

A Different Way of Thinking May Help

by Bonnie Martin

Sometimes just a small change in the way we think about or say something can have a profound effect in the outcome. I've seen this several times recently in my horsemanship journey and am constantly searching now for more of these seemingly subtle words/ideas that have such a major impact on the results of our requests of our horses.

In all of my riding lessons throughout the years, I'd heard instructors tell me to "put your heels down". It not only presents a better picture for equitation, but it sits you deeper in the saddle and helps your legs be able to be more efficient. The downside to putting your heels down though is that one often pushes against the stirrup with the ball of the foot in order to force the heel down. This uses the muscles on the back of the thigh and creates a brace in the leg, and braces are never good in dealing with horses. There is another way to achieve the same look that doesn't create a brace and frees up your legs. Instead of pushing your heels down, try lifting your toes up. A completely different set of muscles are involved in doing this—you use the ones at the front of your leg instead and your foot remains light in the stirrup rather than pushing against it. Then when you use the calf of your leg against the horse's barrel to cue him, your heel doesn't sneak up and out of position and you're not popping yourself up and out of the saddle.

Another example of thinking about something in a way that makes for a different outcome involves use of leg in the back up. There are various ways of backing horses, but the way I had adopted involved using reins to ask the horse to give to the bit and I block forward motion with the reins (not pulling, but merely restricting forward motion), and using seat and leg to ask for movement. The leg movement I was originally taught was to use a light squeeze and release and it worked, but my horses respond even better now to this alternate way of cueing with the legs. Instead of a squeeze, I let my legs come out a few inches and then fall back against the horse's sides. There's no tension, and the horses back up more lightly, rapidly, and freely.

Sometimes our intentions have a profound effect on the results too. In working with a group of people who practice vaquero traditions of training, I've found that they use cattle to help train their horses. There is a big difference in their approach compared to rodeo and cutting training however. Vaquero methods are not working cattle, but rather using cattle to work their horses. It might seem like those words mean the same thing, but they don't. In working cattle, the horse has been taught to be in certain positions to rope, cut, or move the cows. The horse learns its job and does it without much rider direction once it's well trained. As the training progresses, there is speed involved to make it more exciting for spectators to watch.

The horses that are worked using cattle, on the other hand, are responding to the rider's cues and directions throughout their workout. The cattle give the horse a purpose for doing certain moves, but the rider and horse are in constant communication throughout. The horse is capable of speed, but that is not the point of the work. The idea is to get the

job done with as little dust and worry on the part of the cattle as possible. This is probably not as exciting to the casual observer, but it definitely demands good horsemanship and communication between rider and horse.

In a quest for better and better horsemanship, we need to pay attention to the seemingly small differences in terminology because they will have a profound effect in the total picture and outcome. Consider the following lists and decide which words will work best for creating a good relationship with your horse.

partnership	dictatorship
suggest	demand
request	force
allow	make
ask	tell
hold	pull
quick release	slow release
soft	hard
slowly closing hands	quickly closing hands
communicate	boss
show	insist
guide	push
play	drill
focus	inattention
discipline	spoil
polite	rude
leadership	passenger

Hopefully, the words in the list on the left will be the ones you choose to apply to your horsemanship. Strive to apply those words to your mindset every time you are with your horse. The change might amaze you. Happy riding!