

## *Building Effective Relationships through Equine Assisted Learning*

### **RELATIONAL COMPETENCE**

Relational competence is an organization's capacities to build, strengthen, and restore high quality connections between people and create a network of these connections. Built over time, HR professionals must be credible to all shareholders, their colleagues, and the employees they serve. The research by Brockbank & Ulrich finds it critical that HR have effective relationships with key people inside and outside the organization. They must deliver results and establish a reliable track record.

Personal credibility and self-awareness are two components of developing your relational competence. HR people are expected to foster and maintain effective relationships, meaning they should work toward achieving a high interpersonal intelligence or understanding of other people in order to develop their personal credibility. Self-awareness also contributes to your relational competence. Individuals who have an understanding of self or high intrapersonal intelligence, have knowledge of they are, what they can do, what they want to do, how they react to things, which things to avoid, and which things to gravitate toward tend to be more effective.

### **EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING (EAL):**

EAL builds upon the foundation of an experiential learning modality. Research shows that experiential learning is an excellent tool for bringing people together for a variety of reasons - think "team building" and ropes courses. At Kaleidoscope, we partner with horses, our four-legged facilitators, as part of the experiential learning process.

Why horses? Horses, even domesticated ones, instinctually live in a family system that has rules or "non-negotiables" that can help people learn about human beliefs and behaviors. A few salient facts about horses: they are herbivores, and thus are prey to other animals, they live in herds with a hierarchy, and they primarily communicate nonverbally. The herd is important because it means that each horse relies on another for their safety. Two keys to survival are effective communication and **developing relationships** with other members of the herd. Like humans, these relationships can be friendly or the opposite, bullying, can also exist. In the wild, death can be the price paid for a prey animal that does not communicate well or misunderstands the herd's message. A hierarchy or "pecking order" exists within all horse herds. This is not stagnant, but rather is fluid and can be a changing process as individual horses challenge the horse above them in the order. The position in the herd is important, determining many things including who eats first or who eats at all if there are limited resources. Much of the recent "horse whispering" phenomenon is based on creating a mutually respectful relationship, between the horse and the human, while establishing the human being as the leader in the horse herd.

Through our understanding of their instinctual behavior, horses offer humans powerful insights into concepts such as credibility and integrity, effectively working together, and non-verbal communication. Kaleidoscope Learning Circle, llc (KLC) was created because we believe that horse-human experiential learning can positively affect people, potentially challenging and changing the way we think, feel, and behave.

## REALTIONAL COMPETENCE & EAL

How can EAL help your relational competence? Unlike humans, horses are incapable of lying. They do not come into a relationship with hidden agendas, they aren't familiar with sacred cows, and they don't really care about stock prices or other outside measures of success. Horses hold people accountable for who they are in the relationship with them. Nonverbal communication is critical to all animals, and while many humans may think they are primarily responding to the verbal communication, research has shown that we instinctually and unconsciously read and react to nonverbal signals in greater proportion than the spoken word. Horses and other large mammals are masters at reading subtle changes in body language, intention, emotions, and energy.

EAL brings people and horses together in a situation with the goal of creating a learning opportunity for the human. By creating a learning environment, we seek to suspend the rules of habit that often stop people from becoming aware of any incongruence between their beliefs and their behaviors and values. Additionally, horses, through mirroring or reading the emotions of the individual or group can further enhance the learning experience. KLC's programs are customized and designed to invite people to explore their reactions, reflect on the experience, build understanding, and seek to transfer the generalized learning from the experience to specific situations.

EAL celebrates the application of **personal credibility** and **self-awareness** by offering participants the opportunity to...

- increase consciousness and cultural sensitivity by challenging, exploring, and questioning assumptions and habits.
- learn in a supportive and nurturing environment, interacting, developing, and implementing creative, strategic ideas and seeking to identify core values.
- experience a flexible, fluid team exercise where participants define and seek to understand their roles and where there is a high tolerance for ambiguity.
- discover the freedom and autonomy of creating their own consequences, facilitating the exploration of rewards (both intrinsic and extrinsic), risk, and "failure".
- share feedback and reflect through dialogue; possible discussion themes include: identifying mental models and other barriers to change, decision making, linking theory to practice, trust, problem solving, and communication.
- recognize similarities and celebrate differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

*A human being is a part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest--a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for only the few people nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature. ~ Albert Einstein*