

How a CEO uses horses to train leaders at companies like MetLife, Kroger, and Cisco to build trust and avoid burnout

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June Gunter, CEO of TeachingHorse. Courtesy of June Gunter

- **June Gunter is the founder and CEO of TeachingHorse, a leadership development company based in NC.**
- **She uses workshops with horses in an arena to help clients reach their leadership potential.**
- **Her exercises teach teams how to let go of pressure, work together, and take time to rest.**

Years before there was talk of [pandemic burnout](#), June Gunter recognized a trend of workers feeling exhausted and uncertain in their careers and set out to change it.

For 15 years, she created leadership programming for a large healthcare company, and while there she noticed an increasing number of people who had the characteristics of a good leader declining positions of power.

The reason? Long hours and stress had to be worn as a badge of honor. Even Gunter felt herself falling into the trap.

"I had become one of those leaders who was living the same clichés," she said. "I decided I was going to find a different way to think about leading to create healthy, sustainable communities for leaders to lead healthy lives."

In 2002, Gunter quit her job to explore what might be next. She was in her 30s and desperately missing a connection with animals.

She purchased Yani, a horse she said she didn't have the skills to ride — it had been years since she'd rode as a kid — and dove into horse ownership. Yani quickly showed Gunter she wasn't as much of a leadership expert as she'd once thought.

"For a horse to choose you as a leader, you must demonstrate that you are placing your attention at three levels — yourself, those around you, and the environment around you. Then, use what you notice to make good decisions about where to go next at a pace that matches reality with the best interest of your horse in mind," she said. "I learned who I had to be because Yani chose me as her leader."

Gunter signed up for the Equine Guided Education program at [Sky Horse Ranch](#) in Bodega, California, and spent two years studying the work of equine experiential learning with Ariana Strozzi Mazzucchi. She then went on to launch [TeachingHorse](#), a leadership development company based in North Carolina.

Drawing on her professional networks, Gunter, who now serves as CEO, began holding workshops for leaders at some of the country's top companies, including Kaiser Permanente, Cisco Systems, Inc., MetLife, Duracell, and Kroger.

Horses can't talk, but they know how to lead

To live in the wild, horses rely on cues and signals from all members of the herd. Each has a critical role in the herd's survival.

Gunter observed that this takes a physical shape, one she's coined the [Diamond Model](#). Like the flying "V" formation for Canada geese, horses naturally fall into a formation when in a group: Some horses lead from the front, others lead from the middle, and others lead from behind.

"The horse out in front of the herd decides the herd's direction. Those in the middle create alignment between the whole herd, setting boundaries and mentoring new herd members," she said. "The horse that leads from the behind the herd has the broadest perspective and can see a bigger picture than everyone else."

Whether it's a company-wide or department-specific event, Gunter helps clients see that one person in the group must serve as the visionary looking over the horizon for new opportunities — be it a CEO, vice president, or other executive. Those in the middle play a critical role in getting the work done and building group relationships. And one teammate is needed to step back and look at the entire perspective.

For humans, this hierarchy can cause stress and anxiety and lead to power struggles. Gunter shows participants how horses are able to navigate these roles without feeling "better or less" than others and help each member of the team feel valued.

Each workshop includes multiple debrief sessions where participants talk about what happened working with the horses. The discussion focuses on observations of the horses' behaviors, and Gunter takes it one step further by comparing the horses' responses to what happens in the workplace, supporting clients in developing an action plan.

Before working in the arena, all participants complete a self-assessment

The tool measures a person's level of confidence with the Diamond Model of Shared Leadership capabilities, which includes attention, direction, energy, and congruence. It takes each of these traits into consideration on three levels of application: self, other, and environment.

Gunter works with teams and individuals to help them explore what's possible in pursuing a mission and vision without having to sacrifice themselves to do it.

"Before I arrive at a facility, I have a conversation with the client to uncover what's happening in their business and the desired outcomes," she said.

She then designs a half-day, full-day, or two-day workshop. Clients join Gunter in a fenced space with between one and three horses. Participants are then guided through a series of activities on the ground.

For example, she uses an introductory exercise where a person learns the language to use to approach a horse. The activities progress to the team getting the horse to complete an obstacle course or move from one end of the space to another.

"For the horse, this is not a game, and this not a demonstration or a simulation," she said. "This is a real decision of whether they are going to follow the person's leadership or not."

Leading without pressure and taking time to rest



(Photo Caption: The TeachingHorse Diamond Model in practice with someone leading from the front, the side, and watching from behind. TeachingHorse)

To a horse, the real reward for a job well done is the release of pressure. Participants working with the horses are taught how to ask the horse to take steps forward or backward. Then, participants are taught to stop asking.

In a recent workshop, Gunter said, when one leader was successful in guiding the horse, they got so excited they wanted the horse to keep going.

Gunter said to the client, "Did you get what you asked for after two steps?"

The client said yes, and Gunter replied, "So why did you keep asking for more?"

"Because I was afraid if I stopped, I wouldn't be able to get going again," the client said.

"This tells me that you might be afraid to ever release the pressure on yourself," Gunter said.

One of the most important lessons horses teach is the value of rest, Gunter added.

In a herd of horses, when the leader lies down to rest, the other members of the herd will surround them facing outwards. In this moment, the herd is sharing responsibility for noticing potential threats

from all directions to let the leader know they're safe to rest. Every member of the herd knows that when the leader rests, it's in the best interest of the entire herd.

Maintaining the safety of the herd

No prior horse experience is needed to participate in one of Gunther's workshops. Every event begins with a safety demonstration that includes rules for interacting with the horses and one another. She works with a cofacilitator so that two sets of eyes can monitor how comfortable the horses and humans are together.

If the person is exuding too much energy or incongruent in their intentions, chances are the horse will back away and raise his head.

"I work with a lot of physicians, and they can intellectualize their way out of everything except this," she said. "Either the horse is connecting or not, which sets up what to do about that. When the person gets softer and more interested in connecting, the horse changes instantly in their willingness to work with you. That applies to work for teams, too."