

# Equine Communication - More than Eye Contact and Body Language

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It was a warm, sunny spring day. Five miniature horses stood along the far fence of the arena, poking their heads through the boards and stretching their lips towards the fresh, green grass shooting up on the other side. This was my first EAGALA training and I was looking forward to an exciting new learning opportunity. The first task on day one was to “go get a horse” – in the usual EAGALA manner, no further instruction was given. Three people went out among the horses and each attempted to move the horse they selected using a variety of methods.

I went to a dark-colored horse that had his back turned to me. I approached the horse from his right side ensuring he saw me before I touched him. I stroked his neck to gain his attention while visualizing the two of us standing together in the center of the arena. I then moved toward my preselected location with the horse following me closely. We stood quietly in the center while the other participants pulled, poked, prodded, clicked and kissed to their horses with varying degrees of success.

During the processing portion following the exercise, the participants were asked several questions. One woman asked how come I didn't talk to the horse. The first answer which came to my mind was “because horses don't talk to each other”. Sure they occasionally whinny or nicker to another horse but the vast majority of their communication is done non-verbally. I didn't verbalize to my horse during the exercise because I didn't feel it would be a meaningful or effective way to communicate my intentions.

The woman's question caused me to think further about how we communicate with our equine partners. A variety of clinicians have recently popularized the idea of utilizing body language to communi-

cate with the horse (not a new idea by any means but a whole generation of would-be horse trainers have jumped on the “natural horsemanship” bandwagon). Many who have followed these popular clinicians have learned a great deal about how horses communicate but in many cases are limited (by choice or by inexperience) to the various “training techniques” popularized by the clinician. In other words, many “horse communication experts” are still unaware of the various levels and dimensions of non-verbal communication utilized by horses which go far beyond the subtleties of body position and eye contact.

If you think of this from a horse's perspective, we are asking him to essentially be fluent in multiple languages: human verbal and non-verbal communication, horse non-verbal communication as interpreted by humans, and intra-species communication (how horses communicate with each other). Many horses become remarkably talented in all three types of communication but others really struggle and are often labeled as bad, stupid or stubborn.

## What am I really saying?

Later in the day, the miniature horses were replaced by full-size horses and a new group of people volunteered as participants. In this task participants were to work in groups to get a horse to go over an obstacle placed in the center of the arena. For this activity I was in the observer role. The group of participants worked for several minutes but were unable to get a horse to go anywhere near the obstacle. After many failed attempts, two of the participants picked large handfuls of grass from outside the arena and used it to entice a horse to go over the obstacle. With grass in hand, the team succeeded in getting two horses (one right after the other) over the obstacle.

Having observed this, one might think the grass enticement was a success in that the horses went over the jump to receive a reward (the grass). However, what no one seemed to notice is that the horses



promptly returned to the corner they had come from making absolutely no attempt to eat the grass the participants had supposedly enticed them with. Could it be the grass was not a bribe for the horses so much as it was a crutch for the participants?

When the participants picked the grass their attitude about the task changed. They went from feeling they had little chance of success to believing they had a great chance at success since they “knew” a horse would work for a treat. In the end, the horses were more interested in returning to their corner than in accepting the treat. So, what were they responding to? I believe the horses responded to the change in energy of the participants.

At the start of the task, the participants were told they could not touch the horses or speak to them. There was an opportunity for the group to plan before silence was initiated. During the planning time there were many comments about how difficult or impossible it would be to move a horse over an obstacle with these limitations. The group approached the horses “knowing” they couldn’t succeed. They did not exclude the positive, confident energy of good leaders and the horses could sense the discomfort.



When the grass was added to the mix, the group was confident they would succeed. In effect they became better herd leaders as they now carried a positive, confident energy with them. The horses responded to the shift in energy, and the increased confidence the participants expressed in their ability to accomplish the task, not the expectation of receiving a handful of grass.

