

Aggressive vs. Assertive...

Most people have trouble getting firm without getting angry, which is why most horses get scared and intimidated. On the other hand, horses can get firm with each other but don't elicit the same degree of fear. Horses innately fear people, and when people get firm, horses aren't afraid they're going to get hurt, they're afraid they're going to be killed and eaten.

There's a fine line between aggressive and assertive.

Horses are often aggressive with each other – biting, striking, kicking – they break skin and sometimes even break bones. Their motive is to dominate. They have a pecking order over things such as who drinks first, who eats first, who gets to stand with who, and this is challenged every day. The horse who is consistently the most assertive (confident and insistent), the bravest, the strongest, and the fastest thinker is the horse who becomes *Alpha*.

The pecking order of the herd needs to be maintained by each horse every day, especially because youngsters mature and herd members change. It's a *major* part of herd life and very important for us to understand.

If you're going to create real rapport with a horse, you need to act like a horse, use the same rules and social mores that they do. Understanding this is step one. Doing it is the part most people have the most problems with!

When people start to assert their dominance over horses, two behaviors typically emerge: people who get "aggressive," get mad and mean because they're annoyed by the horse's response; or those who become "assertive," can be firm without getting mean or mad.

What I'd like to do is help you to learn assertiveness, to be able to correct a horse without getting mad, and to do it in "phases." It's like when you were a child and your parent warned you that your actions were going to have serious consequences. They'd start counting: "1.... 2...." and you knew that if they said "3" you were in for a consequence! That's firm but fair. You have a chance to modify your behavior and the choice is absolutely yours as to whether you get that consequence or not.

It's no different for horses. They learn the same way, and if given the chance to modify, they usually will. In using phases of assertiveness, horses will be more apt to blame themselves if they "run into" trouble. By being aggressive and just whacking on a horse, he'll most certainly blame you. It's not fair. Horses don't learn how to be right, they just get tight and fearful of doing the wrong thing.

Punishment is not an effective teaching tool. Although some horses still perform with this kind of treatment, it's at a great emotional cost. They don't reach their potential and many will totally blow up and break down under this method of training.

With my system, people who tend towards aggression learn how to tone it down and become more assertive but without becoming a wimp, and those who have trouble getting firmer when needed will learn how to become more assertive without getting aggressive.

Walk a mile or a minute in your horse's shoes

Horses can take any amount of pressure and abuse from another horse. They're raised with an innate understanding of how dominance games work, and have played them with other horses all their life (provided they haven't spent their life in isolation). Being of the same species, they have a strong bond with each other and if they ever feel threatened they'll herd up and protect each other.

However, when a human is aggressive with a horse it's a different story. Horses (*prey animals*) perceive aggressive or forceful behavior from humans (*predators*) as life threatening. Even though horses have been domesticated for thousands of years, we must never lose sight of the fact that we cannot alter their natural instinct.



COCO

'Assertive' is being as firm as necessary without getting mean or mad.

That instinct has ensured their survival over millions of years.

Even if you personally don't eat horse meat, thousands of people still do. So do lions, grizzly bears, dingoes, hyena, wolves and coyotes. Horses know that we belong to the same family as these animals – we are all *predators*. In truly understanding this it is clear that our first message to horses must be "I would never, ever hurt you, even if I could. You can absolutely depend on the fact that I am your friend."

What would it be like to be a prey animal?

Let's say that you and your friends are walking through the Amazon, close to an area that is known for its cannibalistic tribes. How would you feel? A little tense, perhaps?

All your senses would be intensely heightened so you could "feel" the approach of a cannibal. Your survival would depend on your ability to perceive their presence early, the speed of your reactions, plus the ability to get away as quickly as possible. So now, how are you going to react to a rustle in the bushes, a sudden or unusual noise, a movement detected in the corner of your eye... Welcome to the world of the prey animal!

Now imagine that one of your friends is the leader of your group. He is calm, confident, athletic. Every time you hear something scary, you check on his reaction. If he looks calm it will calm you down. But if he gets wide eyed and tense, your sense of security goes right out the window! Run for your lives!

Suddenly, a group of cannibals jump out of the bushes and herd your group into a compound. You stand there all night, scared out of your wits because something tells you you're going to be lunch.

The next day, you are singled out into another corral and one of the cannibals tries to approach you, and although you don't know it, he singled you out because he wants to befriend you. He seems friendly and soft, but you know he's a man-eater so you keep your distance.

All your senses are so heightened that your nerve endings are screaming, you have super-hearing, super-feeling, super-sight, your adrenaline is helping you survive, you even have super-human strength and endurance. If that cannibal comes within striking distance you're going to let him have it in every way you know how. It's you or him, that's all there is to it.

The cannibal, not able to convince you to stand still now goes for his rope. He swings it and catches you by the ankle. You're going to panic, struggle, kick, scream, use your hands, your teeth, anything you can think of to break free. You're fighting for your life, out of a pure sense of survival. There is no time to think.

