A photograph of a herd of bison in a field with a rider on horseback. The background features trees with yellow and green foliage, and a hilly landscape. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# Joining-Up: Building Trust-Based Relationships at Work

by Susan Cain and Debbie Roberts-Loucks

**Creating trust in the workplace** is essential to build collaboration, open communication, and improve innovative muscle. In this paper, we look at a special case study focusing on Monty Robert and his Join-Up® approach for starting young horses. What can horses teach us about developing trust at work? As it turns out, plenty.

**It is late afternoon**, almost what you could call evening, when Monty Roberts, Horse Whisperer, New York Times best selling author, legend, trainer of the Queen's racehorses and countless others, straps on his spurs. He is meeting a group at his breathtakingly beautiful horse farm, Flag Is Up Farms, for a presentation of his famed Join-Up technique. Monty says he "discovered" the approach in his youth after watching how the body language of wild horses formed a type of language that he calls "Equus."

Join-Up is an exercise Monty uses to start young horses. He calls this "starting", as opposed to "breaking" horses. He starts all of his horses with his signature Join-Up process, amazing those who watch with his calm ability and technique. In what normally takes days of training, Monty helps an untamed horse accept his or her first saddle, bridle and rider in under 30 minutes. It's not magic, but it's pretty close.

The group that has come to watch tonight is made up of couples, business professionals and horse lovers, who react with amazement. The "joining up" has been accomplished without restraint or whips, fear or threats. What causes a horse, a flight animal willingly carries his first rider?

The easy answer is trust. Teasing out the conditions that created this phenomenon takes a little more effort. But it is clear to this group on this particular night that they have experienced a new way of thinking, of witnessing the usefulness and undeniable value of trust, and seeing how one man wields it like a surgeon to achieve an unthinkable result.

“You can’t experience this without wondering how you can do this with humans,” one executive comments after the demonstration. “True that!” another one answers. “People aren’t horses, trust only goes so far...” his voice trails off as the pair departs the round pen area.

For all of its hype, trust can seem as elusive in work places as commitment, or communication, or collaboration. But the lessons from the round pen beckon. They offer a tangible case study in the conditions that form trust, and the leadership behaviors that galvanize it. Looking closer at both conditions and leader behaviors in the round pen, it becomes easier to see how trust comes about.

The Join-Up program eases you into making the mental shifts that are about to come:

You will be watching a demonstration about two-way trust, about honest communication, and about building trust-based relationships. What you will see is a round pen, a trainer and a horse with a tough decision to make. Naturally fearful, should the horse Join-Up with the human or remain apart?

You will see the magical moment of Join-Up when he decides to take a chance. Then you will see why a horse might choose to follow-up and build a collaborative relationship. You are about to learn how trust-based collaboration begins, how it continues and what the critical success factors are for creating successful trust-based relationships. Take a look at several key learning opportunities.

The Join-Up process that ensues involves Monty releasing a horse from a lead rope and “sending” a horse away. The horse is left to run in circles, as far from the human as possible. He or she watches the human constantly, monitoring for signs of predation, or aggression. As the horse tires, he/she looks for an “out”; a way to negotiate with the human.

Monty obliges, dropping his eyes from the horse’s eyes (which means, Monty learned in Equus, to “go away”) to his/her hindquarters (a sign that the horse can now slow

down). The horse displays his/her willingness to further negotiate by bowing his head to the ground and licking and chewing.

Monty responds by going passive, turning on a 45-degree angle and mirroring the horse's willingness to trust. Then comes the moment of Join-Up, when a horse will come in and nudge Monty, actually connecting to him.

This is the essence of trust; actively asking to be included, the complete absence of fear and force, the mutual vulnerability.

How then, or should it be, how *could* these conditions be made possible in the workplace? Is it realistic to think that these conditions, this leader behavior could be replicated in the cold hard halls of commerce and industry?

Maybe. Possibly. Even likely, if a leader can imagine how to transfer some of these ground truths back to work.

**1. Set the conditions:** You are only leading with trust when others are willing. Clarify your intentions to develop mutual trust. Ask people to report their current fears, concerns, and reservations with no reprisals. What is in the way of developing trust for each person? Hold one-to-one's to get clear and to understand each person's needs.

**2. Clarify intentions:** Nothing stops the development of trust faster than mixed/conflicting messages from a leader. Watch how trust grows in the round pen. What are the signs you are seeing that trust is growing or stalled out in your own group? Continuously clarify your intentions and expectations, seek and accept feedback. Reinforce the development of trust by affirming the risks others take to let go of control.

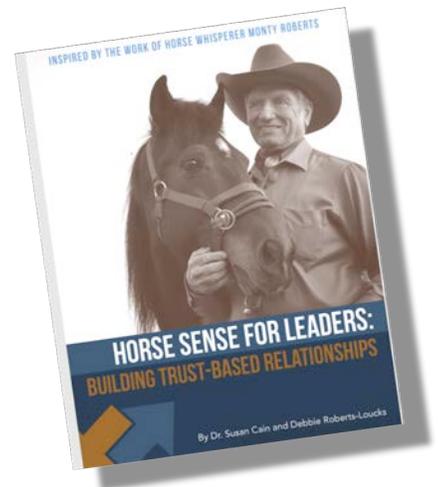
**3. Mutual trust requires mutual vulnerability:** At the moment of Join-Up, both Monty and the horse share, not hide, their vulnerability. There is no cover-up or need for protection. This is the state of mutual trust. What would happen in your organization if more trust existed? How could vulnerability be expressed and supported more openly?

**4. Trust is a self-perpetuating phenomenon:** Trust grows when people (or horses) in need of support are willing to accept it. The conditions which support the growth of trust is genuine support, instead of pressure, reprisals or retributions. This willingness to ask for, give and accept support allows trust to flourish. So many conditions in the workplace support the development and need for personal power and force, and limits the potential that real trust has for optimal collaboration, engagement and joy.

Seems simple, and of course, building trust-based relationships at work takes time and effort. The rewards and surprising value that developing trust with others yields is irreplaceable. No amount of force or fear can produce the results—in the round pen, or in the work place.

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For more information, read the new book, *Horse Sense for Leaders: Building Trust-Based Relationships*, available on Amazon here: <http://www.amazon.com/Horse-Sense-Leaders-Trust-BasedRelationships/dp/1508480338>



### **About the Authors**

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