

Thinking Outside the Box to Keep the Horse Inside

By: John String

Hitting the mark in training often means finding the balance between accomplishing learning objectives, retaining student interest, and maintaining relevancy. Adding to the difficulty of the process are the often-unclear goals of law enforcement training in this new world of liability and criticism. While we often talk of removing the elephant in the room to help the process, in this case adding a horse may be part of the solution.

Hearing What Isn't Said

The ability to interpret nonverbal communication is critical for police officers. Recognizing signs of flight, deception, and aggression can help officers respond to and manage violent behaviors. However, less emphasis is often placed on our own body language and the way it affects these situations. Compounding the issue, when we do learn about nonverbal communication, we talk about it despite the contradiction. There are few accurate tools or systems which can measure nonverbal communication; therefore, instructors verbally engage with students and then tell them about their nonverbal actions. This process has a filter and a delay which can be detrimental to the process. Enter horses....literally.

Stanford University has been using equine-assisted training for nonverbal communication for over 17 years¹. With the intent of improving the doctor-patient relationship, Stanford medical school professors started using horses to effectively evaluate and support learning in the nonverbal arena.

¹ Stanford Medicine <https://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2019/02/05/straight-from-the-horses-mouth-lessons-in-non-verbal-communication-for-medical-trainees-and-the-rest-of-us/>



John String

JOHN STRING has been a police officer for 18 years and holds a master's degree in Public Administration and has completed Northwestern University's School of Police Staff and Command. He is a member of the Board for the Kindle Hill Foundation.

“Horses mirror and magnify our intentions and behaviors. Working with horses requires sensitivity to nonverbal cues, discrimination in the quality and amount of physical contact, and an awareness of one's emotional state, all important skills for relating to patients.”²

² Stanford University Course Bulletin, FAMMED 252: Medicine & Horsemanship: An Outdoor, Equine Assisted Learning Course for Doctor-Patient Relationship

Horses give us this ability since they primarily respond to our nonverbal communications. Involving horses in our training forces students to improve their nonverbal communication skills and reflect on the nonverbal tools they use but may often overlook. When verbal communication is removed completely, these areas can then be highlighted for attention and improvement.

The Silent Dialog

The Kindle Hill Foundation in Blue Bell, PA has been instructing police officers from Pennsylvania and New Jersey for several years through an interactive equine-assisted learning method.

Students in this course will quickly learn that no matter what you say or how you say it, words alone aren't going to move a horse. In an interesting parallel to law enforcement, they will also find that the more force they apply, the less likely they are to obtain the desired result. These training situations mirror incidents where de-escalation is critical and provide students with instant and direct feedback on their performance.

Thinking and Acting Outside of the Box

During the class, officers spend time learning to read the nonverbal cues from the horses as well. Officers who approach too fast or apply too much pressure to an event will see how the horse reacts and learn they are much like humans. They can blade away, raise their heads in alertness, or even back away from the officers. Observing and processing nonverbal cues without the noise of verbal communication can have the benefit of renewing our focus on identifying these responses in the people we encounter.

In one training event officers are given the simple task of keeping a horse within a square marked on the ground, "the box." Like the people we deal with, horses have different personalities and varying levels of compliance. Some horses require only mild interaction to keep them contained, while others require finesse akin to combining dance moves with a 400-meter dash. Switching horses simulates the difficulties we encounter in law enforcement transitioning between calls. If you carry over your intense reactions from the "wilder" horse to the calm one, you will scare them right out of the box. This reinforces our need to stop and evaluate a situation to ensure we are responding to the incident, not to ourselves.



In addition to this course, the Kindle Hill Foundation also provides equine-assisted mental health training for first responders. As we are keenly aware, ensuring the health and wellness of our responders is critical to ensuring their success and longevity. The use of horses in mental health awareness training enables participants to focus more on themselves without the filters and roadblocks in other common modalities. Similarly, officers are reporting the positive effects of this training and the program is growing to offer more support to other officers and agencies.

Horseplay or Integral Training

Strong nonverbal skills are important for anyone, but for officers, it can be a matter of life and death. Improvements in nonverbal communications have a direct impact on improving an officer's ability to de-escalate situations. The ability to analyze behaviors through the reactions of the horses has a direct correlation to interpersonal communications we use with the public.

Officers who have attended these training events have given excellent feedback to help improve the program as it grows. Students have already asked for an "advanced" training course to help them further develop their skills. Through their evaluations, officers have identified that the training is relatable to law enforcement and provides an opportunity to learn about their current skills and improve upon them.

Law enforcement statewide can benefit through this style of training and outreach. As we advance our profession, it will be new and creative training tools like this that help us develop and grow.