

LEADERSHIP

HORSE SENSE***AN EQUINE-ASSISTED LEARNING PROGRAM HELPS CEOS AND OTHER EXECUTIVES OVERCOME BUSINESS OBSTACLES*****BY HILARY LEHMAN**

Michelle Salerno has only known her student a few hours, but already has some penetrating insights into her psyche.

Salerno says Maria Carrillo of Miami, a 56-year-old sales coach for AT&T, is intimidated by “powerful male energy.”

She asks Carrillo about her husband and father, looking for the root of the problem.

And how does she know all this? A horse told her.

Shakespeare, a 1,600-pound Arabian mix, helps Salerno teach sales professionals like Carrillo how to overcome fears about leadership or learn how to work as part of a team.

Salerno’s conversation with Carrillo took place during an “equine-assisted learning” program at Hunting Horn Stables in Miami, where she conducts leadership training and team-building exercises using horses. Clients from big businesses like Sara Lee and AT&T pay up to \$900 to find flaws in their leadership techniques.

Salerno said horses have been used before to “train” humans, but they’re often used in work with children, gaining prominence as a therapy for autistic children. Salerno also does some similar work — she’s licensed to provide behavioral redirection training with children and families — but the work she does with professionals is all her own.

Cathy Pareto, who runs her own financial planning and investment firm, Cathy Pareto & Associates in Miami, said the program has affected the way she works. A big take-away for her has been communication — she’s learned a lot about how much conveys to people with her body language.

Equine-assisted learning programs are based on the idea that horses can sense what a person is thinking and feeling. If the student is fearful or calm, angry or loving, a horse will react in a like manner, Salerno said.

“They are . . . mirrors,” she said.

Horses don’t care if someone is a CEO or drives a fancy car, she said. They don’t listen to cajoling or threats. The intimidation tactics that might work in a business setting don’t work here, she said. Working with horses forces people to think about the effectiveness of their own techniques with humans.

All that matters when a businessperson is standing in front of an 1,800-pound animal is raw leadership skill.

“However good you lead is how good that they’ll follow,” Salerno said.

Salerno wasn’t always the corporate equivalent of a horse whisperer. Since 2004, she’s been conducting customized emotional fitness training for corporations and individuals in her MPowerMentor programs. Before that, she was in software sales and management for 10 years.

The horse program is a relatively new venture. She started the program in August and did her first training session in October.

When Salerno started horseback riding with trainer Monica Gerritsen, she realized that many of her MPowerMentor techniques could be combined with Gerritsen’s horse program.

Typically, Salerno and Gerritsen do two to four trainings a month, Salerno said. Ideally, she said, they would like to do two to three every week.

Rates range from \$295 to \$895 per day or per program, depending on what students want to do and the length of the program. There are half-day, full-day and multiday options.

In all the programs, Salerno assesses what the participants came in to work on, and gives each person a follow-up call a week later.

Salerno also offers a mastery program for advanced students who want to keep working on a specific exercise. Those one-hour sessions cost \$150.

She and Gerritsen developed the leadership program, along with components that help with empowerment issues, teambuilding and redirecting children's behavior.

While other programs exist using horses for therapy or team-building, Salerno said the hands-on aspect of using the horses to teach leadership skills sets her program apart.

Participants in the teambuilding exercise groom the horse and take turns leading it around, making sure it doesn't eat grass — which means it doesn't respect the leader — and follows direction. They're instructed to lead the horse around a ring, getting it to speed up, slow down and turn.

They learn horses don't respond to touch or commands, but pay attention to body language.

"A horse isn't a puppy," Salerno said. "It won't come if you stand and call it."

While Salerno said the feedback she gets is unanimously positive, one of the participants in the teambuilding exercise wasn't so sure.

Carrillo, the sales coach who was taken aside when a horse shied away from her during an exercise, said she doesn't see how it affects her work.

She works from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. most days, she said, and while she was with the horses she was only worried about what her numbers would be at the end of the day.

Horses aren't relevant, she said, especially when she's being told that men intimidate her. She works mostly with men and has been married for more than 20 years.

Salerno later said she meant Carrillo is intimidated by situations out of her control, which Carrillo said she could accept.

In this economy, people need feedback and help now, Salerno said. They need personalized tools to help them overcome their obstacles, she said.

Horses provide the answers people need to help them change, she said.

Whatever people dream of becoming, she said, "The horse makes you be it."



IN TOUCH: Frank Piedra wipes Shakespeare's face.





PHOTOS BY NISSA BENJAMIN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

EYE-TO-EYE: Danielo Martinez, who works at the AT&T sales center, sidles up to Shakespeare in the pen at Hunting Horn Stables in Miami.



HUMAN EXERCISE: Equine program leader Michelle Salerno, right, stands by as Frank Piedra, a human resources director, and Cathy Pareto, CEO of her financial planning firm, groom Shakespeare at the Hunting Horn Stables.