

Company gives managers a dose of horse sense

By Cheryl Walker
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VALLEY CENTER — Who ever thought of using horses to teach people about management? Heidi Helly and Terri Egan say people can learn a lot about themselves and the business world by interacting with these powerful creatures.

Last year, the women developed Saddle Sojourns. The company conducts workshops that combine trail rides and arena training on horseback with indoor classroom sessions. Instruction is geared to those who want to increase their leadership abilities, executives looking to build team collaboration and performance and individuals who want to enhance their professional and personal effectiveness as well as increase strategic thinking.

Small group workshops focus on developing decision-making and risk-taking skills.

Helly is a professional horse trainer and a champion endurance rider. She is also vice president of Saddle Sojourns.

"When I was about 2 years old, I knew there was something out there for me working with horses," she said. She and her husband, Patrick, own Harmony Ranch in Valley Center where she has riding students of all ages up to 72 years old.

Egan, who is president of Saddle Sojourns, is also an associate professor of applied behavioral science at Pepperdine University. She teaches courses in human behavior in organizational thinking and managerial decision making.

Ivy Gordon, the company's secretary and treasurer, has a master's degree in organization

development. She has been a business consultant for 25 years.

Saddle Sojourns workshops are held at various locations, such as Daley Ranch in Escondido and Warner Springs Ranch. Horses are matched to riders to teach a variety of disciplines.

What if people are afraid of horses?

"We customize each participant for a safe and uplifting experience," Helly said. "We also use good performance-type horses such as Arabians that are fun to ride. We've found that a lot of our horses have a real sense of humor."

The company uses the relationship between horse and rider to illustrate the need for trust and communication, Helly said.

"Riding a horse is not like driving a car," she said. "The person learns to bend and work with the horse, which helps them to learn to work with people."

Gordon said part of trust is knowing when to lead and when to follow. In the classes, the horse represents the situation and the people one manages. For instance, when a person is riding a horse down a steep trail, it can be best to allow the horse to choose the best route and not confuse it by giving it mixed signals.

How does this correlate to humans?

"In certain circumstances the role of leadership changes in terms of who is best suited to lead the group," Gordon said. "Effective leadership requires the knowledge that there is no one best approach for every circumstance. It requires understanding strengths and weaknesses."

Risk taking and decision making are other aspects where horses can be good teachers, Gordon said.

"Decision making sometimes needs to be split-second, requiring a manager to be relaxed but ready — like riding a horse. If a rider is not alert to the environment and the cues from the horse, reactions take longer," Gordon said.

Before the workshop, a personality assessment is done. Then the program is tailored to meet the goals of the individual.

"Horses are smarter than most people think," Helly said. "A horse can tell if a person is uptight or scared. It's very cute because there are some horses that will actually baby-sit the person."

Workshops usually last three days. The company works with up to 24 people from a business or up to 12 individuals at a time. Workshops focus on vision and goals, leadership potential and personal effectiveness. Some workshops cover women's leadership and endurance riding, and there's a six-day intensive camp that is for highly motivated and physically fit individuals who want to challenge their limits.

And what has been the response?

"I have been highly recommending these workshops to my commercial clients and peers," said Ellen Massena, a vice president and relationship manager with Union Bank of California.

Do you have a story idea for Valley Center? Contact Cheryl Walker at (760) 752-6736, by fax at (760) 743-8231 or e-mail cheryl.walker@uniontrib.com.



Heidi Helly, horse trainer and vice president of Saddle Sojourns, led a troublesome horse up a trail in Escondido. John Gaetaldo / Union-Tribune