

Tools for Communication

By Karen Scholl

Do you remember getting two tin cans, a length of string and a couple of buttons from Mom's sewing drawer to make a very primitive (but way cool) telephone? You probably tired of talking on it after a while, but it was pretty fun to try it!

Today your kids are probably using text messaging and fiber optic technology! Have you even shown your kids how to make a tin can telephone? Shame on you! Many tools for communication with horses are pretty much from the same era as the tin can telephones. They are designed to lead a horse from point A to point B, and then tie to point B.

There are no fiber optics involved, and yet we tend to blame the horse when they don't do what we ask instead of consider the possibility that it's difficult for them to understand with tools that are heavy, uncomfortable, have no release and especially, are not designed for the subtle communication horses are capable of perceiving.

Many horses learn just to tune us out and keep trying to do what they want to do. And why shouldn't they? Dragging us over to that little patch of grass has very little consequence with a wide web or leather halter. We're then told we need to use a stud chain!

The good news is that most of this confusion and frustration can be minimized by using tools designed for communication with a horse.

Comfort Motivation

Horses are highly motivated by comfort, so if we can think of the inside of the halter acting as a "bubble of comfort" that the horse learns to stay inside of, everything will change. Of course, the edge of this bubble needs to give the horse enough reason to want to stay inside of it, and that's why a thin rope halter can really make a difference. The thin design gives us more of an advantage as it is less inviting for the horse to lean into, but is not cruel or designed to use pain as a motivator. This is similar to me asking you to lean against the palm of my hand with your shoulder—you could lean all day, couldn't you? Now lean against my fingertip. Ouch! It didn't hurt, but you wouldn't lean on it very long, would you?

This is the same idea for communication with the horse. The instant the horse moves away from the discomfort, he moves back into the "bubble" and learns that this is where he wants to be. This is also why it's important for the material to be soft enough to be comfortable when the horse is doing the right thing.

Follow a Feel

Another aspect to rope halters and leads is the feel of the rope. We've all seen the different designs and materials, from climbing rope to cotton rope. I prefer a yachting braid material designed to resist water and salt (sweat).

When finished properly, this material will transmit a very subtle signal to the horse with clarity similar to fiber optics! People are always shocked that they can feel the very slightest movement in one of these ropes compared to their old cotton lead. Another factor is in the length of rope. I recommend at least a 12' line, which seems like way too much rope to handle, but if you fold it once in half, it becomes a 6' lead again. The advantage is that you have more options for safety when the horse spooks, rears, jumps, etc. I've been glad many times when a horse was far away when he had a problem!

One of the first things I teach people is how to ask their horse to respect their personal space. If you're in the habit of holding right at the clip, then 12' is too long, but when your horse learns to

keep a respectful distance (about 4' away) then the lead line is just the right length.

Value of Versatility

You also have a lot of versatility with this length of line. Leadership games are always welcome with horses, and 12' is a good length to begin "riding from the ground." As skills advance, I recommend moving to a 22' length line to expand your communication and challenges. The first stage on the 12' line is a teaching stage for you and your horse.

Moving to the 22' line is into the challenging stage where you'll find the longer distance will help you gain even more respect and have more fun. Another key tool for communication is what I call the "equalizer." It's my pet name for a training stick and is called that because it instantly makes us as big and as fast as another horse.

Believe me, horses know that we're smaller and slower than they are. They have the physical advantage and use it every chance they get—not because they're being naughty, but because they're designed by nature to play leadership games with their herd mates, and guess what? You're their herd mate!

Like anything new, it's common to get frustrated using something that feels so awkward at first. But hang in there, because the rewards are great. Remember feeling a tennis racket or snow skis for the first time? Everything feels awkward at first, but with use will soon feel like a natural extension of your arm.

The little 6' string at the end of the "equalizer" is a very important tool as well. When attached to the stick, it extends my reach to 10', allowing me to communicate with a horse from a safe distance without needing to move towards the horse. I keep a string in my back pocket at all times and use it for a variety of needs on a regular basis. You can imagine the uses for this string, from catching a loose horse, tying a gate open in the wind, driving rude horses away at feeding time, and the list goes on.

Get a Bigger Bit—of Knowledge!

I like to make the transition to riding with a soft rope hackamore. The communication I've established "riding from the ground" transfers directly as the feel of material is already familiar to the horse.

Another benefit is that if/when a horse becomes confused and runs into pressure, I'm not inside their mouth with a piece of metal, which can contribute to a defensive response to pain. I can actually get more done at these early stages of teaching because I can be more clear to the horse without them getting worried about a bit.

As the horse gains more confidence and trust, I transition to a loose-ring, sweet iron snaffle. The loose ring allows for the bit to remain steady as the ring turns with the lift of the reins. D-rings and other fixed-ring snaffles will cause the bit to turn inside the mouth, adding unnecessary information that can cause confusion to a horse.

A little-known fact is that the broken mouthpiece snaffle bit is one of the cruelest bits when used improperly. Snaffle bits are designed for lateral flexion, using one rein at a time. When both reins are pulled on either from fear or lack of confidence from the rider, the horse has one of the sharpest, longest points inside their tender mouth. Because we don't understand these dynamics, nosebands and tie-downs or martingales have become standard appointments, even in the show ring.

The value of weighted reins is well known, but not always understood. Because horses are motivated by comfort, it's important for us to be able to release pressure as quickly as possible. This is why a weighted rein (heavy rein attachments, heavy yachting rope reins, slobber chains, etc.), tells the horse something is about to change while the reins are being lifted—even before pressure

is felt on the mouth. This gives the horse the opportunity to respond to just the shift of the weight on the rein and to offer lightness to the hands of the rider.

When the horse responds to the direction the reins are leading, they learn they can get their comfort back as the weight of these reins go slack again with more immediacy than those without weight. This may seem complicated, but it's fairly simple to experience if you put your hand over the bit and move the reins, feeling what I am describing in your own hand.

Further advancing my horse into more engaged, collected maneuvers, I make a transition to a wide, rawhide bosal, eventually adding a shank bit and smaller diameter bosalito when my horse is prepared for this stage. You can tell a properly "finished" bridle horse when there is only a signal bit with a shank with weighted reins designed for a very high level of communication between horse and rider.

Another little-known fact is that a spade bit is not cruel when the horse is properly prepared. I've seen many examples of fine horsemen using this tool with such finesse that the horse opens their mouth to willingly accept their favorite communication device while bridling. Please know that it takes from four to eight years to properly finish a bridle horse. Demanding vertical flexion with a shank bit before the horse is mentally and emotionally prepared causes a horse to lose trust in the rider, and we all know that once we've lost trust in someone it's extremely difficult to get it back.

Rebuilding Trust

If you're realizing that some of the trust issues with your horse may be from a lack of knowledge around the tools you've been using, don't worry. Horses can tell when we've gained more insights into their world and are making adjustments to further improve our communication with them. I am a firm believer that horses appreciate our efforts and are extremely patient and forgiving as we progress in our journey of horsemanship. There's a saying that you can tell a horseman from the tools they use and also from the tools they won't use. After over 18 years of using tools designed for communication, I can assure you that your horse will feel the difference and appreciate your effort to be clearer in your request. Why put yourself at a disadvantage when a simple change in tools may make all the difference?

As with everything about horses, there's no right or wrong; there's only effective or ineffective, and the horse will tell you which!

Enjoy *your* journey!

Karen Scholl is a horse behaviorist and clinician, teaching "Karen Scholl, Horsemanship for Women" throughout the U.S. Learn more about this empowering program by visiting karenscholl.com or call for a free brochure at 888-238-3447.