### **Horse Communication and EAP Practice**

It is this deeper and seldom understood communication style which makes the horse such a valuable part of the therapeutic team. Humans have learned

to ignore most non-verbal messages we receive. The intuition which came naturally to our ancestors thousands of years ago is now considered a special gift by some and systematically dismissed as little more than a parlor trick by others. Our society has taught us to ignore our intuition and those subtle “gut feelings” and rely upon verbal cues which can easily be manipulated. Vocal dishonesty can be easy to hide but you can’t hide your true feelings and intentions from an animal whose survival depends on their ability to sense danger in any form. Our horses are far more advanced in communication than we are in that they understand the non-verbal cues of emotion and energy never lie.

The horse sees what is on the outside of a person and feels what is on the inside which makes them very successful in facilitating the production of metaphors in therapy as their response is genuine to what the person is really feeling vs. what they are portraying. The client is often unaware of these feelings but they cannot be hidden from the horse. I once worked with a client whom I’ll call Wendy. At the beginning of one session, Wendy was asked to go and put a halter (the word “halter” was not used) on the horse of her choice. Wendy somewhat reluctantly took the halter from my co-facilitator and looked at it with some trepidation. Wendy went toward Molly, a horse that is normally very personable and easy to catch. However, on this day Molly constantly moved away from Wendy each time she moved toward her with the halter.

After spending nearly half of the session with Wendy advancing toward Molly and the horse moving away from her, Wendy was invited to check in with the facilitation team. She was asked about her experience. Wendy didn’t know what the halter was or exactly what it was for. She suspected it went on the horse’s head and she believed it was used to restrain or re-



strict the horse in some manner.

Through the processing Wendy labeled the halter with many negative metaphors saying it was restrictive, could hurt the horse, and could choke or otherwise cause harm and/or discomfort to the horse. It was clear the halter was no longer a simple piece of rope but had become a powerful metaphor leading to significant self-discovery for Wendy. After some contemplation, Wendy called the halter her voice. She didn't just mean the physical production of voice but the power of her words and their effect on others. She felt her words could be harmful and restrictive – so much so she was afraid to say anything at all in certain situations.

This was a powerful session for Wendy as she realized how she felt about her words and how she feared saying the wrong thing and hurting someone she cared about. As she approached Molly, the halter was laced with her fear of unintentionally inflicting harm. To the observer, Wendy was doing everything right in approaching the horse. She was calm, moved slowly and deliberately and approached Molly with respect. However, the information we learned from the processing tells us the message she was sending was one of fear, discomfort and distrust in her ability to not cause harm. The horse was extremely aware of the emotions coming from Wendy and as a result had no intention of allowing this person close enough to touch her.


Once Wendy processed the halter as a metaphor for her voice and all the potential harm her words could cause, she gave the halter to me – metaphorically reproducing her usual behavior: giving up her voice as it was something she feared. The session was near-

ing an end so we gave Wendy the opportunity to go and say goodbye to Molly and the other horses. With no halter in hand, Wendy walked toward Molly who turned and met her half way. The woman and the horse stood together in the pasture in total comfort with one another. A gentle, warm breeze blew across the open fields and I could feel the shift in the energy as the two beings stood in peaceful congruency with the inside of each accurately and honestly reflected on the outside.

#### **About the Author:**

Cheryl holds a Master's degree in social work from Western Michigan University focusing on program planning, development, implementation and evaluation. Cheryl works as a consultant in her EAGALA business, Path of the Peace Horse, where she helps other equine assisted therapy programs build effective, evidence-based programming as well as helping the business acquire funding through grant writing and program evaluations.

Please visit [www.peacehorse.net](http://www.peacehorse.net) to learn more.

Cheryl worked in the horse industry for over a decade and has nearly 25 years of horse experience specializing in equine communication and behavior with a special sensitivity for the "difficult" horse. As a trainer, Cheryl supports a natural and respectful approach, listening to what the horse needs rather than forcing her will upon it. She does not use gadgets (aka "training aids"), special equipment or other "quick fixes" on her horses. If you are interested in building a relationship with your horse, please visit Cheryl's horse professional website at: [www.cherylleigheriksen.webs.com](http://www.cherylleigheriksen.webs.com) 

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