.

I have heard people say, "Oh, my horse doesn't cross water." Or, "My horse is afraid of plastic bags." Some people won't leave the property because their horses are "barn sour" and only want to run back home. Some won't ride alone because their horses get too antsy on the trail without another horse along. I have been asked to not canter in an arena because it was making the other horses too nervous.

I know one woman who will only ride in an arena where there are no other horses. She holds her horse back with a tight grip on the reins and the bit pulled hard into his mouth so that he doesn't go too fast. She's so wound up that her horse gets wound up and excited, and she has to hold him down even tighter.

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Whenever she rides, it's a battle to see who can get control of their nerves better, and it's an accomplishment when the ride ends with no blow up. What's amazing is that she has ridden this way for thirty years and thinks it is fun.

There was one time my wife and I were about to go on a two hour trail ride with a group of people. I was going to ride a horse that hadn't been ridden for a while, and he wasn't used to being away from home. I decided to not go on the ride, and stay back and play with my horse to calm him down. I was disappointed, but it was the best thing for my horse.

During the ride, a friend of ours rode up to my wife and asked why I didn't go along. She said that I didn't want to get into a fight with my horse. Our friend replied,

"If I didn't have fights with my horse, I wouldn't get any riding done."

Sometimes, I just shake my head and wonder why people accept such mediocrity in their horsemanship. Most of the time, it's

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because they don't know any better. For them, it's normal to have a jumpy horse, or to fight with their horses. It's all they have known.

I am fortunate that my horsemanship instructors have shown me that if there is a problem, fix it. If I have a horse that doesn't like plastic bags or won't cross water, it becomes an "Oh, Boy!" moment, as in, "Oh, Boy! Here's a puzzle we get to solve." And the horse and I figure out a way for him to love going into water or being rubbed with a plastic bag.

If I have a horse that is excitable and gets nervous in new situations, he and I will go to new places and see lots of things. I will usually do this while I am on the ground first, because if my horse is nervous while I am riding, I get nervous. The horse feels my tension in my legs and hands. He figures that if I am upset, he must really need to be upset, and the cycle escalates. If I am on the ground, I can be completely confident and allow the horse to jump around at the end of the lead rope until he tunes into my calmness. When he sees that I am a calm leader, he will be calm, too. I will only ride him when we both are confident.

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It's my job to get the best performance possible out of my horses. I don't accept mediocrity in their behavior, and I work on problems until they go away. Actually, these behaviors that I don't like are not really problems, but opportunities to improve. Oh, Boy!

I also wonder why people accept mediocrity in the people they are leading. If employees hate coming to work, and go through the day listless and non-responsive, should the manager accept such behavior? It's easy to say, "Those people in accounts receivable just don't work that hard." But, it would be better to work with them and figure out how to motivate them to be more productive.

As an example of a leader recognizing mediocrity, but doing nothing to fix it, I remember a time when I was giving a presentation about some new technology we were rolling out to the customer service representatives at the company I worked for. After I was done with my presentation, but still standing at the front of the room, the senior vice president who had

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introduced me, thanked me for my presentation, then turned to the group and said,

"I have been getting a lot of complaints from customers recently that you people have been rude to them. This has to stop. If I keep getting complaints, we may just have to find people who can do this job better."

Not only was I astounded that this woman would speak to her employees this way, but I was embarrassed that I was still standing up there, which made it seem like I supported her. I looked around the room. Most people had their eyes down. Those whose eyes I could see looked liked puppies who had just been scolded for making a mess on the floor.

Just berating her employees and asking them to do better is sort of like that woman who rides her horse only in an arena. If the employees step out of line, she just pulls back harder on the bit to force them to behave. This same vice president was always mystified that there was a lot of turnover in that department.

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Like the rider who always blames her horse, this boss always blamed her employees.

That vice president could have said, "Oh, Boy! Here's an opportunity to make my company better." Let's imagine another scenario in which she would have said,

"I have been getting a lot of complaints from customers recently. What can I do to help you improve your interactions with our valuable clients? What makes you upset enough to make customers upset? What strategies can we use to help you be calm when a customer is unhappy? How can we take a difficult situation for the customer and make it better for them?"

