Horse sense: Equine program teaches corporate leadership lessons

Through team-building exercises at Pal-O-Mine Equestrian in Islandia, managers tapped into skills "they didn't know they had," CEO says.


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On the surface, horses would appear to have little to do with teaching corporate leadership skills.

But that's exactly what they're being used for in an equine-assisted training program offered at Pal-O-Mine Equestrian Inc., an Islandia-based nonprofit that offers therapeutic riding.

Information technology staffers from Estée Lauder in Melville learned about the link firsthand recently when Pal-O-Mine founder and CEO Lisa Gatti gave them a demonstration of the program.

The 14 staffers, who were at the stable for a day of volunteering, were told to pick a spot in the paddock and get one of the horses to move to that spot without touching it, working together and using only the objects around them.
After some failed attempts, they were able to get a horse to the desired spot by luring it with loose strands of hay and then creating noise by moving a watering can around inside a bucket that drew it to the spot.

“It was really learning how to work as a team,” said Tim Rutt, a program manager in the global information systems department of Estée Lauder Companies, who was one of the employees instrumental in getting the horse to the bucket.

Rutt said he was open to presenting what he learned to his company for consideration as a future team-building exercise.

Companies pay between $1,000 and $5,000 depending on the number of people and whether they do a full or half day, said Gatti. The sessions are conducted by a certified equine specialist along with a licensed mental health professional. Participants never mount the horses, but instead take part in activities designed to promote “team discovery.”

At least one take-away for the Estée Lauder group: Horses are intuitive. They “recognize inconsistencies between behavior and emotion, and thus reveal the truth,” said Gatti, noting that horses become calm, connected and responsive to leaders who display certain traits. For example, they respond to individuals who are calm and assertive, rather than anxious and aggressive.

“Horses don't care what your title or education is,” added Dora Lupo, a clinical coordinator at Pal-O-Mine who participated in the Estée Lauder demonstration with Gatti. “They read what's going on in the moment.”

Lynn Thomas, founder and CEO of Eagala (the Equine Assisted Growth & Learning Association), said horses “respond to the nonverbal messages being sent to them because they're a prey...
animal. Their behaviors can give feedback to us and our relationships." Her Utah-based nonprofit certifies professionals in equine-assisted psychotherapy and personal development.

Equine-assisted corporate leadership programs like Pal-O-Mine's are growing. A 2017 Eagala survey indicated 18.5 percent of the 439 equine-assisted growth and learning programs that responded work with corporate organizations as one of their top six primary focus areas.

For now, corporate training is only a small part of Pal-O-Mine's work. Since 1995 it has provided therapeutic equine programs to the disabled and other at-risk populations.

"We came to Islandia with 80 students and eight horses," said Gatti, 50, a competitive rider who worked as a special education teacher. "We now have 25 horses and serve 400 students weekly."

After being forced to relocate seven times between 1995 and 2004, she finally leased her current facility, on 7.8 acres off Old Nichols Road, in 2004 and bought the site in 2007.

Gatti added corporate training to the mix after she hosted an Eagala networking event that included professional development training. Since 2013 more than 20 businesses and organizations have gone through the corporate leadership program, she said.

Carol A. Allen, president and CEO of Hauppauge-based People's Alliance Federal Credit Union, said it was one of the most out-of-the-box team-building exercises the firm has done.

About 10 members of the credit union's management team participated in the program in September 2016 and were given the task of getting all of the animals inside an inviting space they had to create.

"The staff had to experiment and problem solve and find their own solutions that worked best for them," said Allen, whose staff has volunteered at Pal-O-Mine for more than a decade. "There were hidden skills that came out that they didn't know they had."

When you have a visceral experience, it tends to have a lasting impact "far beyond a classroom or seminar," says Nancy Engelhardt, an equine-assisted corporate growth trainer and leadership coach, and former director of Molloy College's Energeia Partnership, a leadership program for high-level leaders on Long Island.
More than 150 Energieia members have participated in equine-assisted retreats at Pal-O-Mine, she said.

Gatti hopes the corporate program will grow. It now accounts for less than 5 percent of the organization’s $1.36 million annual budget, but she hopes it could generate 10 percent in less than five years.

“It’s been growing by word of mouth,” she said.

**At a glance**

**Name:** Pal-O-Mine Equestrian Inc., Islandia

**Founder and CEO:** Lisa Gatti

**Employees:** 8 full-time, 30 part-time, plus 100 volunteers a week

**Annual budget:** $1.36 million