

Why You Need Horse Sense to Develop Leaders

Equine facilitated learning may be the next frontier in experiential leadership development.

Åsa Björnberg December 15, 2015 Chief Learning Officer magazine

For the past 8,000 years, horses have accelerated human development, ploughing our fields and carrying our goods. Today, we no longer require their muscle power. Instead, we need their intuition and wisdom for the more subtle challenges of mastering soft skills and becoming authentic leaders.

Leaders who can't harness intelligence in body and brain — head, heart and gut aligned together — are at a distinct disadvantage in today's complex and volatile business environment. Horses are exceptionally well suited to guide a learning process that facilitates this.

Equine-Facilitated Learning

Several methods for learning with horses have emerged since the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International, formerly the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, first began to uncover the human-equine relationship's potential for healing in the late 1960s.

The method described here regards horses as facilitators. Alongside human experts, they conduct experiential exercises in the field and arena. There is no riding involved, and no need for experience with horses.

The core concept is learning how to use our bodies as “sensing devices” — like horses do, to hone nonverbal communication and emotional intelligence. The process stimulates several senses, creating sustainable impressions (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Equine facilitated learning, or EFL, engages several dimensions of development. (Source: McKinsey & Co., 2015)

Why Horses?

Horses are natural facilitators in leadership and followership, and promote development in several ways.

Nonverbal, coordinated use of head, heart and gut: A considerable amount of human communication can be nonverbal. Working wordlessly with horses takes one into the body, and provokes coordinated use of the body's main nerve centers or "brains": the brain, heart and gut. Whereas humans tend to use their heads the most, horses are highly skilled at aligning all three.

Like people, horses follow energy and intention more than words, but to a much greater extent. Learning to move a horse using energy alone, one begins to motivate from a place of embodied wisdom. What's more, horses don't read business cards and could not care less if someone is the CEO or the janitor. Hence, people must rely entirely on in-the-moment, pure communication.

Boundaries and stress: As herd animals, horses are experts on relationships and boundaries. If someone can keep a 600kg, highly food-motivated animal away from a bucket of apples with just body language, that individual will be much more confident when protecting a team and its workload. On the other side of boundary management, leaders will be more discerning of how and when to invite new individuals, ideas and demands.

If the learner can send the same animal to sleep by rhythmical touch and breathing, they will have an in-body memory for creating intimacy and calm with co-workers. For executives who exist in constant movement, the ability to de-stress and enter restorative practice is more than just leadership effectiveness, it is a matter of sustainability and health.

Self-awareness: Horses' survival depends on reading herd members' internal states. This makes them radars for incongruence, able to spot hidden emotions or "fakery," according to Linda Kohanov's "The Power of the Herd: A Nonpredatory Approach to Social Intelligence, Leadership and Innovation." Most people are not aware of what they radiate, but in a group of horses who naturally mirror unconscious states, they quickly learn what lies beneath the surface.

Sensitivity and mindfulness: As prey, horses have heightened awareness. After establishing that there is no lion in the bush, adrenaline drops much faster in a horse's body compared with a human's. This allows them to go back to a relaxed, "grazing" mode, where they spend most of their time. Humans tend to stay with the idea of the proverbial lion in their heads long after the incident has passed, causing prolonged unease.

By contrast, horses are zenlike in that they are fully in the now, not distorting reality with wishful thinking or worry. Being with them forces one to stay present, or lose their attention. This has the powerful effect of grounding the body, making one less self-focused and more approachable.

Impact on Leaders in Development

Learning with horses literally happens "in the field." In this unfamiliar environment, participants quickly reach a level of vulnerability needed for deep personal development. In their gentle but frank manner, horses do not judge.

They simply respond to give immediate, honest feedback, providing a safe learning space, open for experimentation on a range of issues (Figure 2).

Example issue 1

COO, family-owned business

Client challenge: managing upwards to set and maintain boundaries. Tendency to "people please"

Learning process: Working through a series of exercises designed to protect resources (food) from the horse.

Insight and learning: client learned how to recognise the emotions that precede a boundary being challenged, and thus learned how to be prepared. She developed the ability to not be over aggressive, but fine tune her response. The insight was finding the place and energy level in her body to create a boundary without rejecting. This skill was brought to the workplace, enabling her to say no in a gentle way, and more discerningly select work tasks.

Example issue 2

Head of department, professional services firm

Client challenge: ability to slow down and recognise signals from others to stop

Learning process: Engaging in exercises of starting and stopping the horse using body language and energy only.

Insight and learning: Despite an excellent ability to lead, build relationships and energise, the client was less able to stop and slow down. For this challenge, he worked to modulate own energy levels to stop and slow the horse. He also worked in close body contact with the horse (touch and grooming) to learn how to monitor and recognise subtle non-verbal cues from the horse that signal "stop" or "slow down". This way, he was able to create an in-body memory of how to stop, recognising when the point of "enough" is reached. This skill is highly useful in mastering his leadership style, and better manage the energy of his team and co-workers.

Figure 2. EFL is helpful in addressing many leadership issues. Consider the following examples where equine facilitated learning could provide appropriate leadership development. (Source: McKinsey & Co., 2015)

The process is characterized by “high impact and slow release.” Learnings settle in the body long after sessions, contributing to sustained results as neural pathways are created and reinforced. Such powerful in-body memories are a consequence of learning through emotion before engaging the brain in rational thought.

