# Equine-Assisted Leadership

In executive coaching sessions with **NELL DERICK DEBEVOISE,** horses help leaders move beyond intellectual solutions. Brunswick Partner **KEVIN HELLIKER** tried it himself.

In New York City that morning I ended a meeting early by saying I needed to go see a woman about a horse. As jokes go, it wasn't funny. Then again, it wasn't a joke. Ahead of me was a 90-minute drive to meet Nell Derick Debevoise, a leadership expert whose practice involves the use of horses. Our meeting place was a corral.

"Don't fall off," a colleague wisecracked.

"Oh, I won't be riding," I said.

"What else do you do with a horse?" he asked.

I wasn't sure. Despite my upbringing in the farm state of Kansas, my experience with Mustangs and Colts had been of the Ford and Dodge variety. Yet suddenly I felt defensive on behalf of flesh-and-blood horses. I knew very well that the colleague cracking wise about them treated his dog like a family member; the pooch made frequent appearances in our Zooms. "Do you ride your dog?" I asked.

This article idea had come from Jayne Rosefield, a Brunswick Senior Partner who is also founder and Head of Brunswick's Chicago office. A superstar contributor to the *Brunswick Review*, Rosefield has profiled CEOs current or former of McDonald's, Kellanova and United Airlines.

After receiving her suggestion, I did some research on equine-assisted coaching, and found some powerful and fresh indicators of growth. In December of '23, an equine writer named Fran Jurga launched a website to archive and manage a snowballing amount of peer-reviewed research being published on the beneficial effects of equine therapy and coaching. When I called Jurga, a writer and publisher specializing in equine matters, she said, "Your timing couldn't be better."

Much of that research documents the benefits of horseback riding, especially for people with physical and mental challenges. But parallel to that, Jurga writes, is a research area called "human-horse interaction" in which unsaddled exposure to horses has been found to improve self-esteem, help overcome grief and provide clarity toward reaching goals. "In 2023, 106 peer-reviewed research articles documented results of programs for general interaction between people and horses," according to Jurga, who in 1985 founded Hoofcare Publishing.

Other data shows extraordinary growth in certified equine-assisted therapists and coaches, in response to growing demand for their services, according to Path International, which offers certification courses. The EAS—equine-assisted services—material I read described human/horse relations largely absent riding. Although impressed by this movement, I still wondered how much a horse could do for you without you getting on it.

Then I remembered *Michael Clayton*, the 2007 Academy Award-winning movie. As the titular character in that movie (played by George Clooney) drives down country roads in the early light of dawn, unaware that a bomb planted in his car will

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explode any second, he comes upon three horses standing like sentinels on a hill, a sight so dramatic Clayton gets out of his car and walks up the hill. As he marvels at them, the majestic trio watch him with neither fear nor excitement. Behind him, his car blows up. The horses saved his life. Was that a coincidence?

Intrigued, I contacted Rosefield, who had learned about the EAS trend when a long-time friend, Derick Debevoise, expanded her leadership practice to include equine-assisted learning. Before long, Rosefield invited me along to a reunion of sorts, during which she and Derick Debevoise—former college roommates—chatted in the kind of shorthand that decades of friendship enables.

Among other accomplishments, Derick Debevoise was the founding Director in 2008 of Tomorrow's Youth Organization, which facilitated social and economic development for thousands of women and children in the Middle East. She holds degrees from Harvard, Columbia, London Business School, Cambridge and Universita di Roma III, focused on psychology, entrepreneurship and education. As a speaker and executive coach, she says, "I have a nerdy, analytical, data-driven approach to some spiritual and ancient natural tools."

Having worked for nonprofits for a decade before shifting to focus on the private sector, she believes business leaders are no less concerned (consciously or unconsciously) with the welfare of others and of the planet. "I've lived and worked around the world, and my experiences have shown me that, except for the 2% of the population who are sociopaths, human beings want their lives and their work to have a positive impact. They want their grandchildren to be proud of them."

Perfect being the enemy of good, Derick Debevoise isn't urging anyone to change the world single-handedly. Throughout her 2023 book on leadership, *Going First*, she reminds readers that each is one of about 8 billion humans on the planet. "To heal the world, all that each of us has to do is our one eight-billionth." A synonym for that one eight-billionth, she says, would be "purpose."

A horsewoman since childhood, Derick Debevoise in recent years began incorporating equine assistance into her work with leaders, having studied under Kelly Wendorf, a pioneer of the horse-assisted coaching movement through her company called EQUUS, based at Wendorf's Buffalo Spirit Ranch in Santa Fe.

On its website, EQUUS says that the experience of spending two hours beside a horse, rather than atop

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it, can "rewire participants' brains towards wellness, fulfillment, confidence and courage. This results in peoples' lives changing, whether it be within the context of their work or their personal life."

The very idea of equine-assisted therapy may induce some guffaws. "It's not for everyone," says Derick Debevoise. But evidence is mounting for the potential beneficial effects of human exposure to animals, and Derick Debevoise has seen it firsthand. "I'm a fabulous coach, but the horses introduce elements and lessons I couldn't deliver on my own," she says.

Exactly how it works is a mystery, as are the inner lives of animals generally. But what we know, says Debevoise, is that during 56 million years of evolution, horses developed an exquisitely sensitive radar that made them one of the planet's most successful species, in spite of being a prey animal. Also known, of course, is that a relationship unlike any other developed between humans and horses, very much to the benefit of the former.

Those two developments combined to make the horse unusually privy to the inner lives of humans. "It is remarkable how consistently people with horses claim to have learned much about themselves through them," writes the novelist Thomas McGuane in *Some Horses*, an essay collection about his own equine education.

After our meeting, I told Derick Debevoise that I'd love to visit a horse with her, and she invited me to come to North Salem, New York, about 90 minutes north of the city.

I wasn't the first journalist to jump in a car and head off to the boondocks in search of a story about equine-assisted coaching. A 2021 *New York Times* account of such a visit to Wendorf's farm in New Mexico was snarky in tone. The writer professed to stand forever beside a horse without it teaching her anything, yet she was objective enough to include plenty of potential evidence of benefit, at least to judge from a plenitude of non-snarky comments. "Horses are the greatest teachers of leadership and have tremendous therapeutic potential," said one. Another said: "My horse comes to his gate to meet me, comes when I call him, loves to nuzzle me and have his nose kissed, and is the best horse friend a person could ask for. He is brave, curious, mannerly, kind, and very, very smart. That kind of trust and partnership can't be bought."

My own experience couldn't have started out nicer. Following a bucolic drive that took me past Greenwich, Connecticut, I found myself seated on a hill above a corral half the size of a football field.

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Inside the corral stood three horses, one gray (Shannon) and two brown (Cody and Pincio, a pony). The day was sunny, but we surveyed it from the shade, seated at a table Derick Debevoise had set up above the corral. Along with us was one of her clients, a retired lawyer and active horsewoman named Syma Funt Ryan. For a while, the three of us sat watching tails swish leisurely in the corral below, seemingly to the beat of birdsong in the air surrounding Alderbrook Farm, where horses can be seen grazing in the field as well as sticking their necks out of barn windows, their eyes raised in curiosity.

Up on the hill, Derick Debevoise had sparkling water, fruit and nuts, and a notebook in which she asked me and Funt Ryan to record a bit of memoir, revealing perhaps a thought, memory or idea that troubled us. Lulled by the sun-drenched gentleness of the moment, I thought how much my daughter would enjoy this scene. Then I wrote that turning 60 had frightened me on behalf of her. She is 10. I did not want to leave her fatherless.

Now, Derick Debevoise said, close your notebooks. "We're going to enter the corral now, and stand beside the horses."

I was nervous. My research had led me to expect a long stand horse-side. Entering the corral, in fact, was for me akin to starting a marathon. I had a case of nerves amid a moment of doubt: Could I last two hours beside a horse?

I pushed through an open gate into the corral with the swagger of somebody boasting a smart strategy: Don't say howdy. Don't even look at them. Walk across the dirt toward your own spot. I did all that, only to hear the sound of two giant beasts following me, ambling my way while looking slightly off to the side, as if not to assume the intimacy of a look in the eyes.

Each stopped on a different side of me an arm's length away, and I couldn't help thinking that they liked me. To be a magnet of sorts for animals that large and beautiful is flattering. Flanked by them as I was, I felt as if they'd decided to guard me, they'd decided I was worthy of that. Barely five minutes had passed, and my self-esteem had risen.

After a couple more minutes, I reached out and stroked the neck of the big gray gal, Shannon. Pleased, she moved sideways half a step toward me. After being stroked awhile at this closer distance, she came to attention, caught my eye and nodded ahead, toward the gate. After taking a few steps toward it, she looked back at me, her nod clearly indicating that I was to follow. When she got to the gate she lowered her head and pushed against it.

**A client places her hand on a horse during a session with Derick Debevoise.**

Then she looked back at me. I didn't get it. Lowering her head again, she pushed the gate and looked back at me.

"What's going on?" said Derick Debevoise, who was watching from several feet away. She has a disarming smile.

"I don't know," I said. Stating the obvious, I said, "She's pushing the gate."

Derick Debevoise nodded. Then, again, that smile. "What's that mean?"

"I guess it means she wants out."

Derick Debevoise was silent for a second. "Why is she looking at you?" she said.

Its antics did seem to be for my benefit. After pushing her nose against the gate, Shannon looked at me, in a way that was less pleading than playful. That's when I got it.

"Maybe she knows I want out," I said. "Maybe she knows I'm kind of freaking out at the idea of standing here for two hours beside a horse or two."

That wanting-out feeling—I can't finish this, I can't do this—was hardly new to me. In my experience it's a common fear at the start of undertakings big and small. Pushing past it often reveals, as it did in this case, that the fear was based on inaccurate information. We weren't spending two hours in the corral, Derick Debevoise explained. We were spending barely an hour, with a break in between.

Having gotten that straight, I stopped wanting out, and Shannon stopped pushing her head against the gate.

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During the break, Derick Debevoise again invited us to write in our notebooks. When we had finished, Funt Ryan mentioned knowing an 8-year-old girl who loved riding Pincio, the pony. "On that pony that girl is just so happy," she said.

"How old is Pincio?" I asked.

"Thirty-two," said Derick Debevoise.

The average lifespan of a horse is 25 to 30. This particular 32-year-old horse was important in the life of an 8-year-old girl. That felt somehow like a response to what I'd written earlier in the day about my fears as an older father.

In horse years, I was a good deal younger than Pincio. Just shut up and keep playing hoops, I thought, in my mind seeing my daughter score on me yet again. Appreciation has a way of pushing out fear.

I spent the second part of our time in the corral with my hand pressed against Pincio's side. Watching his eyes, I saw that he was never not paying attention, never not in the moment. In fact, all three of them—Shannon and Cody and Pincio—were never not visibly present, even as their expressions shifted from alert to relaxed to curious and playful.

Standing there in the sun beside Pincio, listening to some kind of birdsong, I experienced a few moments of what felt like freedom from the past and future: true presence. The smart strategy I entered with had no place in what I was learning here.

Too soon, it was time to go. ◆