

Understanding Equine Communication (From “The Art of Liberty Training For Horses” by Jonathan Field)

The Primary Equine Language

There are four ingredients that individually or in combination make up all the ways you can approach communication with the horse, on the ground or while riding: neutral/active neutral and friendly are about helping the horse relax, while touch and driving are ways to sensitize the horse to move away from you, using your body language and ultimately just your intent— that is, without any pressure.

1. **Neutral and Active Neutral.** These are all about relaxation in horses. In neutral the horse is at standstill with ease—in his sweet spot. In active neutral he is in relaxation while moving. A horse not in neutral may be pawing, calling, and not standing still. And a horse not in active neutral can be over-energized and rushing forward, jiggling, and prancing, or he can be the opposite: too slow, heavy to aids, and not moving willingly and easily.

2. **Friendly.** There are two parts to friendly: First, it is about you being friendly with a horse so he sees you as an ally, not an enemy. You must find a friendly feeling in you that is real because the horse is reading your body language and will respond accordingly. Smile or relax and find a way to rub or stroke a horse (not a pat: there is no “patting” in his natural world and a pat can be considered predatory) so that he relaxes and softens as well. Second, it is about teaching him to feel “friendly” toward objects that worry him. When he sees a scary item, take time to show the horse it is “friendly,” whether, for example, it is a plastic bag, rope, or saddle blanket.

3. **Driving.** First, driving causes a horse to move away from a rhythmical “pressure,” such as a waving hand, stick, or rope. Second, driving is also used to describe the “driving” pressure you use in the form of touch, or tapping to move your horse backward, or his shoulders over to the right, for example. Third, driving is sensitizing the horse to your body language by “pressing” into his personal space (the “bubble” around him) with intent.

4. **Touch.** This means to ask a horse to move away from a physical pressure of your hand, halter, and lead rope, and when being ridden, to ask the horse to yield away from the touch of a leg aid or rein aid. It is about having a horse yield willingly away from a soft, steady pressure on any part of his body.

NOTE: The key to driving and touch stimuli is to always start out with the very least amount: First it’s your intent, then you can slowly and incrementally increase the level of pressure until the horse makes the slightest “try” to where you want him to go. Then release all pressure. Done correctly, the amount of pressure needed will become less and less until you are communicating with what you started with: your intent.

Draw and Drive

These two words refer to the desire in horse to either want to be with you (draw) or away from you (drive). A delicate balance of draw and drive is what causes liberty training to work: when you have too much draw with a horse, he is too close and can run you over. When too much drive, the horse doesn’t want to be with you and will run off, not wanting to return. This is a constantly changing dynamic when you play with a horse from the ground. You must learn to have a feel for the horse’s state of mind and which ingredient—draw or drive— you need more of at any particular moment.

Intent/Intention

This is subtle communication without any pressure. It is something you learn to “read” in the horse you are handling, and intent is also in your body language when you want to communicate with your horse to do a movement. This intention is backed by a certainty inside you that your plan will happen; it is not a hope or fleeting thought. Horses read the body intention of everyone around them, constantly. If you are back and forth with no plan, you have no intent, and therefore, will not become the leader. When you communicate just from intent, there is no pressure from touch or driving (see p. ix) required to back it up: You are now playing with your horse the way horses do when they are “synced” together. The goal in liberty training is to get past the “pressure” stages to the ultimate level of communication where the horse responds just from your intent.

Sweet Spot

Picture a herd of horses or flock of birds moving as one: All the horses and birds are in active neutral with one another, there is overall peace and harmony, and each creature is relaxed in what I call its “sweet spot” or comfort zone. When playing with your horse, you can pick a physical location where you want your horse to find neutral, where he’ll stand still and relax, and also find his active neutral when he’s moving. Whether you are on the ground or riding, you’ll always know where to move your horse to so he’ll receive comfort and obtain a release.