Or as one senior executive said: “I’ve been to many trainings, but what I have learned with the horses has helped me come forward in a sustainable way. Sustainable because it is a deep experience — a certain feeling that I attach to the horses.”

Åsa Björnberg is a senior expert at McKinsey & Co.

Not just horsing around ... psychologists put their faith in equine therapies

Health professionals say horses can reflect our emotions to bring relief from addiction and stress

[Tracy McVeigh](#) in *The Guardian* US edition

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A horse will move away from an angry person and follow someone they trust, says one therapist. Photograph: Elizabeth B. Herman, EBH Equus Coaching 2014

In a Sussex field, a large bay horse is galloping around, tail held high. This magnificent creature is one of a new army of animals that is helping therapists to treat everything from addiction to autism to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Reports last week showed that dogs, already known to be invaluable helpmates for blind, deaf, diabetic and epileptic owners, were also being trained to help dementia patients.

Now the psychological benefits of working with horses are being recognised by growing numbers of therapists who work with autistic children, young people with behavioural problems, adults with depression or celebrities with addictions.

"The horse is the perfect mirror, they are very emotional beings; we're only starting to realise how intelligent they are," said therapy counsellor Gabrielle Gardner, of Shine For Life, watching the horse dance around his pen at a farm in Blackstone, a village a few miles north of Brighton.

"A lot of my clients start off being very nervous, so I wouldn't always use such a big horse. One of the reasons I think equine-assisted therapies work so well is that everyone has a reaction to horses; nobody is indifferent. People either love them or fear them, so that's two big emotions that immediately reflect what most of life's issues revolve around. If you can work with an animal like this and overcome the fear, then it isn't a bad starting point."

Gardner has worked with all types of clients, including young offenders, and says a horse picks up on the way people are feeling, mirroring their emotions and responding. As a herd animal attuned to stress and body language, a horse will move away from an angry person, follow someone it trusts and be unsettled when it senses fear.

"It's especially good for people who don't take to talking therapies. Counselling is not a 'one size fits all'. While you might forget a conversation you had with your counsellor a few weeks on, it's unlikely you'll forget what happened when you

stood in a field with your counsellor and a horse. It's not like patting a dog; it's a big animal."

Gardner, who runs sessions for clients alongside a mental health professional, says the sudden explosion in popularity of horse-based therapies has been helped by the success of the book and film *War Horse* and a TV series that saw Martin Clunes investigate our relationship with the horse. But another reason is the runaway success of the therapies in the US. Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (Eagala), a US-based organisation, trained 1,500 therapists in Britain in 2011. Coral Harrison, from Cumbria, is their regional coordinator for Europe. "We're seeing hundreds of new inquiries, whereas a few years ago it would be a handful."

Scientific research remains thin on the ground and the therapy's effectiveness remains mostly anecdotal, although The Priory clinic offers equine-assisted therapies, while in the US equine-assisted activities and therapies have attracted celebrity clients including Robert Downey Jr and Sophie Anderton. American horse trainer Franklin Levinson is establishing a regular base for his courses in Dorset, working with troubled children.

"It has been clinically documented that just being around horses changes human brainwave patterns. We calm down and become more centred and focused when we are with horses," he says. "Horses are naturally empathetic. The members of the herd feel what is going on for the other members of the herd."

The Horse Boy Foundation – set up by Rupert Isaacson, who wrote a book about riding in Mongolia with his autistic son – is running a new programme of equine therapy camps this summer for autistic children and their families in Britain.

Such efforts have the tentative approval of mainstream scientists. Dr Nicola Martin, an autism expert at the LSE, said she thought anything that brought children and families together would have a positive effect.

"It's certainly not about healing or curing, because autism is for life, but being out in the countryside, close to nature, doing something enjoyable like interacting with horses, has got to help families come together."

In Scotland a charity called HorseBack UK is achieving tremendous results using horses to rehabilitate injured and traumatised members of the armed forces. Jock Hutcheson, a former marine, had retired to breed horses when he offered to take a group of former combatants riding. Self-confessed as "horse daft since I was three", he said that even he hadn't expected the horses to have such a huge impact. Last year he had 156 people through his Aberdeenshire centre.

He said the trick was offering "mobility with dignity". He added: "Soldiers don't make good patients and they don't want pity, but we want to create a way for them to come back into the world again. The horses have had an enormous effect on them, empowering."

Using animals as therapy is not new: the Greeks documented the horse's therapeutic value in 600BC and French physician Cassaign concluded in 1875 that equine therapy helped certain neurological disorders. Dolphins were used in the former Soviet Union to treat nervous disorders and rabbits lower stress levels in American old people's homes. By the 1950s British physiotherapists were exploring the possibilities of horse therapy for all types of disorders. The Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) was founded in 1969 with the enthusiastic support of the royal family and the Queen still shows a keen interest in the work of Californian horse whisperer Monty Roberts, who has been working on bringing horses and troubled children together for several years.

Whether scientists will ever prove that they offer real medical value, our love of animals shows no sign of abating. As Churchill said: "There's something, about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."