

# What's That Noise?

*Without clear communication, your horse hears only static.*

**W**hy don't we like it when we hear an unusual noise and aren't sure what caused it or what it means? Because unless its meaning is clear, we don't know how to regard it. Concern that has its roots in uncertainty will probably turn into panic or apathy.

Like it or not, know it or not, we are constantly sending messages to our horses. Those messages or voices originate in our intentions, moods, knowledge, understanding, opinions, hopes, fears, suspicions and our world view in general. If all of these voices are talking at once, our horse has no hope of deciphering a clear message. Most of these voices are of no special interest to him in the beginning and are just noise.

His primary interest is in what he perceives to be our intentions. He draws his conclusions on the basis of how we answer his three questions.

1. What do I need to be afraid of?
2. What can I get away with?
3. What do you want?

Our entire communications with horses must clearly address those questions, preferably in that order. When his curiosity regarding them goes unsatisfied he is left with guess work and conjecture. Being from the horse world but finding himself stuck in our world, he is at a loss as to how he should regard us and our strange noises. His questions may very well turn into statements.

1. I am afraid of you.
  2. I will do whatever I perceive to be in my best interest.
  3. I don't care what you want.
- Now we have a problem. The human

knows it and the horse knows it. If the problem of unclear communications (what's that noise?) does not get resolved, the horse will begin to ignore the human. So now we have a leader who is confused and a follower who doesn't care. When a horse ignores his handler and constantly shows the handler that he doesn't care, that horse may be written off as dumb. The horse simply has no motivation to pay attention to a confused teacher.

Having said that, it must also be noted that the lack of desired response from the horse does not necessarily mean that the horse doesn't understand. The handler may be clear in his intentions and communication but because the horse has a sense of entitlement, he chooses to respond contrary to the wants of the handler. It is called disobedience. That is always the result of disrespect for authority. If that doesn't change, the horse's attitude may go from confusion to apathy (despair) and finally defiance.

The defiant horse is no longer apathetic but is in decisive opposition to the humans in his or her life. Confusion and apathy have done their dirty work and the horse in desperation sees defiance as the only option left. That may manifest itself in flagrant acts such as biting, kicking, rearing or bucking. The more laid back horse may simply be balky and just plain uncooperative. So now what?

The burden is on us to get our stuff together. Do we understand our own intentions? Are they misguided and/or uninformed? Are we moody and unpredictable? How much knowledge do we have and what is it based on? Is it knowl-

edge by hearsay, or do we own it? Can we articulate our knowledge to the horse so that he has some assurance that we understand what we know? What are our opinions based on? Are we with or without hope? Do fears paralyze us? Do we have suspicions that keep us guessing? Are we optimistic or pessimistic? Do we have personal contentment or are we given to whining?

Our body language, demeanor, and attitude very quickly signal to a horse whether or not we can be taken seriously. Our consistency and honesty with our horse tell him if he can trust us. The clearer all these issues are, the easier and quicker a horse can give his attention to learning.

What then should be the aim and intention of our teaching and leadership?

1. To bring about a transformation in the horse's world view, i.e. the giving up of his own agenda and accepting ours and being content in that acceptance.

2. Awaken the horse's mind to receive and act on our cues and expectations.

3. Teach him to choose rationally instead of simply giving a robotic response.

4. Force issues in such a way that his freedom to choose is not violated.

5. If a horse ever asks, "What was that noise?" we must answer as quickly and completely as the immediate situation will allow. He will not really rest or be content until he is assured of what, if anything, the noise means. The importance of assurance or reassurance cannot be over estimated.

6. He must become increasingly certain that he is safe in our presence. That can only be accomplished by our honesty and consistency.

Because a horse is concerned about our aims and intentions it is important

that we have aims and intentions. Our ability in that regard is limited if we are confused or intimidated. When we are not clear in our own minds about our aims and intentions, they cannot be clear to the horse. Clarity (What is that noise?) for horse and handler have to do with the following issues.

Horses are wired to dominate if they can and submit if they must.

Horses are not as concerned about what is done to them if they know why it was done.

In our dealings with horses, we should be as kind as possible and as tough as necessary.

Horses learn better and quicker when they are given the freedom to choose between clear options.

The quicker and clearer our responses are, the easier it is for a horse to connect cause and effect. A horse that has not made that connection will probably not be very calm. A horse that is not calm will have trouble making the connection. The first horse will get calmer in proportion to making the connection. The second horse will have to be calmed down so his mind can connect the dots. Both horses are asking, "What was that noise?" but they need to be handled differently.

The goal is always to have a horse do what you want, when you want, how you want and to do it quietly. If that is the case in your horse-human relationship neither you or your horse are very worried about strange noises.

The issues of intentions, moods, knowledge, understanding, opinions, hopes, fears and suspicions will all have their proper place in our world view and even strange noises will be identified and interpreted quickly.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson