

DEVELOPING COHERENT LEADERSHIP IN PARTNERSHIP WITH HORSES- A NEW APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT:

This paper offers a new perspective on leadership training by including horses as partners in developing powerful and coherent leadership skills. The leadership training has proven transformational for students and corporate clients who want to experience their leadership as an energetic connection. Horses facilitate this by providing participants the opportunity to live in the moment and experience the congruence of what they say they want and who they are. The exploratory work suggests how the application of equine facilitated learning can transform and energize people so they make better decisions, gain more clarity, experience more commitment to their life and work and generally improve the coherence of themselves and those around them. Examples are included demonstrating the effectiveness of this new approach towards effective leadership and management.

INTRODUCTION::

A problem with most business education today is that it is primarily cerebral in nature, rewarding thinking and quantitative analysis in contrast to encouraging the development of emotional intelligence and heart-brain-body connection. Education needs to shift from being primarily cerebral towards incorporating the heart and body as well, particularly the education of managers who provide leadership across cultures and nations. It is commonly accepted that continuous change and transformation is the norm in our global economy and that it is very difficult to manage these changes and transformations in ways that “stick.” The author’s developmental work, as presented in this paper, suggests how the application of energetic and equine facilitated learning transforms and motivates people so they make better decisions, gain more clarity, experience more commitment to their life and work and generally improve the coherence of themselves and those around them.

The author has been teaching leadership and organizational development for more than 20 years. For the past 10 years, she has also been working with horses, particularly wild horses, gentling them and preparing them to work with and live in partnership with humans. The experiences gained in years of teaching and consulting and then years of training horses led the author to this emerging field of equine facilitated learning. This paper is only a beginning discussion of the work and research that is taking place in this area and it is hoped that it will be welcomed in the management arena as something that will become more mainstream and not considered as trendy or frivolous. The work has profound implications for changing people at their heart and soul level -- change that can make a difference in who leads our organizations now and in the future and how these people make decisions that are for the sake of our organizations and society as a whole. This paper will include examples of some experiences that

took place over a two year period where the author included leadership development in her course curricula as well as in her training and consulting offerings. It will include various cases in which equine assisted learning generated substantial change in learners: something that happened deep down, not just in the head. Most executives spend their lives “in their heads,” concentrating, talking, thinking - and move at a rapid pace from one event and opportunity to another. This type of learning encourages people to slow down, tune in, pay attention, stay in the present, make changes for the better now and not later, have an experience that incorporates both mind and body as a synchronized effort, and experience a way of learning that facilitates change which sticks and positively influences individuals and the organization they work in.

Leadership isn't about making people do things

Toby (name changed) a computer software engineer and manager of several project teams at a high tech company, showed up for the Saturday session on Leadership with Horses thinking he already understood and had a sense of his leadership style. However, that day shifted this perspective dramatically. When it came his turn to lead a horse through the obstacle course he had to slow down, and check in with the horse instead of “dragging” it along. He learned what it meant to pay attention to the goal (the obstacle course) and to pay attention to his team member (the horse). His first time through the obstacle course activity did not go as he had hoped. He got angry when the horse dropped its head and started to eat so he began to tug hard on the line to move forward. Then the horse refused to move across a bridge and that brought more frustration. Finally, he stopped, took several deep breaths and began to pay attention to the energy between himself and Rocket, the horse. It was an obvious and clear shift from his wanting to accomplish an agenda that the horse had no part in to a focus on how to engage in a partnership to achieve a goal. At that moment, Rocket moved with him, almost like they were

dancing and he responded to Toby's clear focused leadership with energy and enthusiasm. Later, Toby stated,

“It's one thing to have a horse like you, however it is another thing to have a horse want to follow you around with no lead lines attached. You can't be a leader just by telling someone you are a leader. You have to prove it...you have to be it. Before, if I was the leader and you didn't do what I wanted, I would get angry. I may give up on you or just do it myself. Now I have a new perspective on leading others which is more effective and energizing as well. I learned how my energy and presence impacted how others (the horses) perceived me and that became a significant learning experience which has shifted how I manage and lead my team.”

Toby reported in a conversation the following week that he had immediately applied his learning to his project team and found that the work week went smoother and he had more fun and less frustration. He also indicated that the team was more productive without all the fuss that was often associated with getting work accomplished as a team.

