

NLP and Horses

Using NLP in horse communication assists clients in personal growth issues

by Phoebe Bergvall

Jennie held the lead rope, stretched her arm out to her left, and told the horse, “go.”

Dolly, a twenty–six year old Appaloosa mare with huge dark eyes, stood perfectly still, gazing at Jennie with mild interest. Jennie jerked the rope, pointed more forcefully, “I said go!”

Dolly bobbed her head, but not one of her feet so much as twitched.

“Go, damn it!” Jennie pulled the rope taught, then charged the mare, her face reddening. Dolly backed up a few paces.

“See what I mean?” She dropped the rope and turned to face me. “Nobody listens to me. I did exactly what you did, and she trotted in circles for you.” Her voice was tight with emotion. “What’s wrong with me?”

Of course, there are any number of NLP roads to take from here—TD search, change personal history, belief work, score model, etc. But in the interest of focusing on NLP presuppositions

as taught by the disingenuous horse, I start with “the meaning of the communication is the response that you get.” It is a common theme for this type of intervention.

“Make a mental note of how you are feeling right now, as a reference point.” I picked up the rope and stood next to her.

“How about, ready to bawl.”

“OK. Now go back to the start, when you said you were ready to play this ‘game’. What were you feeling then?”

After a pause, during which Jennie’s eyes clearly traveled a visual remembered, auditory, and kinesthetic pattern, she looked down at her now dusty boots and sighed. “Truth is, I wasn’t really clear on what you did, but told myself that the horse was trained so it should be OK. But when I took the rope, I saw her ignoring me, and felt like—defeated.”

“You mean, before you even tried?”

“Yeah. I guess so. I didn’t know that until now...”

“So if the horse was psychic, what would she know about you?”

“All of that!” Jennie laughed.

I then explained to Jennie that in all fairness, this horse already knows me, and that I am serious when I ask her to do something. It might take me a little longer with a strange horse. “But you can get the same results if you pay close enough attention to the reflections she gives you.” (There are no failures, only feedback.)

“She has already told you some important things. First, you were not congruent when you asked her to move out—your body language and tone of voice in effect told her it was OK if she didn’t do anything. Another is, she did understand your approach as a signal to back off. She yielded, and in that moment acknowledged you as alpha to her. (Every behavior is useful in some context) Even though it wasn’t what you thought you were

telling her, it was congruent to her. (The map is not the Territory.) And knowing that you can be alpha is a good thing, because if you aren't, she is. And in spite of her size, her brain is not as big as yours.

“Now, as far as you doing ‘exactly what I did’, let’s look at that a little closer. I ‘saw’ her doing what I wanted before I made a move. I also knew everything I would do to cause it to happen, so I was very clear that it would

happen. I offered her the opportunity first as I held up the lead rope in the direction she should go. Then, if she didn’t take the offer, I would suggest that she should, by lifting the other end of the lead rope in my other hand. Next, I would advise her as to the seriousness of my intent by swinging the end of the rope. Last, if she still had questions, while still holding her lead in the direction I want her to go, I would reach over and tap her with the end of the rope on her shoulder (using the GEO model).

“Since we have had this conversation a few times before, Dolly doesn’t have so many questions anymore. If you use the same body language, and match it with facial expression, she will understand. It is very similar to the language she uses with other horses, where, incidentally, she is usually the alpha mare.

“Back to the communication presupposition, it is me, or my language, that I must look at if things don’t go how I want (problem state). So I check what I did and I do it differently

(requisite variety) (resources). Most horses are very good at reflecting your communication style back to you, consistently. That is one reason they make such good teachers."

I demonstrated the circling maneuver again for Jennie, calling out the action as I did it. Lead...lift...swing...then I stood still as the mare briskly trotted around me for four or five circuits. To demonstrate a call-back, I exaggerated the movements and expression of focusing menacingly on the mares hindquarters, which she knew meant "move it away," and at the same time beckoning with my free hand to her head, which meant "approach me." She trotted in and stopped in front of me.

All of these communications are learned from several basic building blocks where the horse learns to find comfort or relief by yielding to direct or indirect pressure. (Anyone can learn anything if it is chunked down enough.) This again is a natural horse behavior, a game they play with each other while establishing the herd pecking order. Ultimately, communicating with horses, or "training," is a matter of chunking down the desired behavior into yields, and then building combinations.

If good human communication means being able to express oneself so that another hears and understands, then working with horses such that they not only willingly yield, but enjoy the

game and want to play with you, can be a learning that becomes a resource in any relationship. Assertiveness, awareness of response, and clarity of purpose are key issues. I would even suggest that in human communication, the act of listening is a form of yielding. And it is active listening that allows the speaker to develop clarity of thought, confidence, and resolution of conflict.

Attempting and failing to get a horse to yield can and does bring up emotional reactions, typically around issues of self-esteem, capabilities, self-worth, self-image, or in other words, how we think we are seen by the world. Such symptoms are perfect opportunities to resolve important issues for a client. (Symptoms—physical, emotional, etc. are communications about needed action.)

On the other end of the scale, horses in general are metaphors for power, freedom, and possibility. A successful partnership with a horse gives one the integration of physical power, beauty, and grace in communion with one's own mental processes, and the result is a feeling of transcendence.

Jennie worked through the clarity of purpose (visualized Dolly trotting in a circle), awareness of response (ready with what to do if Dolly ignored the first "ask"), and assertiveness (congruent body posture and facial expression), and tried again. Taking a step to the left while holding the middle of the 12 foot

lead rope and pointing in that direction, she lifted the end of the lead in her other hand. Dolly shifted her weight, watching. Jennie circled the end of the rope, eyes firm on Dolly's. Dolly started to walk to the left. Jennie circled the rope end a little faster, and Dolly broke into a trot. Jennie let the rope slide through her hand until she held only the end, and Dolly continued to trot in a full circle. She grinned, "This is cool!"



Phoebe Bergvall is a long-time student of human development, with a degree in Psychology and certifications in Hypnotherapy, NLP, infant swimming instruction, and horsemanship. As she explores the synthesis of core concepts and application of these skills, she finds that clients appreciate the added dimension and impact of the combined activity and process. Questions and comments are welcome. Phoebe can be reached at pbergvall@qwest.net

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