

Business Tips

A Noncoercive Approach Works in the Workplace, for Kids, and Horses!

Last July, I read Laura Hillenbrand's award-winning book, "Seabiscuit: An American Legend," as well as saw the movie. I thoroughly enjoyed both, but my excitement was not as much for the entertainment value as it was for the noncoercive training methods employed by the trainer and owner to turn this horse around.

I recently read an article about the Seabiscuit story written by a former school administrator, Marvin Marshall, who writes a free internet newsletter, "Promoting Responsibility." With permission, I have reprinted it below. Before reading, please get out a pen and make a note to yourself to subscribe to his free newsletter at marv@marvinmarshall.com. Every parent, teacher and business leader can gain huge benefits from this free monthly read. I also strongly suggest you buy his book that he promotes on the website.

Seabiscuit--a descendant of the mighty Man o' War--was an undersized, crooked-legged racehorse but was the subject of the most newspaper column inches in 1938. The horse was nothing short of a cultural icon in America.

In a test race, Seabiscuit once ran a quarter of a mile in an unheard of 22-2/5 seconds. It may have been the fastest quarter mile ever run by a yearling. However, the horse was rather lazy--really lazy--so the trainer was confronted with a behavioral problem.

When the rider asked him for speed, the horse slowed down. When he tried to rein him in, the horse bolted. Asked to go left, he'd go right; tugged right, he'd dart left. The beleaguered rider could do no better than cling to the horse's neck for dear life.

At only three years old, Seabiscuit had already run 43 races, far more than most horses contest in their entire careers. Raced constantly, he surely no longer lacked for fitness. His problems were predominantly mental. He was showing signs of burnout. He became edgy, stopped sleeping, and spent his nights pacing around his stall. He fought savagely in the starting gate and sulked his way through races, sometimes trailing the field from start to finish. He was considered mean, restive, and ragged.

The horse was sold. Seabiscuit's new trainer knew what he was seeing. The horse's competitive instincts had been turned backward. Instead of directing his efforts against his opponents, he was directing them against the handlers who tried to force him to run. The horse habitually met every command with resistance. He was feeding off the fight, gaining satisfaction from the distress and rage of the man on his back. The trainer knew how to stop it. He took coercion completely out of the equation so the horse could rediscover the pleasure of speed.

Neither the trainer nor his rider raised a hand to him. Their noncoercive approach transformed Seabiscuit from a rogue to a pliant, happy horse. He never again fought a rider and went on to win races--including beating War Admiral in the "race of the century."

The lesson as it applies to promoting responsibility, increasing effectiveness, and improving relationships: coercion gets you reluctance, resistance, resentment, defiance, and rebellion.

Nurture the nature of whom you are trying to influence--without coercion. You will not only enjoy the process but the successes of your approach.

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