

Actions or Intentions

Horses need to read our actions to determine our intentions.

There is an old saying that says, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Really, the road to anywhere can be paved with the same material.

In the horse-human relationship, this is an issue that is basic to its success. A horse has less difficulty with this than we do. They are not motivated to relate to us on their own. They don't want to enter our world in the same way that we want to enter theirs and make it part of our world. Because they are “forced” into this human world they are somewhat on the defense and are concerned about what we are up to. Because they don't understand English, they must try to discover our intentions by reading our body language and picking up on our “vibe.” Our body language is clear to the horse only to the degree that we are clear in our own minds.

When we are tentative, confused and uncertain but have good intentions the horse will have difficulty discovering those intentions. We help a horse immensely when our actions are in accord with our intentions. Intentions are like a glove. Our actions are the hand that goes into the glove. A glove by itself serves no purpose except maybe to create clutter. A glove needs a hand much more than a hand needs a glove.

It is presumed that we all intend to be good stewards of our horses. Those intentions, however, are formed by our philosophy and what we believe to be true about horses. So our philosophy shapes our intentions which in turn are activated or validated by our actions. When our actions are confusing to a horse, it is because our philosophy is not really coming through in our intentions. The horse is reading our actions (body language) which he depends on to discover our intentions. What we intend is what concerns the horse. What he decides about our intentions helps him decide what our actions

mean. That combination tells him what his place is in this horse-human relationship. It tells him if he can relax and trust or if he should be on guard and be suspicious. It tells him a lot about our ability to lead and protect him. He also discovers whether or not this is somebody to respect and take seriously.

A horse has to deal with the action-intention combination also but there is a fundamental difference. We are interested in this relationship, he is not. He didn't go to the sale barn and buy us so he could take us to the black hills trail riding. Ours is the primary interest in the relationship. The horse has a secondary interest and that is forced on him by our interest. We are the ones who have expectations in the relationship when the horse has none. He eventually develops his own kind of expectations as he correctly discovers our actions and intentions.

The horse's intentions and actions toward us are initially based on instinct and quick conclusions that are primarily the result of how he happens to view being dragged into our world. As he reconciles himself to the fact that he is stuck with us and cannot escape, he then starts to consider how he will regard us and our intentions. The way that works out will have to do with the horse's personality and the type of human he is stuck with. If the horse is strong willed and the human is weak willed, disaster is certain. If the horse's personality is delicate and the human is insensitive, disaster is also certain. The term “sensitive” here is defined as being aware of and concerned about a horse's real needs. That excludes the “sensitive” type human that is so emotionally paralyzed that leadership is out of the question for them.

If the horse is laid back and indifferent to its surroundings and the human is laid back and indifferent to his/her surroundings, the disas-

ter will be that there can be no disaster. If the human is too lazy to lead and the horse is too lazy to follow I guess they can always hang out and just enjoy each other's company on the road to nowhere.

There is another side to the issue of intentions. If a horse misbehaves, defies us or ignores us, we must take action of some kind that gets the horse's attention. The action we take communicates to the horse our intentions. The action and the immediate follow up should signal clearly to the horse that the behavior will not be tolerated but there is nothing personal.

It should be clear to them that we do not dislike them. That in itself will be a relief to them and be a proof that our intentions are not as bad as they may have thought. If our actions have to do with revenge and anger, it will be clear to the horse that they dare not trust our intentions. What we do to the horse to get his attention will soon be forgotten if the horse is convinced that we have good intentions. Conversely, what we do will be held against us if the horse is confused or suspicious regarding our intentions.

When horses are mistaken about our intentions it is because what we really intend is smothered by fear or confusion. Anyone who works with young horses knows that what we really intend is not always immediately clear to them. They often see us and our actions as suspicious until they start to realize that they had been misinterpreting those actions.

It may be thought by some that if a horse is struggling to understand our intentions we are not being appropriate. Of course that is a possibility if we are not sure about what we are doing. Teaching a horse new concepts will often be a little confusing at first but mastering each new challenge prepares him for the next one. He will become positive in his outlook and confident in his relationship with us. When something new is asked of him or introduced to him his confidence grows because he is no longer suspicious of the human action-intention issue.

Every horse will have his own way he regards

this issue. It is always wise on our part to accommodate their individuality and give slack and understanding, where needed. When we are truly sensitive to a horse's dilemma as he navigates the human world, we will be able and willing to push him on to his potential. We will then have a horse that will do what we want, how we want, when we want and do it quietly and confidently.

OK, by the way, do you remember where you put your gloves? Gloves floating around free will spook your horse and clutter up the barn. They can only do a glove's work when they are on a pair of hands. Gloves enable hands to do their job, just like good intentions should produce positive actions.

This reminds me of a conversation I heard at a service station between a mechanic and his customer.

Customer: My car keeps going in the ditch and I was wondering if you have a loaner I could use for the two months it takes you to fix my car?

Mechanic: Do you pick things up off the floor while you are driving?

Customer: Yes, all the time.

Mechanic: Do you drive when you are sleepy?

Customer: Yes, quite often. I see you are jumping to conclusions about me. You see, I never intend to go in the ditch.

Mechanic: Do you ever try to turn your steering wheel to prevent going in the ditch?

Customer: I do but I'm careful not to traumatize my car because it is quite sensitive and doesn't like it when I put too much pressure on it. I'm very cautious and careful about steering because I want my car to be my friend.

Mechanic: This is very serious and complicated and will require at least two months to run tests and diagnose and fix the problem. Yes, we have a loaner for you but you can only drive it on roads with no ditches — and don't leave your gloves in the glove compartment.

For what it's worth, — Warren Bengtson