Respect

This is necessary between horse and human and must go both ways, though always starting with the person. You need respect for a horse’s innate characteristics, his needs, and mental state; you earn this through leadership and by building rapport through your actions. When you gain respect, your horse will want to be with you as much as he does a herd mate, and he will move easily and willingly where you ask him to go, under any circumstance. At the root of it, respect is trust.

Purpose

This is when an exercise or task has a clear beginning, middle, and end. You can set up small exercises for a challenge and for fun, but without purpose these can become boring and unpleasant for the horse.

Pressure

Applied via touch or driving stimuli, pressure causes an action.

Release

When you take all pressure away from the horse—that is, both physical and mental pressure.

Play

I play with my horse, never work with him. It’s a difference of attitude and approach. Playing doesn’t mean it’s frivolous and without purpose; it’s not all “running barefoot on the beach and burning incense.” It is an attitude that is active with an objective, yet it is light in spirit and fun.

It is not over-repetitive with high negative consequences that turn sessions into drudgery for both horse and handler. A playful attitude of optimism is one I prefer to take.

Driving

Driving is sensitizing a horse to body language by pressing into his personal space, with a goal of causing him to move away. Start out close to the horse and increase the distance between the two of you as you get better.

Driving relates to so much you will do at liberty. With liberty, your main way of communicating to your horse is a driving cue. Unlike riding, where 90 percent of riding is a touch of your seat, leg, and rein aids, liberty relies most heavily on body language.

Driving pushes the edges of a horse's personal space "bubble" around him to ask him to move. As with earlier exercises, the key is to use the least amount of pressure needed. Begin by first using your intent , and then increasing rhythmical pressure with your Horseman's Stick if the horse doesn't move. Your goal is not to touch the horse, but if he doesn't move, use a light tapping to support your initial aids. If you don't increase the intensity, your horse will become numb to your cues. However, just like a herd leader, you don't want to start with a bite. If you always use "high pressure," it's like always yelling at someone who actually can hear you just fine when you're speaking in a quiet voice. By making your requests incremental, starting with the lightest pressure, your horse will become increasingly sensitive to your driving cues, until you have him moving with just your intent . That is exactly what you need for liberty play.

Pressure: Too Hard for Some, Too Easy for Others

When we ask horses to be sensitive and move, in the beginning, it requires pressure. Horses use pressure all the time, such as to move another horse off a flake of hay or to show dominance. One of the things you'll notice is that they're pretty willing to go to high pressure—to kick or bite another horse. I would never suggest you go to that level. Horses use pressure to back up their intentions, which they always signal first.

Watch closely next time your horse tries to run a new neighbor off some hay. If you look carefully, you will recognize a thought forming; then your horse will get a nasty look on his face, ears back, directing all his focus on the horse he wants to move. If he's ignored and is dominant, he will escalate the pressure, threatening a bite or kick. If the offending horse still doesn't listen, your horse will follow through with physical contact. After the scuffle, win or lose, typically the pressure is off and it's over. Horses don't hold grudges.

Horses quickly learn who the leader is and don't require as much pressure the next time. They refine communication in the herd until it just requires intent , a change of focus to get a response. Sometimes intent is so subtle, it's hard to see communication taking place in a well-established herd.

My main goal with pressure is that in the end I get to that point where I can just use my intent . Two things must work to get to that level: You must be in control of exactly what you say with your body language, and your horse must believe that you will follow through, increasing or persisting with the pressure until you get the desired result.

