

Decide the Culture of your Barn

It is important to be intentional about the culture you wish to create in your healing center.

ANT's culture seeks to provide sanctuary for all creatures, to be a place of mindfulness, a mindfulness of how our behaviors, words and being affect others.

We will share some of the tools we utilize to create our culture.

ANT's Full Value Contract (ANT's Team Contract) is an integral part of our programs; all participants, volunteers and staff agree to be in alignment with this and sign the contract. We uphold the Full Value Contract at all times and in all circumstances, even during the production of intense events.

The three elements:

#1. Keep myself and others physically and emotionally safe.

#2. Give and receive respectful feedback.

#3. Work as a team.

We are very conscious of maintaining physical safety with Barn Safety Rules and we present those at all staff/volunteer trainings. Creating a place of emotional safety is a continuous challenge as our society does not promote emotional safety and boundary setting by people, for example people are laughing when others are made fun of and respect is often not seen or emulated. But emotional safety is very important in our group process plus we need to take the feedback we agree to take, increasing resiliency.

The Philosophy

A Philosophy of partnership, not dominance is important. We don't dominate our animals nor participants. All team members are equals and those in lead positions don't dominate their teammates—it is to be a mutually respectful dance. From an administrator at ARCH, a PATH center:

After offering 70,000 horse lessons, we have found that: Horses who are dominated have only one of two choices: They will either fight back or acquiesce and only give you their minimum. We must get their cooperation instead of dominating them.

An excerpt from Linda Kohanov's book The Power of the Herd.

Linda writes of watching different horses in the herd taking on leadership roles at various times, as we have seen our horses doing at ANT. This paragraph reminds us of the leadership dance we aim for:

"Consensual leadership draws on the wisdom and sentience of the entire herd. It is, to a great extent, improvisational. Though I may be acknowledged as the official leader of Epona, I'm still in the business because I've gathered a group of people around me who can both lead and follow, who are knowledgeable yet willing to continue learning, whom I can trust to support me when I am feeling vulnerable and who can admit when they're feeling unsure. When we're uncertain or triggered by what's happening, we look to the person who seems the calmest and most centered in that situation. Sometimes when we're undecided about which road to take, we look to the most confident, invested, or enthusiastic person. When there's conflict, we agree to consult outside experts, yet sometimes even then the path is not clear. In these cases, I may have to follow my gut, though I'm still dubious as to the exact right course of action.

Mostly, however, we all have to acknowledge that we don't know the one true right way, that authentic community itself is a work in progress. Some students and employees find this disconcerting, even frightening. Some are comforted by how human we seem, but we really have no choice in the matter.

Ultimately we have a black Arabian stud on the property who is absolutely intolerant of incongruity. While many of our horses are more subtle, supportive, and patient with our shortcomings, he's always ready to challenge our egos if they get out of control. "

The philosophy of ALLOWING. We may have a lesson of-the-day but the participant and the horse determine where it will go and we follow. We allow the learning to unfold. Horses are always intentional in their teaching. We are asked to PAUSE and take the time to understand the lesson. It may be yours or the person you stand beside. Seasoned staff and volunteers/instructors are to support each other through the challenges of reading the horses and “allowing” everyone’s voice to be heard.

Physical and emotional check-in is important and required when we enter the barnyard because most of our animals at the farm are prey animals. If we are carrying “cougar energy”: the horses will respond differently to us. Remember “Horses Never Lie” (Mark Rashid) – if your horse won’t pick up its feet ask yourself or anyone around if you’ve assured their physical safety in a 20-foot circle. If so – next you may ask – *where in my life am I afraid to lift my feet and take the next step?* (refer to clip from movie, *28 Days*, and Sucia’s story)

In an experiential education model the instructor and mentor try to refrain from telling someone **how** to do something “correctly” but instead guide the participant through careful questioning to find the best solution within themselves.

We help youth **identify their current anxiety level** on a scale of 1 to 10. (1 is least anxious)

We do **debriefing** with all mentors and instructors/therapists after participants leave. This debriefing serves at least 2 purposes: You are allowed to share your own “What, So What, Now What?”, your own challenging experience and insight for the day. Secondly you can hone your skills with a professional beside you and get feedback on how to handle particular situations as well as support for working with a sometimes-challenging population. You might have heard painful stories you need to process, you might be confused how a youth can return to a difficult home life, or you might be bursting to share the awesome insight you’ve just witnessed with a youth or with yourself. This is a time to process, share and learn.

Model Behaviors of Physical and Emotional Health

It is of utmost importance to have your own active self-care program to survive in this giving profession. Barbara Rector, founder of TROT in Arizona, said you need a mental health therapist yourself if you are to offer equine MH therapy. We must be a good role model to others with our sleeping and eating habits as best we can. We influence young people who may be struggling to figure out their place in society so we ask ourselves what we want the future to look like?

Respect:

How patient are we with volunteers and horses? It is often said horses teach patience. How respectful is any teasing? We do not allow disrespect for our horses in both words or actions. Ask questions about a negative comment and get the kids thinking about how that comment can affect another. Get them to put themselves in another’s shoes. No profanity is accepted.

Communication & Trust:

Part of our contract is Giving and Receiving respectful feedback. We are to speak with those we have the issue with, not triangulate or complain about someone to another instead of addressing the person personally that we are having a problem with. Are we role modeling honesty? Horses (and people) will not feel safe around us if we are not honest with them and work out our differences in a kind way. When we approach each horse, we communicate our plan for the day, and they are then choosing to have the halter put on and be a part of it.