

Healthy Boundaries: Consistency Balanced with Flexibility

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

It is fun and interesting to return to my herd when I come home from my frequent trips away. Ameer, the Arabian gelding, is the most expressive about greeting me. Recently, my return from a longer than usual trip had the horses excited, and four of them had galloped up by the barn to greet me. As they were cavorting and exuberant, I did not want them too close to me and so held my hand up to signal my boundary. I noticed how Ameer held back until I lowered my hand. Then, he galloped up very close, stopped on a dime beside me and wrapped his neck about me in a hug. Because it was Ameer, because I trust him so much, and because I understood what he was doing, it felt natural – and joyous and exhilarating – to experience and allow this. Was it wrong?

We are frequently exhorted in the horse world to be consistent, and to have good boundaries. Yet, it's not always simple to figure out what that means. Boundaries are an important cornerstone of good relationship. And yet to truly function in organic environments, to truly be useful and adaptive, boundaries have to be flexible. Good boundaries are all about discernment, letting in the good as well as keeping out the bad. And boundaries must be grown from the inside out, each person must understand where they are putting their boundaries and why. And it is wise to remember that boundaries can be part of our authenticity in relationships, or they can be rigid, "knee jerk" reactions from so-called "false self patterns".

Boundaries are one of the most concrete manifestation of the invisible agreements between human and horse. Seemingly simple at first, the delicate dance of ever-changing boundaries invites a lifetime of possible learning. When are we safe? What is respectful behavior? Can the rules change from moment to moment? The fact is, that boundaries are confusing because they often change (sometimes even moment to moment), because they are highly situational, and the interpersonal signals with which we signal our personal boundaries are often very subtle. This is true even when we are capable of relative clarity and consistency with boundaries. There is an optimum balance for boundaries. Consistency and firmness are tempered by a reasonable flexibility and understanding of how the boundary "fits" the situation.

My colt Tankha, who is almost two years old now, had a tougher time than some horses learning about spatial boundaries and to control his nipping. He has this challenge both by nature and (literally!) by nurture as well. As soon as he had risen, nursed and began to notice his environment, he was on to me like a puppy – friendly and inquisitive, not the least bit shy, and liked body contact, even with humans. This is very appealing in a young foal, but also signals a bold personality that can be a challenge as the horse grows.

Tankha's disposition was further shaped by the unfolding of his first weeks. His dam Frieda was critically ill with peritonitis during the late stages of the pregnancy. She had lost much weight in spite of intensive veterinary care. And it quickly became evident she wasn't making enough milk to support this foal. By the middle of his 2nd day, Tankha was losing energy, and shivering on the cold, late March afternoon, even

in the barn. I learned to feed him with a bottle, and then I piled up the straw, brought out a blanket and pillow, and slept with Tankha to keep him warm. In the following days many of the volunteers and friends associated with Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL) offered help with the constantly growing chore of supplementing Frieda's scant milk with bottles, and later on, a bucket. I was grateful when Frieda slowly began to recover her condition.

Being smart and personable, and very trainable, it was not difficult for Tankha to learn and respect my boundaries, since I interacted with him many times daily. But, being smart and personable, Tankha would instantly ascertain the varying boundaries (or lack thereof!) of each individual person! You could see that he would investigate each new person to discover where they would set their boundaries. More than once, a person who could not convey the integrity of their spatial boundaries was rewarded with a nip. During this time, I fully realized the difficulty of communicating to a horse where the boundaries should be, when the visitor themselves did not own the power to set boundaries. I will always remember Tankha's first session as a therapeutic helper in my practice.

A nine year old boy named Nate was referred to me for acting out in "sexually aggressive" manner at school, intimidating other children into exposing themselves, and talking with them in sexually explicit terms. Nate was all boy, bold and charming with a brilliant smile. I also recognized that he had a marked tendency to tell others just what he thought they expected. Several times during the intake process I watched Nate's mother speak to him about "boundaries", and I could see he had little idea what she was talking about.

Nate's face lit up when I told him that one member of my herd was also a growing boy, just like Nate himself (Tankha was about 6 months old at that time). After meeting the other horses, we walked over to the pasture where Frieda and Tankha were grazing. Tankha, of course, immediately came to the fence, friendly and engaged. So cute. So appealing. Nate was delighted as Tankha nuzzled him through the fence. Nate and I stood there talking for awhile, and I sensed Tankha's mood. He was pretty mellow on this sunny autumn afternoon. Taking a calculated risk, I asked Nate if he would like to go inside the pasture. "Sure!"

Well, I knew what would happen and it did. Under my close and watchful eye, and with subtle signals to Tankha *not* to nip, that colt nuzzled the boy up and down in a *most* friendly fashion! I'm quite sure Nate felt somewhat undressed himself that day. It only took about 30 seconds for Nate to gasp in a breathless voice, "Can we go back on the other side of the fence?" Now we began to talk boundaries in a way that Nate could understand. Nate went on to work with the older horses, who taught him how to negotiate and maintain boundaries in relationships where the boundaries are less fixed, and much less obvious, than a fence.

In working with Tankha to be a respectful of people, I noticed a tendency in his responses that disturbed me. Often, when he was in a "nippy" mood, he needed quite a bit of correction and shaping behavior. But if my corrections got too sharp, too rigid, he would sometimes bite himself, and I mean hard! A couple of times in my life I have met horses that self-mutilated, biting chunks out of their own hide in response to

stress. I knew I did not want Tankha moving in the direction of this horrible habit. I had to watch carefully that others could exercise care and discernment in their boundary work with Tankha, and I fired one barn helper who couldn't seem to modulate her "expert horse trainer" persona even though her too sharp corrections provoked this anxious and self-destructive tendency in my young horse.

It is fascinating to watch how Tankha learns increasing discernment about people's personal boundaries, and how he teaches people to define their boundaries in ways that are firm but flexible enough to fit the situation. He has learned to nuzzle without nipping. He has learned that sometimes people don't even want nuzzling! As Tankha matures, he gains savvy about boundaries and growing confidence in his own self-control. Still, he shows anxiety in the presence of people who think that they will "teach him a lesson he won't forget". If they will let him, this teacher with a bright coppery coat can teach them how to be consistent, firm *and* flexible – conveying the integrity of their personal space with softness and grace.

About the Author:

Leigh Shambro, MSW, LMHC, a licensed therapist and educator, began her career as a horse trainer. Leigh is widely recognized for her articulation of the horse-human bond and its application in therapeutic and learning programs for a variety of ages and diagnostic groups. She is the founder and lead therapist for Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL), a non-profit charitable organization that supports equine assisted services and programs. Leigh is regularly invited to teach and to speak throughout the US, Canada and Europe.

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