

Get back on track with Icelandic horses

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Icelandic horses have many roles and there are many aspects to horse riding and cultivation. Some people spend the summer with their horse-trailer in tow driving between competition venues, others take horse-riding tours in the mountains and the wilderness and still others prefer shorter, more peaceful rides. Then there are trainers, coaches, breeders and countless others.

Switzerland has a considerable culture in Icelandic horses, which have been given the noble task of getting managers who are tired of their job or are not sufficiently productive back on track.

Claudia Sidler, horse whisperer, riding instructor and trainer, runs a company that provides leadership coaching using exclusively Icelandic horses. There are various courses on offer – from group courses for managers from various walks of life, to group courses in the workplace and workshops for teachers seeking better control of their classroom.

Claudia was recently in Iceland with a friend of hers and invited me to spend a morning with her to learn about her methods and vision. After a delicious breakfast and pleasant chat, we set off into the countryside on our Icelandic horses and in good company.

“All horses need a leader”

“People get back in touch with themselves on these courses. The thing is that horses, by their very nature, need leaders. In the herd there are always leaders that the others follow. Horses find those weaknesses that people need to deal with. The horses help to overcome problems and the tasks set are a great challenge for everyone,” says Claudia.

The management courses take place mostly in the woods, with all sorts of puzzles and tasks to be completed using the reins. Participants rarely actually get on the horses.

“Reading” people from the horses they choose

“I put the participants among a group of horses and get them to choose a horse to work with. In fact, the horse and the person choose each other. I can gauge participants from the horses they choose, as I know the horses so well. I guess the personality traits of a participant correctly about 80% of the time, and base my course on that,” says Claudia, who has been running courses like these since 1999.

There are many types of tasks to be completed, such as leading horses through cones or hanging curtains or over a red mat. Longer reins are also used to enable participants to control the horses from behind.

“Horses open the heart and soul”

“Horses open the heart and soul,” says Claudia, and apparently have a sixth sense. They sense what people are thinking and feeling.

“Horses sense what you are thinking and if, when you come to a task, you have already decided that your horse will not make it or if you are apprehensive about the task, then the

horse will stop too,” says Claudia. This apparently happens often and, when it does, the challenge becomes to get the horse back on side in order to complete the task. This can also be applied to the context of the workplace. When staff feel a lack of trust or see that their managers do not believe that a given project will succeed, they do not receive the right message and the results suffer accordingly.

Working with the horse’s natural character

In fact, the courses work on the basis of the natural character of the horses. Icelandic horses grow up in herds, which have their own pecking order and leaders. Claudia attaches great importance to using horses that have grown up in herds. They adopt this natural herd behaviour and are therefore preferred for this type of task – Icelandic horses spend a lot of time outside, free in their herds to develop natural herd behaviour. In other countries it is common for horses to be separated off into smaller enclosures and smaller groups. Five of Claudia’s six horses were born in Iceland.

Training a horse is about replacing the leader the horse previously had in the herd. Horses are therefore dependent on leaders both by nature and human training. Most horse enthusiasts know that when you try to round up horses some play up more than others and that not all members of the herd are as easy to get under control or even get into a field.

Helps keep the respect and order in the classroom

When Claudia gets teachers on her courses, they are put inside an enclosure with six horses. Once there, they are asked to work with the horses in various ways, one task being to move them from one corner to another. They are not told what methods should be used – the key is to identify the leader among the horses, get that horse on side, and make it trust and respect you. Once you have achieved this, you can easily work with the whole group and move them around as needed, as the other horses will follow the leader. No doubt many teachers recognise this. If in a group of students there is one individual who is influential over the others, it is important that they should respect the teacher and that there should be discipline and mutual respect. If you constantly try to discipline the others – who are not the leaders or the root of the problem – then it will be difficult to get the upper hand.

Claudia’s students are rarely horse enthusiasts and many have not had any contact at all with horses. Indeed, that is part and parcel of the training – to get them to experience and cope with new situations. “Managers must learn to understand in order to be able to manage. It’s about respect and trust. The same as is needed for communication between humans and horses. Just as all horses are different, so all staff members are different,” says Claudia.

Claudia worked as a teacher for seventeen years before going into leadership coaching

Before going into this sort of leadership coaching, Claudia worked as a teacher for seventeen years and then taught herself about horse training. She says that horses are useful tools for self-control and self-improvement.

