

So, what is your management style like?

I was recently faced with an apparently simple task: Introduce yourself to this horse, get to know it, lead it and then get it to perform a simple task such as walking with you through a maze.

I should explain, the last time I went near a horse was pony trekking when I was 13 (and it wasn't a pleasant experience for either me or the pony). This is a large, feisty, muscular Welsh Mountain pony: I was rather apprehensive. Wondering why I was there? I was one of eight people, most of whom had not met each other before, who were also set the same task, under the safe guidance of Liz Morrison, who does understand horses (and people).

So how do I get this horse, I have never met before, to understand that I would like him to perform a specific task? How do get across to, and explain, *to a horse* that I want him to go through this maze my colleagues have constructed? To follow my plan? What will make this successful? What constitutes success? How do I get the horse to perform? Sound familiar?

Ever been faced with the challenge of dealing with, and getting performance out of, a large, unwieldy group or an individual from another culture? Believe me this horse is not going to respond to "I'm in charge – so do what I say!" even if I tried. Tugging on the rope isn't going to help. He is at least 3-4 times my weight and much stronger. Neither will waving my arms at him. I have no polo mints, so bribery and incentives are out of the question.

So, I walk gently (and a touch cautiously) up to the horse and, slowly, introduce myself to it, offer it my hand to sniff and get a sense of what the horse is like. Give it a chance to suss me out as well. I'm very apprehensive. After a few minutes, gently responding to the horse, I find myself "pawing" the ground with my foot in response to him doing the same with his hoof.

Slowly the apprehension turns to a sense of being with Loki (in Norse mythology the god of mischief, is often called the Sly One, the Trickster, a master of guile and deception. Sometimes its better not to know these things). Its interesting being on eye level with him as well. Feeling his muscles as I stroke and pat him.

I feel he/we want to move around so now its time to see if we can go around the arena together. How do I get him started? How fast would he go? Could I stop him once we got going? So holding the rope I ease forward and, surprisingly, Loki followed. Steering is difficult, as I don't want to get trapped between a ton of horse and the wall.



I find that by matching his step, keeping at eye level, even on a long rope, I can get us to change pace into a trot, steer around the arena and come to a halt with him as I want. I coming to the conclusion this wild creature is a sweetie really. We had developed a useful level of trust, rapport and understanding between us.

What is interesting is that we matched step as we trotted along. One of the observers noticed that, even though I "invited him" to come along, he would respond, but only when I used a low tone of voice. A higher tone got no response. At one point he had stopped and it took me a while to work out why and get us started again. It wasn't by setting off and pulling him along. We needed to set off at a pace, *together*, with the right encouragement. Sound familiar yet?

Slowly we had built up each others trust, learnt each other's language, I learnt that even simple light flick on a long loose rope was enough to transmit the message to turn. Interestingly others were doing things differently, perhaps using very short ropes and one person in the group constantly had their hand on the horse's neck. Why?

[What is your performance management approach like?](#)

First time through the maze is slow and we miss the last turn. We have a chat about that: Me and Loki. Second time Loki is getting a sense of what I wanted and I am learning what he needs to know to follow the instructions. Third time: it is a piece of cake, as we execute it smoothly and without any fuss with apparently little effort or communication between us. We understand each other. It is a nice feeling. I feel I could throw my leg over him and we could go off for a trot together (shame its not possible today).

Later I work with a different horse that I hadn't worked with before, Frankie, and we manage after a few loops, to walk successfully through the maze with little fuss. Boy am I chuffed with myself, and the horses.

Well you have probably thinking and deducing a lot about my style of working. You have no doubt already started to make links between this, management styles and performance.

Imagine a new employee just starts, does not know the organisation, comes from somewhere completely different and has a different way of thinking and working. How would you like to behave? How do you behave? What effect would it have? How do you gain rapport? How do you handle things when they stop? What options are available to you?

You could explain, in your organisation's terms, what is required: Your plan; Your strategy; and how you want it executed. But would that necessarily work? Would they understand? What would it mean? And why should they listen? Do they respect you? Is there any bonding and trust between you? What pace are they operating at? Is it different to yours? When it doesn't work what do you do? What effect does that have? Why do you make that choice?

What was also interesting was looking at the group as a whole. What about the team? What does their different styles reveal about how the team should operate? One person summed it up: The best way to get a feel for a group, how they behave and their management preferences in a very short time: The apparently easy going person, using the very short leash; The "I can control any horse" person; The guide with the hand on the horses neck all the time; amongst others. As a way of quickly appreciating a group of people's styles I have experienced fewer quicker ways.

Imagine your team. You can work directly on the tasks, problems and issues, *and* you can use sessions like these, with the horse as a metaphor for what you are trying to deal with: That new employee, that manager, that large team from another area/company/office, or whoever. It is fascinating to see people realise for themselves, how analogous it is to how they deal with the people around them: helping individuals and teams look at themselves. What is my/our natural style? Is it working? What options are available? What can we do differently?

Interested?

The session was facilitated by Liz Morrison, an associate with Excitant. She runs Sporting Tactics and is very experienced with horses, sports training and developing individual's and team's values and beliefs. It was held at the Waterstock House Training Centre, which has excellent conference facilities and superb food in a quiet environment.

If you are interesting in developing your team, unlocking blocks to their performance, understanding how you can work and perform better together contact us to learn more.

About Excitant

Our name represents what we do: *Stimulate and improve organisations to perform better.*

We are a niche consultancy. We specialise in helping Management teams:

- Develop, clarify and agree their strategy
- Communicate the strategy so the whole organisation is mobilised
- Work more effectively as a team, learning together, as the strategy evolves
- To bring about change in organisations, by developing the beliefs, culture and behaviours of high performance
- Ensure strategy and performance leads to results.

Phil Jones, Managing Director: Phil.jones@excitant.co.uk 0870 420 7978 M: 07 711 711 123