The Human Challenge of 4-H Horse Programs

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Abstract
Management of volunteer, adult leaders in 4-H/Youth horse programs can be challenging. We identify four reasons why "people problems" may develop within horse leader groups, and we recommend five strategies that 4-H agents can use to manage the groups. In sum, we propose that 4-H agents apply some "horse sense" to people problems.

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One of the core educational programs of 4-H/Youth across the nation, and in Oregon, is the horse program. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is also one of the most difficult to manage. The challenge lies primarily with volunteer leaders. In this article we exercise some "horse sense" and present five strategies for success.

Background

In Oregon, there are presently 3,821 youth in horse programs, involved in projects ranging from raising foals to riding for show. 4-H agents guide the programs with support of 1,174 adult, volunteer horse leaders. According to Pat Parelli, author of *Natural Horse-Man-Ship* (1998), this high number of horse leaders can be explained by adults wanting to fulfill a dream--as "to ride off into the sunset"--and to share that dream with youth.

This goal sounds idyllic, but problems with horse leaders can develop. We see several types of "people problems."

Dominance Mindset

To manage a horse, a person must continually assert his or her authority. With some measure of levity, we have found it useful to consider the dynamics of horse herds, where the dominant individual, the alpha animal, must constantly re-assert authority or be replaced by another horse. To maintain this dominant position, the alpha animal intimidates the others. Our observation is that this "dominance mindset" extends for some horse leaders to people, and they vie with each other and the 4-H agent for dominance.

Fiscal Commitment

Participants can spend a substantial sum in 4-H horse programs. In Oregon, an average horse owner will spend about $4,500 each year for board, feed, shoes, and basic veterinary care. There are often additional expenses determined by the owner's willingness to invest in training, showing, and equipment for their animals and themselves. We have seen that increased investment relates to increased desire for dominance, for more control of program decisions.

Time Commitment

In addition to financial commitment, horses also require a substantial time investment. They must be fed, groomed, exercised, and have their stall cleaned daily. That adults invest a great deal of time to help youth manage the horse is significant and raises the horse leader's level of desired control of the program.

Training Methods

Training the horse involves application of knowledge and experience, but there are many theories about what works best. The stakes are high given the fiscal and time commitment and the welfare of the young rider and the horse. Philosophical differences about training methods underlie many disagreements among leaders and with the 4-H agent.

To respond to these challenges we use five strategies.

Strategies

1. Think of the Group of Horse Leaders as a Herd

We expect the group to develop a "pecking order"; however, we conceptualize this more benignly as a preference for a hierarchical leadership style (Gallagher, 2001). We encourage the 4-H agent to expect the horse leaders to vie for dominance but to make clear that the program belongs to Extension and that a volunteer leader can be "fired."

2. Provide Training for Horse Leaders

More proactively, the 4-H agent needs to prepare leaders. Increasingly, we are using leadership training modules on communication, leadership styles, decision making, and conflict resolution to promote effective horse leader groups.

3. Have the Right Attitude

Parelli (1998:13) identifies two ends of the management spectrum: the carrot and the stick. He proposes that between the two extremes is the person who is assertive, balancing the authority to command with the skills to motivate others to follow. We argue that this is fundamentally how 4-H agents must relate to their horse leaders.

4. Anticipate Change, Particularly When a Volunteer Leaves or Joins the Group

When the dominance structure of a horse herd is set, it becomes stable and more peaceful and productive. However, when a leader resigns or a new leader joins the group chaos may reign until a new pecking order is established. The 4-H agent needs to retain the role of "herd stallion" while enforcing norms of civility through the transition period.

5. Be Credible

The 4-H agent needs to be credible. This involves having both solid knowledge of the field and a solid process for engaging participants in decisions. Concerning knowledge, the agent needs to recognize his or her own limits and to draw on volunteers for their knowledge and experience. Indeed, by drawing on horse leaders for their knowledge at key times in a decision process, the 4-H agent demonstrates his or her own dominance.

However, in the final analysis, as one reviewer quipped, "to be the 'boss hoss' or the 'head nag' the 4-H agent will have to be credible, and that involves talking the lingo."

Conclusion

In closing, we believe that strategies for working with horses and working with people can be similar. We see the recent best seller, *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (Roberts, 1997) as not necessarily only about training horses, but about reading people and adapting leadership that is effective. We propose, with these five strategies, that 4-H agents use some "horse sense" to work with horse leaders.

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