

The Story of Renewal Ranch

An Interview with Gayla Hodges

Interviewer: How did Renewal Ranch originate? What was the idea behind it?

Hodges: Renewal Ranch emerged from my love of horses and from my tendency to use traditional coaching and training processes in non-traditional ways as a Leadership and Change Leadership Coach. The original idea for the ranch was to do empowerment workshops for women. After 9/11, business was slow and I was looking for a way to have the horses earn their keep. In my work with corporate teams, there always comes a time when it's beneficial for the team to get away from the workplace and focus on their interaction as a team. That is the time that I recommended a ropes course or similar activity.

Then I heard about training to facilitate Equine Assisted Learning. At that time, most of the equine workshops were done with either physically or emotionally disabled individuals. Greg Kersten, who founded the field, was visionary enough to recognize the potential for EAL in building human performance. My husband and I went through a training workshop and, as they say, the rest is history. We moved to our first ranch, which made the idea of doing workshops more viable. We have found the ranch to be a place of renewal for ourselves, our family, and, now, others who come and participate in the workshops.

Interviewer: So the ranch was conceived as an extension of the work of Change Agents?

Hodges: Right. At Change Agents we specialize in change management and corporate effectiveness. Two critical aspects of corporate effectiveness are leadership capability and team productivity, whether the team is the executive staff or a group of front-line employees brought together to solve a problem or develop a process. Working with the horses at the ranch is an important training and coaching venue for working with leadership competence and team effectiveness.

Interviewer: Change Agents, Inc. uses your Natural Effectiveness™ philosophy and coaching and training methodologies. Renewal Ranch uses Equine Assisted Learning. How do the elements come together, and what are the outcomes?

Hodges: We incorporate our Natural Effectiveness™ Coaching philosophy into EAL workshops. We actually find it is a very comfortable fit. Horses really do have distinct personalities. Horses are different and people are different. Identifying your natural leadership style and strengths, and using that style to get a horse to do what you want it to do, can be very enlightening. It is very hard to ignore 1000 pounds of feedback!

Whether sales teams are learning to harness competitiveness into something positive and mutually supportive, or executives are trying to learn how to effectively lead a corporation through strategic organizational change, horses are apparently excellent teachers. Because horses are social animals, our clients can work with equine behavior and how the horses may or may not react to them. This allows people to understand better what might be more effective in their own human relationships and interactions. You see, the way a horse reacts to an individual creates a visual metaphor for how co-workers or peers might be reacting internally to that person's actions in a work environment. This gives insight as to why people are (or are not) getting the results they desire from their personal and professional relationships.

Interviewer: How does EAL, as you use it here at Renewal Ranch, compare to ropes courses and other training and coaching techniques?

Hodges: EAL uses a team approach, bringing together a horse specialist, a trained facilitator, the horses, and the participants to create a complete learning environment. The horses are the primary difference between ropes courses and a number of other techniques and EAL because the horses are living creatures with definite personalities. The horses provide real, measurable and immediate responses to the leadership style and the teaming activities of the participants.

Interviewer: What kinds of training and coaching needs are particularly appropriate for EAL?

Hodges: We use EAL very effectively in teambuilding programs, in executive coaching, in leadership development, and in conflict resolution experiences. It is not unusual for business executives to underestimate the power of the insights derived from EAL; but once they have an experience with the horses, the unique value of this kind of coaching and training is immediately clear to them.

Many managers and executives discover from working with the horses the precise issues in their leadership style or communication style which have been creating barriers when they tried to get people on board in support of an idea or a vision for the future of the company. In a great many instances, clear recognition of the problem is 75% of what is needed to make the changes that will result in either a more effective leadership style or more effective communication and progress toward achieving their goals. Once the barrier is recognized, we can develop the appropriate coaching or training to leverage the individual's natural style and build the needed support to achieve the vision.

Interviewer: What you are saying is that this unique approach to coaching business leaders and teams is both exceptionally effective and fun?

Hodges: Absolutely. The horses have fun, the participants have fun, and we have fun. And real relationships are formed in a very brief period of time between the horses and the participants. It is very gratifying to see the change effected through EAL and some individual or group coaching. It is always exciting to witness or to be part of an "AHA" experience. We are fortunate enough to be able to see them every day.