



Janis Cooper

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Horses Are Listening to Us – Are We?

Observing what horses are telling us through their actions can reveal how well we listen to ourselves – mind, body, and spirit. Working with horses and using Appreciative Inquiry principles can help people appreciate their holistic voices. Horses help us become more congruent communicators, strengthening our ability to listen to our appreciative voice, a key component of personal and professional success.

A woman in her 30s, who we will call Mary, participated in an equine-facilitated learning session with a goal of strengthening her self-leadership abilities. In the first activity with Andrew, a tall, slender thoroughbred horse, she was asked to move Andrew from point A to point B without touching, bribing or using a lead line to guide him. The goal was for Andrew to want to follow Mary on his own. They set out walking side by side with Andrew as an eager partner. After fifty feet, however, Andrew suddenly stopped while Mary continued for another fifteen feet before stopping. She stood still staring straight ahead, knowing Andrew was no longer by her side.

The practitioner called across the arena, “What happened at the very moment Andrew stopped following you?” Mary replied, “I began to doubt myself.” As Mary verbalized the words, the practitioner noticed Andrew relax. When they probed further into her thoughts and Andrew’s behavior, Mary began to consider her negative thoughts and associated them with disadvantageous outcomes elsewhere in her life. She recalled times when negative thoughts eroded the trust of those she was charged with leading. The remainder of the session involved working on reversing negative thought patterns and replacing them with positive ones.

The appreciative voice

Partnering with horses brings out certain aspects of the appreciative voice, including listening with our eyes and asking questions that evoke deep inner



The power of Appreciative Voice

perspectives of participants' feelings and actions, as well as those of the horses. Horses add a dimension to facilitation that enables people to experience and reflect upon their own behaviors and group behaviors in a memorable way, accelerating everyone's learning.

When people step into an arena with horses, their experiences are unique and practitioners need to be open to outcomes – all outcomes – allowing the horse to play the role of co-facilitator. Some people express fear, some complacency and others confidence, apparent to other participants through verbal and nonverbal expressions. What others cannot see or sense, however, is what is going on inside another person – hearing their inner voice or receiving their biofeedback. But horses can, which is why they make excellent co-teachers. Horses help us gain a perspective that people cannot usually see or observe, and yet has an impact on outcomes – if we only listen to what they are telling us.

<i>Practitioner:</i>	Why do you think the horse stopped following you? What was going on with you at that time?
<i>Participant:</i>	I started to doubt myself; that the horse would stop following me.
<i>Practitioner:</i>	When else does this happen at work?
<i>Participant:</i>	A lot. I'm often very confident at the beginning of a project, but part way through I begin doubting we'll succeed.

When people sabotage themselves with negative thinking, horses pick up on and react to them based on their biofeedback and body language. For instance, when Mary began to doubt herself, a series of physiological responses (blood pressure increased, body tensed) signaled to Andrew, and he no longer felt safe walking by her side, so he stopped. Mary's initial thoughts of success as she started out produced positive results with Andrew, while her negative thoughts involving self-doubt kept her from attaining her goal.

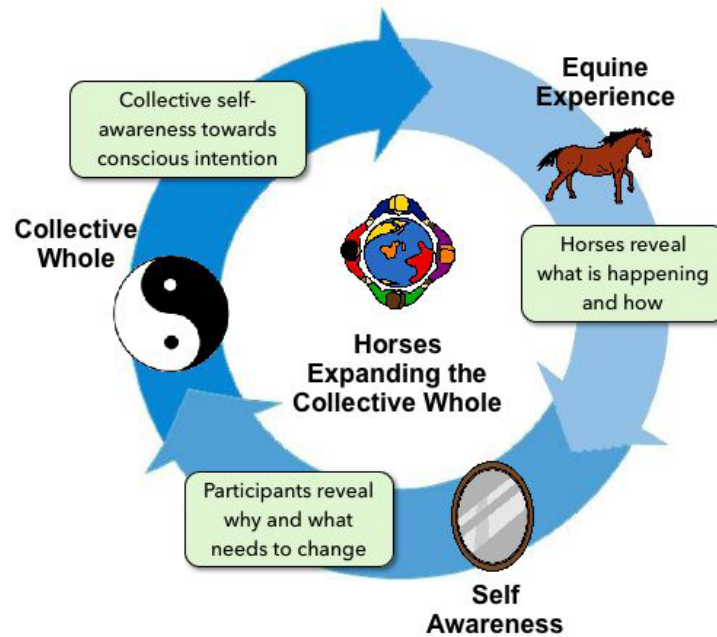
Equine-facilitated learning practitioners are trained to look for and probe the disconnect between mind, body and horse. Instead of pointing out what went wrong in unsuccessful activities, practitioners can layer Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into clients' experiences by reframing thoughts and actions, highlighting individual and group strengths, and using positive reinforcement. In response to what the horses are telling us, participants can quickly become aware of thoughts and behaviors that no longer serve them or their relationships and learn to associate positive results with somatic responses in their body.

