



Having COOL thoughts!

Middle of the Road

By Paul Dufresne

When people own a horse, they usually wish to have a partnership where they do fun things together. In saying this, I assume that most owners agree they should be the leader in this relationship.

Many people lack experience in understanding horses and how to be a leader that is firm, but kind. They need to find a balance in their leadership so that their partnership can progress positively. This is developed through positive experiences, gaining courage and building trust so that growth happens in the partnership. That narrow, middle road is what people need to identify for themselves.

How do you find the middle of the road? To be effective as a leader of horses we need to be more horse-like. We are challenged just understanding other humans and getting along, but understanding another species can be tough! People think ahead (sometimes) and have ulterior motives. Horses just live in the moment. We need to be simple, clear, and fair with horses. This is easier said than done while communicating in entirely different languages.

You can lavish horses with treats, caresses, and rubs but this does not mean they will see you as a leader or respect you. It does not mean it will have that "sure I can do that for you" attitude. If a horse doesn't respect you he may not care to comply. He will happily accept

treats and love then ignore you or give you attitude when it comes to what you might like to try. This can be a tough pill for folks to swallow - that, after all the loving you've lavished on him, the horse would not try for you. People may think it must be something else bothering their horse - sometimes looking for answers everywhere but themselves.

Some owners overuse pressure and others don't use enough. Some owners hate the very word, but pressure can be positive. To move forward with a task, there needs to be a positive pressure that tells the horse he should go ahead and investigate - to try something even if he's unsure. The pressure necessary for any task needs to be modified to the point where any horse could start to succeed doing it. To lead, you have to become responsible for ensuring you are understandable but also ensuring the horse makes a sincere attempt at trying for you. This can be where the waters get muddy.

A demand may feel scary or odd to a horse or maybe he thinks, "I am not subordinate to you in the herd so why should I do that for you?" Most people would agree that their horse needs to be able to accomplish certain tasks with their guidance... SAFELY. If the guidance

is poorly presented, the horse may simply ignore the pressure of the demand or he may try to get away. The leader needs to be fair and understandable so that a demand is presented as something worth trying. This is the middle of the road. A leader needs to know how to break down a task into easily achievable steps and how to recognize when the horse is making a try, however small. Some have trouble recognizing a small try that they should reward. Some reward a non-try. Recognizing and rewarding a small try is crucial in training but repeatedly rewarding the non-tries may set up road blocks in more challenging situations.


Some people have no idea whether their lead is understandable or whether they actually have the horse's undivided attention.

Not everyone knows how to achieve a safe and trusting relationship with a horse. Leaders need to be positively assertive. Of course, it might help

to know how assertiveness looks and feels and how a horse can find your approach acceptable and understandable. It's hard to find the middle of the road when you are not sure where the road is.

This is where good teachers can help. They are there to help you find the middle of the road. They will take you through incremental exercises that are designed to establish you as the leader and your horse as the follower while maintaining a safe environment for both. They can help you learn to lead correctly and give you feedback before the horse decides to take over! Horses will try for you if they feel they should. There needs to be incentive there and a recognition of you as the leader - especially as the tasks become more challenging. A fair leadership role can develop a far stronger bond than simply lavishing them with praise/love.

Horses are born followers IF they have a leader they trust. A calm horse that follows your lead is quite simply happier, is safer to be around, has few (if any) destructive behaviors and is less expensive to own. Farriers are happier working on horses that don't fight when having their feet picked up. Vet appointments are faster and less expensive if your horse doesn't have to be sedated for simple procedures. Heck, if your horse should get injured and you have to do basic emergency treatment, the treatment shouldn't become secondary to trying to control your horse. This is why we train for these situations. The horse owner has to first learn basic leadership skills to find the middle of the road. Being a proactive leader means becoming educated in the way of the horse. Lessons or clinics are a great way to learn these skills. You can always read books or watch videos but it's rarely as effective as working with your horse and getting feedback from a professional in real time. Every time you interact with your horse you are training, so watch what you train for!

The choice is yours. Choose to become a responsible leader. Find the middle of the road with your horse. You can develop that extraordinary relationship with your horse if you take the steps necessary to become better educated and be a better leader/trainer. 

Paul Dufresne is a clinician/trainer educating people for over 25 years to develop safe, creative relationships with their horses. His approach is a blend of the classical but also using methods that make sense to the horse. Helping owners develop their leadership skills by using techniques that are modified to the needs of the horse and its leader. One of the key ingredients is the development of relaxation cues that are based on the horse's natural reflexes, to relax and to produce a calm follow and enhanced performance.

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