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THE BLOG**

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The Three Keys to Successful Trainer / Owner Relationships – Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

“If you ask trainers whether they are good at communication with owners, the majority say that they are. Unfortunately, while a very small number are consistently and reliably good at it, that is definitely not the case across the rest of the training ranks.”

In early days when I did a lot of management training, I used to joke that the vast majority of people believe that they are good in bed, great car drivers and excellent communicators. Occasionally people would take offence, as some probably will do about this blog, and there were always a few who, for whatever reason, immediately admitted that they were terrible at all three. My response was always the same – while I wouldn't dare comment on the first two, I would be pretty confident that very few would pass the test of excellence in communication. I then used to set up a series of exercises involving video recording of different types of communication that pretty quickly proved that I was right.

Interestingly, if you talk to trainers about communication the distribution is always massively skewed to their perception that they are good at it. Alas, in my experience it is the same as in the management training scenario – a very small number indeed are consistently and reliably good at communicating with owners. Having made that statement, these would be my ten tests of excellence. Why not rate your own trainer(s) out of 10 and see what score they get. I'll leave it to others to assess their prowess in other fields of activity!?!)

1. **Asking owners about communication.** In all my years of owning horses not one trainer has ever asked me any questions whatsoever about how I would like them to communicate with me, with what frequency, through which medium and about which aspects of the horse's development and performance. Not a good start.
2. **Authenticity of communication.** Any idiot can communicate, but the question is whether it is meaningful, genuine, honest and authentic. We can all sense immediately when we are not being spoken to in a truthful and timely manner. I have encountered the full range of this in my ownership career, from meaningful and helpful through to downright deceptive and pointless. Hardly surprising that none of the trainers at the negative end of the scale lasted very long.
3. **Frequency of communication.** If trainers bothered to talk to me about this, I'd always say that my communication preference is for regular, weekly updates, ideally on a Sunday morning, by phone or email. As I always do a Sunday update on our horses, this would help me enormously. Even now, I still have to chase some trainers. They should be the proactive ones, not me. After all, it's my choice whether to go to or stay with them, or not.
4. **Using the channels of communication.** There have never been more channels, and different types of medium to select. Trainers can communicate by phone, fax, email, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, with photos, videos, audio messages etc. They can even try face-to-face. That mix of communication, and how it is best used, can only really be clear if Question 1 has been followed – "How do you want me to communicate with you?"
5. **Communicating setbacks.** Absolutely vital that if a horse has any setback, no matter how minor, owners know about it as soon as possible. A number of years ago a trainer even had the audacity to geld my horse without my being aware of it. Correction, I should have said "ex-trainer"!
6. **Race planning and communication.** Some trainers enter every race imaginable for your horse without any proper discussion. Some then do the same on selecting the race. Not only can that waste a huge amount of money, but it is extremely frustrating, particularly if you are organising partnerships or syndicates. Owners need at least an indication of the probability of a run so as to make plans to attend.
7. **Raceday communication.** Ideally, owners meet up with the trainer on the track before the race in a relaxed way, for a highly personalised briefing. Not easy, particularly on a busy race-day when the trainer has other runners. All too frequently you meet with your trainer while the horse is being saddled up, and if the trainer can't attend it is with a member of staff who doesn't really know you. That doesn't give much time for meaningful dialogue, particularly with a large ownership group.
8. **Immediate post-race communication and feedback.** We all know as owners that we are dealing with disappointment probably, on average, nine races out of ten. If there is an area where trainers need to excel, it is in dealing with that disappointment. It is vital for there to be balanced communication that looks for the positives while also dealing with the negatives in a realistic and sensible manner.
9. **Communication the day after a race.** It is absolutely vital that the trainer or a member of their staff contact you the next day with an update on the horse, particularly if there is a possibility of a physical issue or injury. Again the ideal is a communication coming out around a fixed time, such as 10:00. That way the horse can have been examined and trotted out. Vets can also have made an assessment.

10. **Communicating expectations and key decisions.** The famous phrase is that success in life is expectation minus reality. If the expectations are built up too high, then everyone is doomed to failure. A difficult balance to achieve in practice. It is amazing though how many horses are potential Group winners until they step on to the track for the first time. Most trainers over-hype horses most of the time. That doesn't help at arriving on key decisions, either to do with selection of race targets or for that matter when to move a horse on – sell, retire or rehome it.

I think that will do for the moment – there are doubtless far more than ten, not least because everyone has their own communication style and requirements. What would yours be? What would encourage you to stay with a trainer? If I was a trainer, I would certainly want to know what would discourage you, as that can quickly lead to an owner having no more horses in the future, and / or removing them to somewhere else where communication is excellent.