Finally those ropes are looped around your whole body and you are brought to the ground, terrified, trapped. Once you are rendered completely helpless, the cannibal approaches you and your spirit has one last chance, you're not going to give up. You try to bite, you scream. And the cannibal smiles and lifts his arm and his whip over you... and gently, lovingly strokes you. How long would he have to do this before you believed, beyond any shadow of a doubt that he was not interested in eating you? And a year later, would you still feel the same level of trust? It wouldn't take very much to break that trust.

This is where many horses are. This story would be akin to the experience of a horse that had never been touched before, that was roped and brought to the ground (not the most natural approach in communication and understanding, but one often used even by people with good intent).

Most horses are not captured from the wild. They're raised in a human environment and often handled right from birth (although this is not necessarily a pleasant experience). Although they've learned not to be terrified of people, they still have millions of years of evolutionary grooming. They're still suspicious and on-guard when around people so it doesn't take much to scratch the surface of a horse and bring out the prey animal. You see it every day... horses who pull back, blow up, run off, panic in a trailer or in public situations, freak out, jig, jog and prance on a trail ride.

If ever you find yourself feeling frustrated about it, just put yourself back in that cannibal compound for a moment. Even years later it wouldn't take much to make you think that the cannibal had changed his mind and was going to kill and eat you after all! How well your horse does and continues to do is totally up to you.

Mild aggression vs. strong assertiveness

There are three things that define aggressiveness from assertiveness in people: attitude, emotion and timing.

Aggressive vs. Assertive... cont'd.

Aggression has an attitude of punishment or attack and an emotion of anger, frustration or fear. Because of this, the timing is often late and there is a distinct lack of phases, just one big Phase 4!

Aggression, no matter how mild or severe, is ineffective with horses because even if you achieve the result you want, you lose the horse's trust and respect. He'll mentally and emotionally shut you out, bracing his mind and body against you.

Some examples of aggression are represented in actions such as pulling on a horse with a chain shank when he doesn't lead well, or smacking him across the nose when he tries to bite you. The horse feels your anger or frustration which increases his insecurity and resentment, so instead of the behavior going away, it gets worse.

Let's take the same examples and apply assertive leadership and lateral thinking to modify the horse's behavior...

When leading: start by giving your horse a loose rope and allow him some room to move around. If he passes in front of you, turn abruptly 180 degrees in the opposite direction and pop him on the hindquarters (using the *Carrot Stick* and *Savvy String*) as you pass by. He'll turn around in surprise and find himself following behind you again! Walk a little ways and turn again, popping him on the rump as you pass. There's no need to get mean, mad or flustered, just outsmart your horse by changing the game plan on him. It'll only take a few turns before even the most persistent horse starts paying attention and staying respectfully behind you, his leader.

Same thing with biting: instead of slapping the horse for biting you, set it up so he can't bite you! You shouldn't punish a horse for your lack of attention in that situation. Have him maintain a certain distance when standing near you (use *The Driving Game*^{#3} and *Yo-Yo Game*^{#4} to put him back in place). This way he cannot reach you to even get into trouble.

If he does get close enough to bite you, when you feel him coming in to take a bite, start flapping your elbows like a chicken. Don't look at the horse, just act like he's not even there and allow him to run into your arms if he wants. It'll be just like a child trying to put his finger in a fan, he'll only do it once! The horse will blame himself for taking that action. Whereas if you turn and smack him, he'll blame you, lose respect, and then turn it into a game to see how many nips he can get in and out before getting swiped!

Once a horse has overcome his deepest fears about people, he's often given to playing games on them, mercilessly! It's important that you also recognize this as a game and not get too serious about it or you'll find the horse taking advantage of your emotional vulnerabilities (frustration, anger, etc.).

A horse will only respect you if you are quicker, stronger and braver than he is, just like the alpha horse would be. As your level of savvy builds and you're able to stay more mentally, emotionally and physically in control of yourself, you'll be amazed at how much more your horse will respect you and stop all those difficult or annoying behaviors.

Going back to the cannibal scenario, remember the qualities of

your group leader... cool, calm, confident.

Physically speaking, you are no match for a horse. But! If you have the right attitude, knowledge, tools, techniques, savvy and experience, your horse will start to vote for your leadership and enjoy it.

Learn how to get firm without getting mean or mad

The trouble with getting assertive is that most people are not emotionally fit enough to get firm without getting mean or mad. If they see me having to get firm with a particularly disrespectful horse, they sometimes think I'm being mean because they cannot imagine themselves getting that firm without losing their temper. The secret is firstly to make sure you're not blaming the horse for being a prey animal and that you're taking the right action for the right reason (for example, you would not need to get firm with a fearful horse, you would need to help him gain confidence).

You have to have an *attitude of justice* which means small consequences for small things, big consequences for big things. And consequence does not always mean physical contact. In most instances you just need to know how to cause a horse to be uncomfortable when he is doing the undesirable thing.

