

Changing Resistance to Willingness

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We've all experienced our horse shying away from mailboxes, trash cans, or that new lawn furniture we placed under the best tree on the farm. Often it may seem that the horse *won't*, more than they *will*. When a horse won't ..., we label them resistant, (or stubborn, or pig-headed or angry). Horses have a long list that they share in saying no. Clippers, fly spray, bath hoses, farriers, bridles, saddles, medications, crossing water, and horse trailers are just a few of the items on the list.

The horse is a rather simple-minded creature. Now, don't take that the wrong way. What I mean is that their brain is designed almost exclusively for survival and self-preservation. It's hard for us humans to remember that. Our brains are capable of higher, complex thought processes. When we get up in the morning we start planning our day. We have a long list of tasks and agendas. The horse doesn't create a plan for the day. They search for the best grass blade, take a rest, play a little for exercise, find some water, and take a nap again! And, of course, they keep an eye on the environment for danger and threats. The agenda for the day is simple, *stay alive*. Eat, sleep, and exercise. The equine brain is instinctual and reactive. Resistance or refusals are not natural behaviors. Can you imagine the outcome for the horse that refuses to follow the instruction of the lead horse, and runs left instead of right away from a threat? Of course – it's death for sure. So, though we know the mailbox won't suddenly start chasing us, the horse doesn't know that, instinctively. A horse sees anything unfamiliar as a potential threat to their survival and so attempts to flee. There's no thought or planning behind their movement, just pure instinct. As a horse becomes experienced, they learn to override their reactivity and contain their fear.

When you're with your horse, think of him/her as a purely natural creature, no matter how experienced. Our "job" is to guide them to understand that those clippers are not a threat.



We are usually the ones that provoke and inspire resistant behavior. Remember, the instinctual response to anything unfamiliar is to flee. Combine that response with the movement of that unfamiliar object coming *at* them, and in the horse's mind, it is confirmed that the object is indeed a predator. Enter - the third problem. The horse is trapped and can't run. They're haltered and contained so their behavior escalates to fighting. Reactive behaviors become dangerous quickly.

When a horse demonstrates these reactive behaviors, we tend to attribute them to the horse making a *decision* not to cooperate. (All the horse is saying is, "I'm really uncomfortable right now, and would prefer to get away from you.") Often more forceful methods are applied to try to control the horse's behavior. Usually this just makes behavior worse, and confirms for the horse that he *is* going to die. He's trapped and can't fight. You get the job done, but at the expense of the horse. Inspiring fear is a poor way to train the horse.

Effective teaching and training *involves* the horse in the process. Our goal should be developing interactive behaviors rather than reactive ones.

In my experience, the reason even natural horse training methods fail to be effective is that we don't fully take into account how our horse thinks and learns.

Requirements for willingness

We can't change the fact that inanimate objects are unfamiliar to the natural horse. Clippers and spray bottles are just not seen in the field! We can, however, change how those objects behave. Your horse must feel safe and non-threatened (by his definition, not ours). Consider the simple task of bathing. As you pick up the hose and turn the water toward him, he moves backward, starts shuffling, or tries to run away from the stream. *You're* thinking that the water shouldn't be a big deal because he's very willing to stand out in the rain or even walk into the pond. But, his concern is not about the water. The equine brain sees an unfamiliar object moving toward him as a predatory attack. The hose is chasing him and he can't get away. You can overcome his safety concerns and instinctual reaction by holding the hose still with the stream pointed away from him, then ask *him* to step to the hose and then into the stream, one foot at a time. This gives him time to evaluate the unfamiliar. If the hose is not chasing him, he won't feel threatened. He's not fearful if *he* is the one who chose to approach and evaluate. Most of our tasks with horses involve "going at" them with many different objects – medicine syringes, saddles and pads, spray bottles and clippers, to name a few. *We* know these are not horse-eating items, but the horse only registers that an unknown something is coming at him.

Once your horse feels safe, then learning can take place. The education (training) process must be broken down into steps that they can accept – one thing at a time. They can't think about the big picture. They don't know the ultimate goal. They deal with life moment to moment. The only thing important to them is what is happening *now*. Dealing with the horse is not really much different than dealing with a two year old child. The education we provide for that child is a step by step process. She can't learn to add 1+1 until she knows and understands what the number one means. Certainly she may be able to recite the answer, but won't truly understand its meaning. When she can comprehend the meaning of the numbers, she can move beyond basic arithmetic. The horse doesn't know that the "bath" involves hosing every body part. They must be taught, step by step. You must first teach them to accept the hose. Just because they stand still for the chest area doesn't mean they'll stand still for the flank and hind end or legs. Horses are particularly sensitive to movement toward the flank. I suspect this is because that's the target the lion aims for in taking them down.

Teaching the horse using a slow and deliberate step by step method allows them the time to think and participate. Every time we "go at" our horse, whether it is with a piece of equipment or our body language, the horse immediately switches to instinctual reactive behaviors. It's impossible for them to learn if all they're thinking about is how to get away. Whenever the horse displays reactive behavior, it's important to bring them back to a cooperative state before proceeding to the next step. When the horse tries to avoid, don't continue on to simply get the job done. The horse reads this as persistent chasing (threat) and his "poor" behavior escalates to dangerous behavior. They don't learn from that strategy either. Strive to provide comfort for your horse in each step and they'll enter an interactive, willing state. Show them there is no threat. Keep in mind that since you're the one behind that hose, or clippers, or spray, that it's *your* behavior and movement that determines whether your horse will quietly participate or fight.