“People complete the tasks in their own way and it’s OK to make mistakes – we all do. The course helps people refocus. If they lose balance again then they know it is time for another course. When you “hit the wall” at work, come back to us and we’ll help you back on your feet,” says Claudia.

One of the tasks that managers have to tackle is to be in an enclosure with two horses and find out which one is the leader. “One is bigger than the other. The manager has to detect the relationship and communication between them. He then needs to control the leader – that is the key. Once that is done, the manager has become the leader of all three, and so can control the situation,” says Claudia. It is a similar project to the one given to teachers, but targeted at managers of companies working in smaller groups, rather than at leaders of larger groups, such as teachers. “It’s important in all of this for managers to focus on what really matters and think less about what is less important,” says Claudia.

Claudia also trains groups in team-work

Claudia also runs courses to train workers from large companies in team-work. She has had groups ranging in size from thirty to seventy people from companies and institutions, with the focus on being both a team-player and a group leader. She also gets many people who are battling with getting over the stresses and strains of daily life. Horses are a useful tool in achieving this.

“The horses have a sixth sense. They perceive your feelings and mental state. They sense stress. When a participant chooses a horse, you can gauge their character and read them through the horses. How they react, and so on. The horses are actually a mirror for these features. When you have a task to complete at work, you know who is boss and who answers to you. It is also important to know what the task is, its goals and challenges. In teaching, it is important for the pupils to know who the leader is. Children need to know who is in control,” says Claudia, by way of explanation as to why horses are such good teaching material.

Women go about things differently to men

Claudia says that women make different managers to men and often splits them up in group lessons and keeps track of how each group manages their tasks. She says that their approach is usually different, with men going about things differently to women.

We move on to discuss whether or not anybody can become a leader. “Management styles vary. What kind of manager you are is determined by your upbringing, family, birth order and other factors. Everybody has a fire inside. But that is not the most important thing. Water is more important. Water gives you new ideas and flow, which are important for a manager,” says Claudia. She says that everybody can become a manager – some have it in their nature, others need to work harder at it.

“You must be able to lead yourself in order to lead others”

“The key to being a manager is to be in touch with yourself. You must know yourself in order to lead others. It is essential to be able to lead yourself first,” says Claudia, adding: “In order to get the best results, managers and staff should be as diverse as possible. You can liken companies to football teams. One individual does not have everything it takes. You need a good combination of the main elements in the team: wind, fire, water and earth. Wind brings ideas. Fire brings movement and power. Water brings cooperation. And with earth, comes money.”

Managers need an overview

Having an overview is an important aspect in management. Claudia says that many managers want to lead from the front and keep a high profile, but in the meantime do not know what is going on behind them or how individual departments or staff members are operating. She says that managers need to be able to stand outside the group, watch and see what is happening. We can learn a lot from horses in this context.

“That’s how stallions behave in their enclosure. The stallion stands outside the group of mares and watches, but is not inside the group itself. When the herd is on the move, the stallion runs behind. In this way, he has an overview, knows exactly what is going on and has complete control,” says Claudia. By letting people work with a few horses together in an enclosure often brings this home to people.

She says that those who follow her courses usually leave with better vision and focus as regards their tasks and functions. They gain some foothold and grounding, and some come back if things at work start to go wrong again.

Learnt a lot from Benedikt LÍndal

Claudia claims to have learned a lot from Benedikt LÍndal, riding instructor and master trainer. His work and approach has taught her a lot – to focus on the positive side of things and work on the basis of that, instead of sticking to how things in training and coaching were always done, and fixating on the horses’ mistakes and what went wrong.

She mentions other inspirations, such as the world-famous horse whisperer Monty Roberts, David Harris, and Paul Hunting, who also offers management training using horses in the UK and is the author of *Why Talk to a Guru? When You Can Whisper to a Horse: The Natural Art of Leadership*. According to Claudia, this book is very informative.

The German writer Fritz Hendrich has also written very good books on the subject, such as *Horse Sense – Drei Schritte zum Charisma der Führung* (*Horse Sense – Three steps to the Charisma of Leadership*, a book about Alexander the Great and his horse, Bucephalus) and *Die Vier Energien Des Führens* (*The Four Elements of Leadership*, i.e. earth, water, air, and fire).

More information on Claudia’s work is available on her website Magnus.ch (in German). Magnús is one of her horses, she has worked extensively with him on these courses and he is one of her favourites.