

Understanding the difference between these concepts is important.

by Chris Irwin

When working with our horses on the ground or in the saddle, if we “let a horse go” when we needed to “make a horse go” then the horse will not respect us. On the other hand, if we “make a horse go” when we needed to “allow a horse to go” then it will not trust us.



Imagine you are with your horse - either on the ground or in the saddle - and you're asking your horse to stand still and quiet. But your horse moves. Well, the typical human response to pull on the head of the horse to “whoa” may or may not get your horse to stand still but it does nothing to develop a willing partnership. Any pulling pressure at all to cause a horse to halt is a bullying form of “capturing your prey.”

Instead of using restraint to the head of a horse who needs to move perhaps we should ask the important question of accountability; “why doesn't my horse feel comfortable enough with me in this environment to be willing to stand still?”

When a horse both respects and trusts his or her rider implicitly, then it feels, not just decides but feels, that being with their human leader is definitely in his or her best interest. So, the psychological art involved here is not to use bullying tactics to force a horse to be with a rider.



June 2015 - “Letting Go”.... or “Making Go”

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We can't really force anyone into wanting to be with us. Our horses, our family, our friends and our lover, will ideally want to be with us because they respect, trust, admire, appreciate and, yes, love us, not because we threaten them with restraint if they need to leave.

The horses will give themselves over to us willingly if we care enough to read “why” they need to leave us and to respond appropriately according to both the herd psychology and body language of horses.

The art of horsemanship involves empathy and psychology with a determined focus to consistently find and maintain the perfect balance between respect and trust so that a horse knows his or her rider as a force to be reckoned with but nothing to be afraid of.

The real magic begins when a horse knows that you know where the horse is at emotionally and that you adjust yourself to their psychological needs. Having said that, perhaps the most dramatic example of this concept is when it comes to the difference between “making a horse go” or “letting a horse go.”



Body Language

If the body language of a horse indicates that it is frightened and/or it leaves respectfully, then we should simply allow the horse to move otherwise it will not trust us. Soon the horse will trust us and be relaxed enough to be willing to stand with us. On the other hand, if the body language of a horse demonstrates aggressive or rude body language when it needs to move then we should definitely “push” the horse to go or it will never respect us.

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This is where a concept like the Ray Hunt “ism” of “make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult” comes into play.

For example, if you’re riding and asking your horse to stand still but it walks forward from the halt, then your halt has been “walked through” and “pushed out of the way.” This is “aggressive resistance.” So, when we “push back” by telling the horse to do a turn on the forehand then we have met “push with push.” And by pushing the hindquarters of the horse away from you during the turn on the forehand, your push not only disengages the movement of the horse but it also brings the horse right back to where you were standing originally. You push the inner hip out to turn on the spot. You essentially said with your response “since you pushed through me I’ll push you right back to me.”



Two or three turns on the forehand with a pushy horse will get it to make it their idea to stand still willingly because it is so much easier to stand still then it is to do turns on the forehand. And as an added bonus, the turn on the forehand is the best stretching exercise there is to get a horse to relax. (Similar to how we have all seen our dogs self-induce relaxation by doing two or three rotations in one spot – all with a bending spine – circling around themselves a few times before laying down to sleep.)

On the other hand, a horse walking backwards when we want it to stand still is offering “passive resistance.” Yes, it is moving and it is leaving but it is not being rude to the rider. Backing away from you is (more often than not) the way a horse says “nothing personal, but with all due respect I’ve got to go.” If you try to stop or push this horse it will only become stressed and worried and it will not be able to trust you.

However, if you simply turn the horse laterally without any aggressive push forward, if you meet passive with passive, more often than not the horse will then engage back to forward movement and come right back to you and be willing to stop. A horse will trust you if you let it go when it needs to go and within minutes it is willing to stand still.

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Horse Sense? If you love them, “let them go.” If the horse comes back to you, it is “yours.” If it does not come back.... rather than capture them, ask deeply and honestly who do you need to be and how to change so that your horse does not want to leave in the first place?

Author Chris Irwin is an internationally renowned horseman, best-selling author and a leading pioneer in the equine assisted movement. It was discovering how to transform BLM wild Mustangs into calm and collected U.S. National Champions in english, western and driving competitions, that first showed Chris his greatest insights into learning how to learn. To connect with Chris Irwin visit his website at www.chrisirwin.com .