

arts & life



The life coach and horse whisperer Koelle Simpson believes that the skills she teaches in the ring can be transferred directly to the workplace. Rich-Joseph Facun / The National

Horse sense

How did our relationship go this wrong, this fast? I mean, I'm the one who's supposed to be in charge here. But first she stopped wanting to do the things I wanted to do, then she stopped listening to me and now she's ignoring me completely. So now, desperate to win her back, I abandon my last shreds of self-respect and resort to begging.

Worst of all, the object of my pleading is a horse.

Koelle Simpson, a life coach and horse whisperer, can learn a lot about a person by putting them in a ring with an unfamiliar 15-hander. The horse can learn a lot about you too, and if the first thing it picks up is that you aren't Robert Redford in *The Horse Whisperer* then you're history.

Such rejection is part of the learning process on offer in a series of leadership courses Simpson is running this month at Al Asayl equestrian centre near Sweihan. By teaching business leaders how to handle the horse and then to recognise and let go of their ingrained ideas about self and control, she shows them how to better manage people

and get them on side, to "create a level of transparency and authenticity that allows connections and bonds to happen".

Simpson, of course, meeting a keyed-up chestnut stallion for the very first time, makes it all look so easy. Standing in the centre of the ring, a slight figure in her jeans and cowboy boots, she walks a small circle as the animal canters skittishly around the perimeter, kicking and bucking.

This could go western, big time. Surely this is one petulant colleague no team leader could win over?

Yet beforehand, Simpson predicted exactly what would happen, and it does.

"When I go in with this horse, he is going to be watching me, feeling me out," she says. Simpson claims that even the biggest, toughest-looking horses are happy to follow a leader, but that there are certain things they are looking for; they don't surrender their leadership to just anybody. Sound like anyone in your office?

Horses, she says, are sensitive to all the physical clues that our comfort-dulled

Koelle Simpson's True Leadership course helps attendees to better understand themselves and improve their management techniques by applying equine handling skills to their everyday lives. Jonathan Gornall learns some valuable skills

modern minds long ago lost the knack of reading. In the wild they need to know who is boss - and who is next in line for the job if things go badly; it's a matter of life and death. Without a leader, the herd scatters in the presence of predators "and as soon as you become an isolated grazer, the game is over".

For this reason, a horse's level of sensitivity is heightened compared with ours. They are always aware of potential danger and of each other - what's going on, how you are breath-

ing, your adrenalin level and your pulse rate.

In the ring, Simpson exerts a magnetic influence over the stallion. Instead of kicking her or knocking her down, which seemed to be on the cards, he slows to a walk. And one ear has now swivelled in, focusing on her, just as she said it would.

"This is to say, 'I'm paying attention. I don't know what we're doing here, but I'm watching you.'"

Horse, continued on 3 →

see
we

That Justin Bieber mania has worsened. Tickets for his world tour have caused heart palpitations and general hysteria from young, female fans across the globe. Is he the most successful YouTube phenomenon ever?

'The horses gradually started to teach me how to lead and how to teach them how to treat me'

→ Horse, continued from 1

Next, the horse starts to reduce the size of his circle, moving slightly closer with each orbit of the ring. "He is saying: 'Is it going to be all right if I get a little closer to you, or are you going to lash out?' He takes a small, measured risk to see if he can trust me. He will never assume he can."

Then he pushes his luck, coming even closer. "Now he is testing me, saying, 'OK, can you set boundaries on your space, on what makes you comfortable? Because if you can't, then you have no business leading,'" explains Simpson.

Right on schedule, as forecast, he starts to chew on some imaginary food.

"That's a two-fold gesture," she says. "He is saying he feels comfortable with me and also that I don't need to be afraid of him. He's saying 'I'm a herbivore, not a hunter. I pretend I'm eating when I'm relaxed, because I don't stop to eat when I'm running for my life.'"

The magical little play reaches its final act as the horse bows his head, obediently following at Simpson's shoulder as she walks around the ring. "This last gesture is to say: 'In this moment, the way you are conducting and expressing yourself, I feel comfortable allowing you to lead.'"

Horses, in other words, know a born leader when they see one and when my turn comes around, the white mare clearly knows I'm not The One.

My problem, says Simpson, is that I'm too eager to please, too busy whispering what I hope the horse will hear as sweet nothings, too reluctant to crack the metaphorical whip: "The way your communication comes across is as a very soft, sweet, don't-rock-the-boat kind of approach."

Simpson is alert for every subtle nuance of her clients' body language: "Our bodies do not have the physical capacity to lie." She doesn't need her heightened sensibilities to spot my crestfallen demeanour.