Mary demonstrated this in the previous example when she was asked to create an affirmation and use it to walk with Andrew to see how he would respond. Andrew provided immediate feedback based on the authenticity of Mary's appreciative voice when he exhibited a willingness to follow her, on his own, wherever she wanted to lead him.

Our inner being revealed

If the words and images we paint create futures, there is a somatic component that comes into play in AI which has a lot to do with our future success. While words are easily spoken and positive images can be painted, unless we truly embrace the positive thoughts that accompany the words and images, we diminish our goals of attainment.

This diagram shows how horses help us develop congruence between how we show up, how we act, and our intentions.



Activities involving horses demonstrate how we show up in leadership roles and as group members. They reveal how our thoughts and energy impact others, along with our ability to communicate and collaborate effectively. Horses also require that participants practice empathy while pursuing the goals they are tasked with, no differently from how we nurture human relationships to get things done.

When AI is applied to equine-facilitated learning workshops, practitioners can help bring to the surface the places where positive changes can benefit an organization. They provide guidance through selected activities with the horses and can incorporate strengths-based learning and AI principles in post-activity

debriefings. A series of appreciative questions helps participants understand what the horses were “saying” and, more importantly, give voice to the “why” behind their behaviors. Practitioners essentially guide participants through an individual AI 5D cycle during arena activities:

<i>Defining</i>	What is the horse telling me?
<i>Discovery</i>	Becoming more self-aware of feelings, behaviors and inner voice.
<i>Dream</i>	Imagining how to show up at work/home and what their world would look like through an appreciative lens.
<i>Design</i>	Modifying behavior to produce appreciative results, validated through horses' behavior in subsequent activities.
<i>Destiny</i>	Acting upon the modifications through their experiences of listening to what the horses were saying (validation of positive change, authenticity, and congruency).

Mirroring the workplace

When groups of people partner with horses in AI equine-facilitated workshops, discovery unfolds in many ways. Often, behaviors that show up in workshop activities mirror behaviors in the workplace. This allows people to become aware of how they behave and collaborate with one another. By applying AI principles and a strengths-based approach to the activities and facilitation, a group's diversity is highlighted, where differences are honored and where each other's strengths are applied towards an effective and thriving organization. Leaders also become more aware of their effectiveness in steering a group.

Picture two leaders in the middle of a large circle, standing with their backs to each other so they can only see half of the circle. They cannot talk to each other or move from their positions. Each leader is responsible for guiding their own team to move the horse around the section of the circle they are facing (180 degrees). One leader begins by instructing their team to begin walking the horse around their half of the circle. The participants cannot touch or bribe the horse, which is free to wander. Additionally, they cannot talk to one another and can only act on what their leader tells them to do. When the leader successfully guides the horse, through their team, to the other side of the circle, the other leader takes over instructing their team on what to do. Everyone operates as a unit with the horse being an equal member. The horse will respond to what is

Learning in action. What is the horse telling the group and who is leading whom?



happening within the teams as the leaders direct them, including individuals' thoughts, energy, and breathing.

During a facilitated workshop, one group tried repeatedly to guide the horse around their portion of the circle to the other team and yet the horse refused to move. The leader of the team stood frozen, not sure how to guide the team through the horse's deadlock. Seeing the frustration, the practitioner asked, "By a show of hands who believes that you can be successful in getting the horse over to the other team?" Not one person raised their hand. They were asked to reflect where skepticism in the outcome impacted results, whether at work or home. After a moment of reflection, the practitioner presented a third question, "What would be different if your thoughts shifted to what is possible?" With that, the group refocused their attention, took some deep calming breaths, and effortlessly guided the horse around the circle to the other team. All members' effective use of appreciative voice, including their self-management and self-control, ultimately determined the outcome of the activity.

One of this group's leaders said afterwards:

The difference in what I communicated with my thoughts, the energy I projected, my body language, and whether I was holding stress, made a huge difference in how the team did as we moved throughout the exercise. This will have a huge impact on how I lead in the future because I've felt the difference and seen the results.

Positive words, images and thoughts are synchronized through Horses
When people communicate effectively through their minds and bodies, their actions become congruent with their thoughts, feelings and emotions. In a group setting, these actions can have a positive emotional contagion that influences

others in terms of how things get done. Horses provide people the awareness needed to alter their voices and have a more profound and positive effect on the world. They will know if the leaders and the team participants are congruent in their thoughts and visions of a positive outcome. When they are, horses will wholeheartedly participate in that outcome.

Success! Reframing negative thoughts towards positive results in a horse activity



People's voices cannot be effective if they are not listening to themselves. When people take the time to stop and reflect on what the horses have been communicating, they will discover and experience the power of their own appreciative voice.

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