

## Are You Listening?

To be accepted by a horse means being able to communicate with them in a reciprocal way. The horse understands you and you understand the horse in a human/horse relationship. Problems occur when communication is discordant, usually when the human is not willing to listen to the horse.

Jackie is the proud alpha mare at *Silver Horse Healing Ranch*. She works with special needs clients by letting them ride on her back. She is tolerant, intelligent and takes her work seriously. One morning Jackie and I were assisting the needs of an autistic and blind client by taking them out on a short trail ride. I was leading Jackie with the client sitting on her back.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Jackie stopped in her tracks and refused to move. My immediate impulse was to pull at her to get her going again. Instead, I decided to pause and figure out what it was that made her stop. She had a determined look in her eye and I knew if I tried to make her move forward it would create conflict.

I looked around at our surroundings. We were at a small opening on the trail where tall grass and wild flowers grew to one side. The thought occurred to me that this was the place on the trail where we had turned around the last time we rode out with this particular client.

"Oh, I get it," I said. "Thanks Jackie, you're informing me this is where we turn around, right? I appreciate your attention to details, but today I've decided to go a little further."

With my listening now in place, I gently pulled on the rope lead. Jackie released the tension in her body, dropped her head, and letting out a huge sigh, strode forward following my lead with ease.

This example illustrates how horses remember everything. As a prey animal their awareness is crucial for their survival. In this particular situation I could have become frustrated with Jackie, calling her stubborn (a stereotypical description of horses when they won't do what WE want). As an alternative, I took time out to pause and reflect. In doing so, I recognized Jackie's willingness to work with me as a team. Horses generally communicate through their actions like humans do. Most every form of communication requires some kind of movement. The actions of horses can give us clues as to what they are trying to communicate.

I used to take care of two geldings, Hank and JJ. The more dominant horse, JJ, consistently bullied Hank until finally I decided to separate them by placing a fence in-between. They had one water bucket at the time, so I placed it beneath the dividing fence. During times I went to feed them and upon inspecting the water bucket, I noticed horse poop floating on top of the water. I figured out it was Hank. At first I thought it was an accident, but after the same thing happening several days in a row I concluded it was a protest. In order to get my attention Hank was strategically targeting the water bucket.

Using my listening skills—basically, asking the question and waiting for a response—I discovered what Hank was trying to convey: "Sara, when are you going to move the water bucket? Every time I get a drink JJ goes for me and I want to drink in peace."

I went ahead and moved the bucket over to Hank's side and got a replacement bucket for JJ. After this Hank never pooped in the bucket again!

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