"And that's OK," she adds quickly. "It will have served you well in certain ways." Or not, I think, running a mental inventory of relationships.

"Your mind has equated being clear, assertive and authentic with being a bad, negative or aggressive thing. But you can be in a place of power and not be aggressive."

Our problem as human beings, Simpson says, is that we take the concept of leadership and distort it to fit our own neuroses and our own fear-based ways of looking at the world. This tends to go in one of two directions; either towards dictatorship, whether spoken or unspoken – "I'm going to make you do what I want, or else" – or the way more often exercised by women – "I'm going to schmooze you and be sweet and cute and pretty and manipulate you into doing what I want you to do."

Great. So not only am I not Robert Redford, I'm a manipulative girl.

At least I'm not alone. Too many of us, Simpson says, "feel like they are the resource for other people's happiness". We do whatever it takes to make other people happy. "But that means you are abandoning your own sense of what is good for you, having a complete disconnect with your own sense of personal boundaries. If you let everyone else hook up their jumper cables to your battery, you are not going to last very long. And for a horse, that is not sustainable leadership."

Neither dictator nor manipulator are even close to leadership material in the animal world. "And that kind of energy, which all stems from the root of fear – fear of not having control, fear of not having enough money, or love – is not safe leadership."

It is, she says, entirely appropriate for a horse trainer to be teaching horse sense to humans.

"The beautiful part, what makes this work such fun, is that subconsciously humans respond in the exact same way that a horse does."



Simpson applied the lessons she had learnt with horses to people after meeting The Oprah Magazine columnist and author Martha Beck Rich-Joseph Facun / The National

Once we outgrow childhood, "we don't ever say how we're coming across to one another because it's not socially appropriate or polite, but this creates problems in our relationships."

"With horses, you realise you are able to express exactly what you want. And when it all goes pear-shaped and the horse responds to that, you think, well, 'that's exactly the response I get when I'm trying to communicate with my wife, or talk to my boss.'"

Plenty of "horse whisperers" have sprung up since Redford wooed Kristin Scott Thomas with his animal magnetism, but Simpson is part of a long tradition that predates the 1998 film and the 1995 Nicholas Evans novel that inspired it.

The term seems to have been applied first to Daniel Sullivan, an 18th century Irish horse trainer about whom very little is known, but the

first record of the principal of training horses with compassion rather than compulsion can be found much earlier. The ideas are found as far back as a treatise on horsemanship written by Xenophon, the Greek student of Socrates, in about the third century BC.

Simpson fell in love with horses when she was seven, when her mother became engaged to a Florida farmer who owned horses and plenty of land for them to run around on. Too much land, in fact.

"You had to be in a certain frame of mind to even get your horse," she remembers. "When she didn't come I'd sit down and cry, 'Princess doesn't love me.' But on other days I'd show up and she'd be there, waiting for me. I couldn't articulate it then, but gradually I started to feel the difference that was causing this to happen."

Growing up, Simpson had some

"challenging" relationships and she used horses as an escape. In her teenage years she started working with therapeutic riding for disabled people. It was a way to be with people she could relate to and who didn't have hidden agendas.

It is, she says, the same thing that appeals to her about horses. "They do not have the capacity to lie. In my young life I'd been in so many situations where I got tangled up in people's hidden agendas and I couldn't keep myself safe. The horses gradually started to teach me how to lead, how to set appropriate and healthy boundaries with people, and how to teach them how to treat me."

Soon, she started to work with troubled horses and eventually, in 1997, ran up against a horse with whom she could make no progress – "a severe bucker who would reject you from the saddle in a serious hurry", and who had already put a

series of trainers in hospital.

Realising she was in over her head, she took the animal to a demonstration in Florida by Monty Roberts, on tour following the publication the previous year of his book, *The Man who Listens to Horses*.

Roberts, a horse trainer who grew up studying the ways of the wild mustangs in the Nevada high desert, had pioneered a training method based on co-operation and trust rather than domination and punishment. Roberts worked his magic and the bucker bucked no more.

"I didn't know if there was some trick up his sleeve, if it was carrots or drugs, but I had to understand what he knew," says Simpson, laughing.

They clicked, he became her mentor and, a few years later, she moved to his California ranch where she worked for him for five years. Working with one troubled horse after another, she gained a large volume

of experience and learnt the way that horses communicate.

She applied the lessons to human beings after meeting Martha Beck, the life coach with a monthly column in *O, The Oprah Magazine* and the best-selling author of such books as *Finding Your Own North Star* and *The Joy Diet*.

At one of Beck's coaching workshops, Simpson was blown away by Beck's words. The methods she preached were exactly what she had been doing with horses. It was what she had learnt from Roberts, applied to people.