There are three common mistakes we make with pressure:

Some people never use any pressure and are constantly being pushed over by their horse. Others remain in a state of “middle pressure,” which means they end up constantly nagging their horse. Results of this depend on the horse’s personality: One horse will get dull and tune out while another will go crazy with too much noise. And there are some people out there who have a short fuse. They get frustrated quickly, and take things personally with their horse. They can become mean and aggressive with pressure. The Horse’s Pressure Pressure should originate from the horse. It’s best if it is his pressure against something. That way it is his choice to relieve it. Pressure cannot come from us charged with emotion. It’s not fair and no horse deserves this. The amazing thing about a horse is he can tell if pressure is personal and comes from emotion. You can be quite firm, drawing a clear line, and telling him not to cross it. If he runs into that line himself, up against only his own pressure, he won’t hold anything against you. But if you change the line, get emotional and begin taking out your frustration, he knows the difference, and you will pay for it in the relationship. Plus, he might kick you or buck you off to teach you it was too much.

I’ve learned this through experience. Everyone who has been into horses a long time has been through all of these things. We know when we didn’t offer the horse the best deal we could because the next morning we went to catch him and he wanted nothing to do with us. Thank goodness they’re so forgiving for many of our learning curves.

As horsemen and horsewomen, we need to always remember that we chose to have a relationship with the horse, and it is our idea to ask him to be here. Therefore, there must be a level of respect that we try to do the very best we can to teach our horse to understand. And in that learning curve, as trying as it might be, it is our responsibility to adjust to the horse and not his to adjust to us.

Sometimes, we must abandon the mission: try another approach, take a break, or go get help. We need to figure out how to help a confused horse understand, not just hammer away hoping for something different, while doing the same thing. I think we all know that is the definition of insanity.

Intensity of Pressure Pressure is applied differently according to the circumstances.

Control Pressure. If a horse tries to run me over, he is attempting to take control with pressure. To stop him, I would apply a block equal to the amount of pressure coming at me. It could be quite high, and quick, but if I don’t match his intensity, I’ll be run over. The pressure I give originates with the horse because the longer he pushes, the longer he keeps the pressure on himself. If he calms down and backs away from me, there is no pressure. His choice.

Communication Pressure. Communication pressure is using pressure to get a message across. For example, if I am teaching the horse to move, I start out very slowly, and gradually intensify the pressure of my cue until I get his foot to step in the direction I choose.

I am constantly working to communicate with more subtle cues, all the way to intent . It’s a bit like the hot-and-cold game we played as kids when trying to find a hidden object. Getting “warmer” meant we were on the right track, and this feedback kept us going in that direction. You tell your horse he is getting “warmer” by releasing the pressure and relaxing your body language. The key is, as soon as he moves in the slightest direction you want him to go, you must release immediately. Horses are comfort seekers and learn when you release pressure. Starting slowly allows the horse the chance to comprehend, and he’ll begin to yield off very

little pressure. Pressure that comes quickly, “pokes,” comes out of nowhere, or is sustained, makes a dull, unresponsive horse.

Confidence Pressure. With a horse that is unsure or lacks confidence, the use of pressure is different again. You need to recognize this horse is worried and not confident about what you are asking. With a horse that is unsure of things, only use the slightest amount of pressure needed for the horse to recognize it as a cue. Also, be ready to release to go back to friendly or neutral at the very moment he gives the slightest visible try.

When you know you're with a horse that is not confident, your approach to how you use the Horseman's Stick and String—or the pressure of your hand—is different from the previous pressure categories. For example, you'd approach this horse with a different feel and sensitivity than you would with a horse that is trying to run you over to get back to the barn.

Incremental Pressure. I've touched on this briefly before, but when you ask your horse to do something, always have a clear goal in mind, and start out with the least amount of pressure possible. Ideally, he will respond to just your body language, before you even lift your stick. As soon as your horse gives you a signal he's thinking of moving in the right direction, release all pressure as a reward. Release means lowering the end of your stick to the ground and relaxing your body language. This softer stance is comforting and lets him process what you just asked.

Break requests into very small increments, and find a slight try that you can reward. This way, the horse isn't overwhelmed by a large task and views the lessons more positively. Take too big of a bite, and a horse will revert to his instinctual prey-animal mode of self-preservation where he'll spend more time evading than comprehending. Break your lessons down, and he'll actually learn much faster.