Those employees probably would have been able to share some frustrations and give some suggestions. But, most importantly, they would be grateful for getting some help from management. If that vice president had offered to help her employees instead of threatening them, they would have been a lot more willing to work for the good of the company instead of against it.

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Just like I feel it is my responsibility to help my horse through his problems, that vice president should have helped her employees be the best possible customer service reps they could be. Instead of using the opportunity to teach and improve, she just told them to get better and fix it themselves. She missed an important opportunity to lead.

Secret #10: Do what you love

On a warm mid-February day a couple of years ago, I thought that it would be a good day to fire up the tractor after not using it all winter. I put in some gas, checked the oil, and lubed some joints. When I turned the key – nothing. Not even a click.

My tractor is older than I am. I was a late fifties model kid, and the tractor was born a couple years before that. I love this tractor when it runs. I can do almost everything I need around my ranchito that involves moving dirt, or manure, as the case may be. However, it doesn't always run. I never know when I go out there whether I will get some work done, or whether I will have to futz with that old machine for a while just to get it to run.

When it comes to machines, all I want to do is get a job done. I want to turn on my tractor and truck and go to work. I don't care how it works, and I don't like to spend any time maintaining it. Fortunately, there are guys who do. My tractor

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mechanic, Tracy, is a guy who loves to work on machines, especially tractors. He can tell me how many years this brand of tractor had a certain kind of carburetor, or the gap needed on the plugs.

Tracy also has taught me a lot about how to maintain my tractor, but I only retain the minimum amount of information. I can fix a few things that only require a couple of wrenches and a screw driver, and I know how to keep various fluids filled. But, when it comes right down to it, all I care about is getting a job done. The tractor is just the ends to a means.

And I suppose that Tracy feels the same way about horses. While he sees the beauty of a smoothly working machine and wants to know how it works and why, I want to understand how a horse thinks, moves, and reacts. If Tracy had a job to do that required the use of a horse, and the horse wasn't performing the way he wanted him to, Tracy would get just as frustrated with the horse, as I do with a broken tractor. Tracy loves to solve the problems of a broken machine, and I like to figure out why a horse doesn't behave the way I think he should.

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For each of us in our own passions, there is satisfaction when things work well, but the real fun is figuring out what is wrong, and then fixing it. When I am working with a horse, and I don't know why he's not doing what I want him to do, or I am trying to help him through something that is difficult for him, that is when I lose all track of time, and there is nothing more important than being in the moment and working on that problem. Finding the solution to the problem is more interesting than getting a job done. I am sure it's the same for Tracy. The joy is in getting the tractor to go. He's happy to leave and let me drive off into the pasture with my flexible harrow trailing behind.

A good leader knows that it is important to match the person with the job. If person is mismatched with his job, he'll hate the work and won't do it well. Don't make a bookkeeper answer phones and don't ask a gregarious person to sit in a room by herself and add up numbers all day. If the employee loves the job she is doing, she will be much happier doing it.

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So, as I returned from Checker Auto Parts with a new battery, I resolved to remember to take the battery off the tractor in the fall. I feel stupid for letting it sit outside all winter. But, I'm also grateful that the clerk behind the counter at Checker didn't let on that she thought the same thing. I'm equally glad that the clerk and Tracy love machines as much as I love horses.

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Resources

Please check out my blog at

<http://TheBestHorseSense.com>

Look for information about our clinics and seminars at

<http://TakeTheLeadSeminars.com>

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About the Author

Jay Koch has played with and learned from horses since 1996. He and his wife, Nancy Gage, have studied with horsemen like Pat and Linda Parelli, Lee Smith, Mark Rashid, Marty Martens, and Dave Seay.

Jay quit his job as a computer nerd in February, 2008 in order to pursue his dream of spending his days with horses and making money at it.

Jay and Nancy live in Los Lunas, NM, about 20 miles south of Albuquerque. They live on 7.5 acres with their eight horses, seven dogs, and two cats.