

The Quality of Response

By Linda Parelli

Being prey animals, horses naturally resist or are afraid of pressure. And humans naturally push harder and pull stronger when something isn't working! This is where horse training breaks down – when people don't know how to apply it very well and horses don't know how to respond to it.

Pressure and response is primarily how horses are trained and ridden. We ask a horse to yield to pressure from our hands, reins, bit, legs, body, ropes, sticks... that's how we get them to do what we ask, both on the ground and riding.

To 'yield' means to give, acquiesce, defer, surrender.

What if we could take that one or two steps further? The Parelli philosophy is about Love, Language & Leadership in equal doses and seeing a word like 'surrender' doesn't feel that good to me. I want a horse to *want* to do things *with* me and *for* me.

Looking at things practically and logically, our horses have to yield to us or things could get pretty dangerous. A horse that takes off, blows through pressure, runs over us, kicks, bites, strikes... is a horse that is not yielding. He's braced, fighting or escaping instead of trusting and partnering with us. I think of it like a car. We let our horses do things we'd never let our car do!

"Do you want to come to the store with me? My car has a few problems, the gas pedal is sticky, the brakes don't work, it steers better to the left than the right, and doesn't stay stopped at the traffic light." You would not get in, would you? And yet we get on horses that are like that every day!

Pat Parelli defines respect as "the appropriate response to pressure". But the appropriate response to pressure cannot be learned without "release", or relief from pressure: Pressure motivates, but it's the release that teaches. It is our responsibility to teach horses how to yield and get in harmony with us.

Categories of Response

When you ask your horse to do something, what kind of response do you get?

- Refuses
- Resists
- Reluctant
- Reactionary
- Compliant
- Willing
- Exuberant, enthusiastic

I like to think of a horse's quality of response in four distinct categories:

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
Does Not Yield: FIGHT FLIGHT NO RESPONSE	Yields from Pressure TEACH YOUR HORSE TO BE RESPONSIVE, COMPLIANT	Seeks Comfort KNOWS THE GOAL WILLING	Harmony & Unity EXUBERANT

<p><i>Fight = Left Brain</i> <i>Flight = Right Brain</i> <i>Unresponsive = shut down or freezes.</i></p>	<p><i>Teach horse the appropriate response to pressure:</i> <i>Phases of 'request', and improvement of response:</i> <i>The horse at first feels heavy, then learns to be lighter and more responsive.</i></p>	<p><i>Feels for boundaries, seeks relief from pressure, tries to understand the goal to find harmony in motion.</i></p>	<p><i>You almost can't tell who's the leader or who's the follower. The horse is totally engaged – mentally, emotionally and physically, puts in a lot of effort, enjoys it!</i></p>
<p>Control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hindquarter disengagement • Lateral Flexion 	<p>Use Phases of Friendly Firmness:</p> <p>Phase 1 – <i>soft request</i></p> <p>Phase 2 - <i>slightly increase the pressure</i></p> <p>Phase 3 – <i>increase a bit more</i></p> <p>Phase 4 – <i>match the resistance</i></p>	<p>Set it up and WAIT:</p> <p>Hold steady until the horse softens and/or goes with you.</p>	<p>What you do in your body the horse does in its body. It feels so connected, as you think it the horse does it!</p>
Scores: -10 to 3	Scores: 4-6	Scores: 7,8	Scores: 9,10

Defining these four categories of response has proven to be a great tool for me when training my own horses as well as teaching students to have more *feel*, which is a sensitivity to the partnership. It feels amazing when my horse *wants* to put in more effort... figures out the goal and truly acts like my partner in a dance.

Heavy or Light?

Depending on your, or your horse's, level of advancement the quality of response can be widely varied. In the beginning we just want a horse to not run over us, to go when we ask him to go, to stop when we ask him to stop and to turn left or right. But then what?

Whipping, spurring, kicking to go and pulling to stop is pretty common to see, especially when horses are more challenging, but there's a huge change when you actually teach a horse to yield from light pressure. We use "Four Phases of Friendly Firmness", start with the lightest pressure (phase 1) and incrementally increase it until we match the degree of resistance (phase 4). This gives the horse time to think and respond compared to ambushing it with a kick or a whip. It's what horses do in the herd, they have phases and offer plenty of warning to read and respond to if you're paying attention. For example, a horse doesn't just kick. You can see it coming:

- Phase 1: The warning look
- Phase 2: Ears flatten, tail switches
- Phase 3: Hind leg raises
- Phase 4: Kick delivered!

First you teach a horse to yield to you, to get control as well as be able to maneuver your horse both on the ground and riding. But then you need to progress to the next category of response, which is #3, seeking comfort or your horse will not get lighter and more responsive, and especially not more enthusiastic. He or she may even start to get dull over time so your aids are more phase 3-4 (heavy)

than they are phase 1-2 (light). That's why it's so important to keep making progress and develop more technical expertise and 'feel'.

You may have heard this quote: "If you're not making progress you're not just standing still, you're actually going backwards." So, you need to keep improving the quality of your horse's response, especially as you teach your horse higher level movements.

We know that Four Phases of Friendly Firmness will get us to category #2, but how do we get to #3 and #4?

- A "#3" response is achieved when you allow the horse to find the comfort versus you releasing the pressure. Your horse releases to itself. You have to *set it up and WAIT*, holding steady until your horse yields as opposed to increasing the pressure. Your horse will begin to look for the soft spot, for harmony and therefore comfort. That's how you engage the horse's mind. It is also the key to having quiet hands and legs that your horse will feel as 'boundaries' and be able to find comfort within them.
- A "#4" response relies on your ability to do in your body what you want the horse to do in its body in terms of energy, balance, frame and position. Your horse has to be giving you #3 responses on a consistent basis and from there it's a level of personal mastery that evolves, developing your knowledge, expertise and quality of feel, which takes time, dedication and experience. Like ballroom dancing, it's a very close partnership that you first experience for a step or two, then two or more, then more and more, for longer and longer. And that's what keeps us all highly motivated – the passionate pursuit of true partnership, harmony and unity!