My mother was a great example for assertiveness... Once when I was a teenager lazing on the couch I replied with a disrespectful "Oh, all right..." when asked to take the trash out. My mother just tipped the trash right over my head and never took the smile off her face. She said "Son, this trash is going out via you whether you like it or not. You have two arms, two legs and one mouth which means you can say 'Yes Ma'am' with a smile while hustling over to take it out." She knew how to make me very uncomfortable and she never had to hit me! To this day I knock on the door with hat in hand and, and after kissing her hello I ask "Hey Mom, do you have any trash that needs taking out?" She has my respect.

What I need to teach you, more than anything else, is *how* to become more mentally and emotionally fit around horses, how to understand where the horse is coming from so you can act appropriately, and to learn infinite patience. Most people run out of patience in less than four minutes. Horses know this and they learn to play on it because all they have to do is persist for longer than four minutes and they win!

The Four Phases of Firmness

A simple way to keep emotions under control when having to get firm is to determine *Four Phases of Firmness* until you are effective in getting the desired response. Using "phases" is natural to horses and can be observed in something simple like when he's preparing to kick another horse:

Phase 1 – the horse lays his ears back, wrinkles his nose, gives a warning look...

Phase 2 – he tosses his head and lifts his leg...

Phase 3 – he kicks out without making contact...

Phase 4 – he kicks out again and makes contact.

There were three strong warnings that a kick was coming.

Horses don't often get kicked by other horses because they pay attention to the impending signs and get out of the way. They tend to get kicked more when they're trapped. But people get kicked all the time because they're oblivious to those warning signals and the speed at which they can occur. Sometimes the phases come so quickly they are barely distinguishable unless you know what you're looking for.

So how can you use phases the same way as a horse?

To lash out and slap a horse or kick him in the belly can be perceived as an aggressive act by the horse because it is sudden, there's no warning that he can reliably detect, and there's a rash of emotions that go with it. To help you avoid doing this, one of the first things I want you to learn is how to use *rhythm* – kick your leg up in the air three times, or do three jumping jacks, or flap your elbow three times. It's hard to maintain an angry emotion if you have to repeat the action three times! If you need to drive a horse back, do the action a minimum of three times without approaching the horse's space. In this way he has the chance to get out of your space and learn how much better it is to not invade it in the first place.

For *Phase 1* I use the "*Schwiegermutter look*" (which means mother-in-law in German!). It's the "*Leave my daughter alone and get out of here before things get worse*" look. I cannot physically put my ears back but I can make the same face and convey the same message horses do when they lay back their ears in threat. It's the behavior that precedes any biting, striking or kicking that's about to come. So when I want to drive a horse backwards, or move his hindquarters or front end away from me, I'll use this look as *Phase 1*. For *Phase 2*, I might lift my hand. For *Phase 3*, I'd swing the end of my rope or a *Carrot Stick*. For *Phase 4*, I'd make physical contact (not necessarily very strongly), just like a horse kicking or biting another horse, and in the appropriate *Zone* – the one that makes sense to the horse. Then I'd relax for a moment, give him time to absorb what just happened, and then start again. Horses are very perceptive. They know what happens before what *happens* happens so pretty soon, it'll take little more than a firm look to have him yield without question and, more importantly, without fear.

Effectiveness comes with Savvy

When you know how to be effective with a horse in a positive way it helps you remain calm and stay fair. As long as you don't cross the line into aggression, your horse will learn to respond with respect and without fear. It's better to have a program of prevention than to punish the horse when you think he's wrong. If you really understand the horse, you'll see that punishment is not appropriate – psychologically speaking – because you can't blame him for acting like a prey animal.

Horses are simple. But they're only simple if you truly invest yourself in learning about them... not how to sit and hold the reins, what leg to put where... but more about what makes them tick, what's important to them, how they think, why they do what they do, and how to gain their trust and confidence. When you have this kind of savvy you'll never get frustrated or run out of answers again.

Work on yourself so you can enjoy your horse... and he can enjoy you.

Some savvy sayings to help you stay sane!

The attitude of justice is effective.

Be effective to be understood,
be understood to be effective.

Punishment doesn't work for prey animals,
but a program of prevention does.

Cause the wrong thing to be difficult and
allow the right thing to be easy.

Don't *make* or *let*, instead use
cause and *allow*. Know the difference.

Walk a mile or a minute in your horse's
horseshoes.

I've never seen it take longer than
two days!

Be polite and passively persistent in the
proper position.

Be as gentle as you can but as firm as
necessary. When you're firm, don't get
mean or mad and when you're gentle,
don't act like a sissy.

Don't bribe 'em with carrots, don't hit 'em
with a stick. Find the middle of the road.

Don't get mad, get eventempered.

If your horse wants to bolt... there's
probably a nut loose in the saddle.

Don't be a "big jerk" on the end of the rope!

Don't act like a predator. Become more
mentally, emotionally and physically fit.

When in horseville, do as horses do.

Think like a horse.