

SAY "HELLO"



Julia Felton developing trust

Great teamwork always requires trust. Trust can only develop between you and your horse once you have a great bond and friendship with him. So trust, along with friendship and respect, form the foundation of developing any great relationship.

So what is trust and how do we develop it? For me trust is defined as reliance on the integrity, strength, ability and surety of a person or thing and in my experience you cannot form a great partnership with either another person or your horse unless you both trust each other. Trust is a two way street and each party needs to know that they can rely on the other, no matter what. Yet all too often in horse/human relationships I witness situations where the horse does not implicitly trust the

human 100%. Invariably what I notice are horses that only trust their owners in certain situations. For example, your horse might trust that you will feed and care for him every day, but he may not trust you when you are riding him down the road. The level of trust that your horse has in you is directly linked to how much he can rely on you to be a good, consistent leader for him. We all know that as a prey animal our horses are looking for us to lead them, but we need to be consistent and reliable in that leadership role otherwise our horse will assume the leadership position instead of us.

A great analogy to describe how trust is measured is to compare it to money. Each time you make a good leadership decision you build trust with your horse

and so earn more money. Conversely, each time you make poor leadership decisions you pay out some of your money as trust is eroded. All leaders start with a certain amount of money in their piggy bank; how you act determines whether that pile of money grows or becomes depleted. If you keep making bad decisions then eventually the pile of money disappears; you run out of trust with your horse. It doesn't matter whether the last blunder is big or small, it will be the straw that breaks the camel's back, so to speak, and the reason that mistrust develops.

One of the best ways I have discovered of building trust with your horse is to become really respectful of his personal space. Personal space is defined by the area around you in which you feel totally comfortable. If

someone violates this space you often feel uncomfortable and in some cases threatened. Setting boundaries allows us to respect ourselves and keeps us from inappropriate behaviour.

My work is inspired by Caroline Resnick who developed The Seven Waterhole Rituals philosophy, based on years of observing wild horses. The second Waterhole Ritual is 'Saying Hello' and enables you to create trust with your horse whilst respecting his personal space. In the 'Say Hello' ritual you enter your horse's personal space, give him a little rub on the face and then leave. By entering and then leaving your horse's personal space you show him that you respect his boundaries. For many horses this is a strange experience as typically most humans enter

their horse's personal space uninvited and stay there. The more times that you can 'Say Hello' to your horse the faster you can help build trust and confidence in your horse.

I cannot tell you the number of times that I have witnessed a massive change in a horse, particularly a shy and timid horse, as their confidence builds when they know that every time you approach them there is no agenda and no requirement to do anything.

I was running an Instinctive Horsemanship workshop recently and we spent over half an hour 'Saying Hello' to a very shy mare called Zhara. Before the workshop she had only interacted with her owner, but after a period of various students saying hello to her she soon understood that was fine to allow someone to come up to her. By the end of the workshop she opted to come and stand next to me whilst I was coaching. It was a magical moment as she put her nose on my shoulder, and a massive breakthrough for her confidence.

The 'Say Hello' ritual is based on the horse's natural instinct for formal introductions. Unlike humans, horses reintroduce themselves to each other a number of times each day. Yet many people don't even introduce themselves to their horse once a day, let alone multiple times.

When two horses meet for the first time they effectively ask each other three questions:

1. Who are you?
2. What do you want?
3. How do you operate?

These are the same questions that run through a horse's mind when he interacts with people.

So how do you initiate 'Say Hello' with your horse? First you approach your horse directly from the front making sure that you have your horse's full attention. Many people ask me why we approach from the front when they have often been taught to approach a horse from the side. Well, have you ever seen horses greet each other from the side? No, horses approach each other directly



The Waterhole Rituals so far:

First - 'Sharing Territory'

Hang out with your horse without any expectation of him. Sit in his field, read a book, drink tea and observe.

Second - 'Say Hello'

Horses evaluate each other when they meet for the first time and reintroduce themselves to each other a number of times each day.

from the front and from this position they evaluate each other. As you approach your horse, if he is eating, make sure that he lifts his head up and acknowledges you with both eyes. Since you have already spent time with your horse 'Sharing Territory' ritual (see last issue) and building a great bond, he will not see your approach as threatening.

As you approach your horse, be acutely aware of his body language and what it is signalling to you. If your horse steps backwards, stop your approach and step backwards too. This signals to the horse that you respect his wishes and will not proceed any further until he is ready. If your horse is happy for you to approach, do so slowly and as you reach him reach out the back of your hand. Encourage your horse to stretch to reach your hand. This stretch signals that your horse is being submissive

by lowering his head. Once you have rubbed your horse, step backwards and leave his personal space following the same path that you approached the horse on.

Over the next months continue to Share Territory with your horse in companionship and begin integrating the Say Hello ceremony. Do this ritual as often as you can and let me know how your relationship with your horse begins to change. The Seven Waterhole Rituals are often described as the foundation of all equestrian pursuits, so these activities can easily be integrated into your existing training programme with your horse to complement your current activities.



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Watch your horse's body language as you approach from the front