In 2005 Simpson moved to Arizona and spent a year and a half as Beck's apprentice, in the process abandoning her unfinished psychology degree and starting her own business, coaching people through interaction with horses.

Back in the ring, I've manned up a bit, ditching the clucking and baby talk in favour of whacking my leg with a leading rope to catch the mare's wary attention. I'm being authentic and transparent, letting her know clearly what I want, and I'm succeeding in having her walk first one way and then the other.

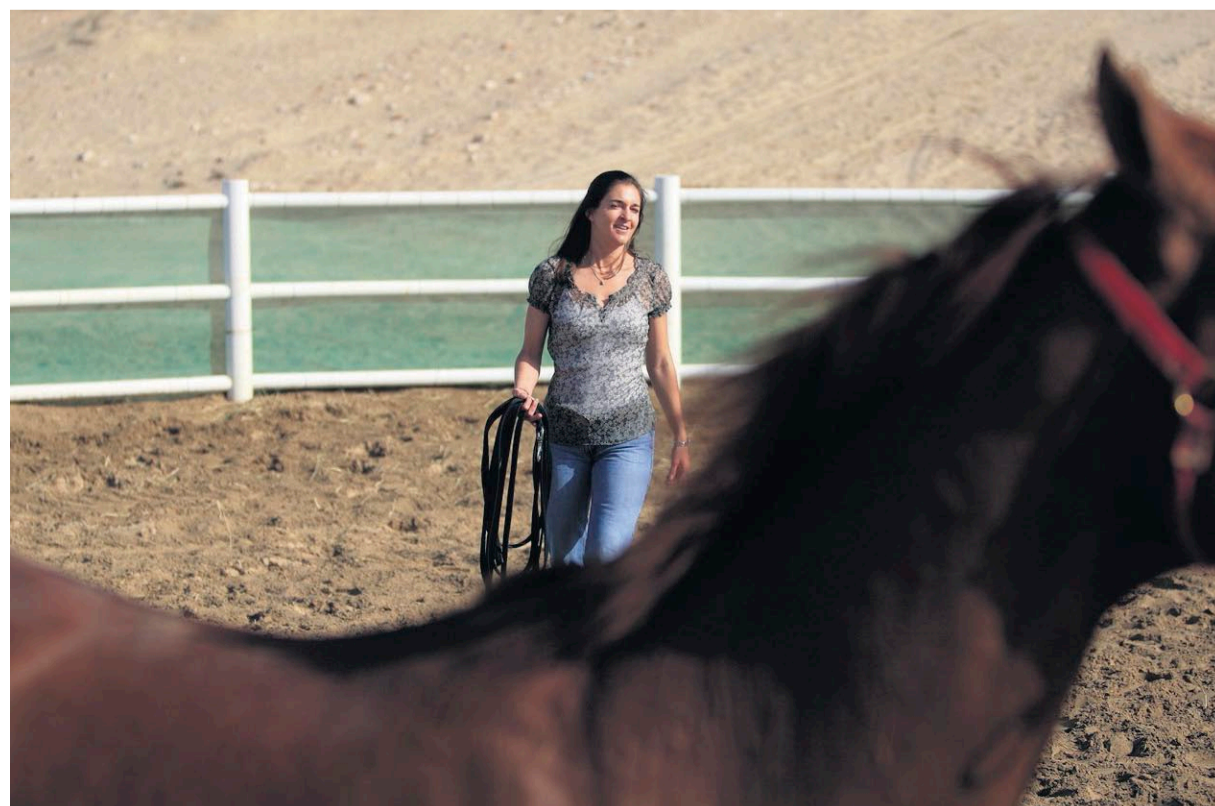
It's a start. Humans, says Simpson, will respond to the same things. "Lead and create your experience without manipulation or dictatorship. Take those out of the picture and you will see people begin to line up with you very fast. It looks like a horse 'joining up'; it looks like magic, but it's not. Anybody can do it."

I haven't quite achieved the joining-up, the moment of nirvana when the horse appoints me boss, gets in line and follows me around like a faithful puppy, but she is giving me the ear, a sure sign that I am at least being considered for interview.

● There are vacancies on Koelle Simpson's True Leadership courses at Al Asayl equestrian centre today, Saturday and April 28. Call 050 440 4674 or visit www.trueyoume.com. Private, one-on-one sessions are available any time with Simpson's UAE-based partner, Kelly Eide.

We don't ever say how we're coming across to one another because it's not polite, but this creates problems in our relationships

Koelle Simpson life coach



As the horse circles you, he is letting you know that he is watching you, judging you Rich-Joseph Facun / The National