

Lessons Learned from a Runaway Horse

By Barbara L. Sherf

It is nearly 4 a.m. Despite the hour, I cannot sleep following a runaway horse incident yesterday. I toss and turn trying to analyze what happened and what, if anything, I can do to make sure it doesn't happen again. The conclusion is equally tormenting; there was little I could have done differently and the same scenario could easily occur again - they are big strong animals. I am human. In life and work things happen that you sometimes can't control; and they can happen again and again.

The Risk Factor and Group Dynamics

There were three of us riding that day and I think we all learned a key lesson in group dynamics – the hard way. I took out Buddy, the “gentle soul” in the Philadelphia Saddle Club, because he had not been out in a while and he recently had his hooves trimmed and new shoes put on. Of late, Buddy had gotten the reputation of being “lame” and I wanted to dispel this theory and stereotype. He clearly did. Jane rode Madison, a newer, spirited horse. I had never ridden with Jane. Diane and Dakota, longtime riding buddies, rounded out the group. We had never all ridden together before and the horses seemed nervous and a bit ornery. Those feelings can only mirror back to the riders.

Out of Control

About halfway out from the lovely Monastery Stables on Kitchens Lane in West Mount Airy we got the horses into a trot, and then a canter. Life was good, or so I thought. We carefully made our way toward a bike path near Lincoln Drive and managed to maneuver over the bridge toward a trail I had been to before. As we made our way up a steep incline Madison started off; there was no holding him back. Dakota followed suit and finally ‘good ole Buddy.’ It was a ‘neck-in-neck’ race in which nobody wanted to clear the finish line that stood before us. At the top of the hill was a 6-foot park gate across the gravel trail to keep out vehicles. Would it keep the horses out too? In a flash, two scenarios crossed my mind; neither option seemed desirable. The first was that the horses would try to jump the gate and one would get caught up on it for sure; most likely my horse, Buddy. The second scenario was that they would stop short and one of us would be ejected over the gate tumbling onto the blacktop on the other side. If I had had a few more yards to think clearly, I might have jumped off the horse and tried to roll into the hedges. Time was not on my side. Upon reaching the gate, all three horses came to an abrupt stop and nobody was thrown. We were all pretty shaken up and so were the horses. In life and business, how do you react when things get out of control? Do you jump or stay on board and hope for the best? Do you look for obstacles to slow you down or do you try to jump over or around them?

The Irony

My business partner and I gave a talk earlier in the day to a local Rotary Club about “Presentations and Networking for Success.” As we left the room, most of the fliers we had put out on the tables about our upcoming half-day seminar had been left behind; not a great confidence builder for sure. Yet we had 10 individuals who had signed on and were willing to

take the risk and get on board with our program about the need for good presentation and networking skills. While those 10 had committed, I also knew that as we got closer to the session, we would have a certain number of cancellations – mostly because of individuals who wanted to change, but who eventually were not willing to take the risk to put themselves out there and take the risk. Do you want to take a chance on bettering yourself and then fall short – or do you go for the long, steady ride?

Know When To Fold

We were all a bit shaken, but made our way back to a trail that was pretty much all down hill. That didn't stop Buddy. He was really wound up and the 'out of control' feeling surfaced again. Somewhere along the way I made the decision to dismount. In talking to experienced riders I was told I did the right thing. "As soon as that thought crosses your mind, you should make your move," said cousin Linda Lusen, a 57-year old equestrian who owns a horse farm. From there, I walked Buddy about 2 miles back to the barn – a humiliating experience for sure, but one I needed to make for the horses safety and for mine. In business and life, do you know when to fold and get out of a job or business dealing?

Getting Back in the Saddle

Once I got back to the stable, I saw my dear neighbor and friend, Dr. Thomas Fitzpatrick, who co-founded and is President of the Philadelphia Saddle Club. I shared with him the disastrous experience. "It happens," was his reply. I was hoping for more, but "it happens" pretty much summed up the experience – in life and work.

Instead of allowing "good old Buddy" to go into the barn for his evening meal, I took him up to the ring to make him do something positive. I also needed to get back on him to boost my confidence. While my upper body and lower back were 'screaming' from our wild ride, I knew that it was the right thing to do. When things don't go your way in business, do you get back in the saddle and "giddyup" again or do you walk away?

My Passion

Once back home, I quickly wrote a check to The Philadelphia Saddle Club and sealed the envelope and my fate – good or bad – to ride for the next two months. I know, for the most part, I will continue to have some very positive experiences with these 1500 pound animals, and I know that the good riding experiences have clearly outweighed the bad. I fully intend to pursue my professional goals in terms of public relations work and my latest passion for speech coaching. Of the latter, I have fallen on several fronts and continue to dust myself off, but I will persevere and carry on. Will you? Please call or e-mail me if I can help get you get back on track with your goals and passions. We all need to 'keep plugging away. :

Barbara Sherf is a publicist and speech coach. She can be reached at f 215-990-9317 or Barb@communicationspro.com