Imagine working in an organization where each day the leaders show up and work entirely for the safety and survival of the people and the organization. Every day they earn their positions of leadership. And, that leadership is only maintained through continuous attention to the environment, knowledge of how to find and lead others successfully through complex environments, ability to make quick decisions that could mean life or death to the organization, and operating from an energetic connection that is able to mobilize organizational actions immediately, often requiring little if any on the spot explanation or manipulation. If the leaders are not able to maintain this flow of safety, awareness, or social integration capability - members of the herd, or organization, lose trust, feel unsafe, and experience a dis-equilibrium. When this happens then another mindful and aware leader will quickly move into the leadership position, taking over the territory which is common in herds and it critical for the survival of the herd.

The concept of leading for the safety of the herd is important to horses. Horse herds tend to demonstrate three leadership styles-- leadership styles which mirror what most of what many of us experience everyday in organizations. First, there are true leaders who lead for the sake of the herd, second, there are those who are just dominant bullies, pushing others around and looking like they are in control, and third, there are those who go along with things in a submissive manner- also considered as a passive leadership behavior. The true lead horse serves as the responsible leader - leading for the protection and survival of the herd. If the lead horse is not constantly aware of the environment and providing constant communication exchange then predators may kill it or members of the herd. All members of the herd who want to be safe and cared for make sure they know where their lead horse is - at all times. The dominant horse tries to be a leader, pushing and moving others around successfully, but is never given leadership status because it is considered a bully and not looking out for the safety of all. Others may comply temporarily but they do not look to a dominant horse as their true leader. The passive horse goes along with the leader and willingly takes orders and participates within the herd hierarchy which is also important when the lead horse gives the signal to leave quickly or danger is nearby.

Decoding the Mystery of Human System by Examining Horse Herd Systems

Comparing the social systems of horse herds with social systems inside organizations is an innovative new way to assist in leadership growth, change and transformation. Engaging individuals and teams in equine assisted learning is different than many of the popular outdoor adventure or experiential learning courses. Unlike these other experiential program, the activities require true communication and engagement with another being - at a level that does not often present itself in traditional training environments. It is not about overcoming fear or

building self confidence to jump off a cliff with others. It is about recognizing the moment of an energetic connection with other and what that communication moment really means for lasting and effective relationship. The experiences tend to be so profound for participants that they will often ask about certain horses they interacted with a year prior, or recite a particular lesson they learned about themselves in the presence of a horse. The changes and realizations are quite “sticky” and offer participants reflective insights which resonate for days, weeks and months.

Another Case: Melissa Experiences the Connection

Melissa stated that she felt difficulty in others truly understanding her. She mentioned some situations with her parents as well as her co-workers and her fiancé. Melissa, manages a busy retail store and was participating in an organizational behavior class. As part of the leadership segment the author inserted the leadership with horses workshop. One of the first activities is for participants to mutually choose a horse to work with through awareness of the exchange of energetic connection and understanding between themselves and the horse. Oftentimes, one horse will end up with two to three people out of a group of 10 -15. On this day, Melissa found herself the only person connecting with Rusty. Rusty is a very gregarious clown of a horse and usually ends up with several people in a workshop...so it was interesting on this occasion that it was just Melissa. She later stated in her journal,

“I never felt so “mirrored” in terms of another animal and myself in my life. I felt like he was trying to reach out to me but for some reason I didn’t let him all the way in because it was overwhelming to me and I didn’t quite know what to do. I think that he definitely sensed that with me. He sensed my power and confidence a few times and I really did feel the energy between him and me when I had him moving- then there were times when I felt lost in the process and weak and that was when I knew I lost Rusty and his reliance on me as his leader. Its crazy to me how we can overlook so many minor details within our lives that plague and excite us on an ongoing basis, but then in a moment or through mere seconds with a horse, you can have all the clarity in the world as to what plagues or excites you, as they look within your soul and you to theirs. All I have to say is “wow!” I am truly speechless as to the immense freedom this study has brought to my life. It is a feeling like no other than I have ever known.”

Over the next few weeks, she arranged for a meeting with her parents to talk about some things that had pulled them apart, she reconsidered her style of managing her retail store and she even told me that she cut down on her excessive drinking...all as a result of her one session with Rusty and the other horses.

How does this educational development work?

Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), Equine Guided Education (EGE), Equine Assisted Activities (EAA) and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) are gaining increasing recognition in the field of personal growth and leadership development. Horses are included as partners, sentient beings, in the venture and awareness for facilitating leadership change and learning. Unlike humans, they are not capable of hiding their emotions. In fact, they are primarily emotional beings and respond to the stimuli produced by emotional energy which begins in the heart. Horses do not approach relationships with any agendas, judgments, or preconceived thoughts of how the relationship “should” be. In addition, they are not familiar with any such things as sacred cows in organizations, they don’t care what gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status, positions you hold or any other social indicators of status or equity. This makes them ideal in providing honest and clear feedback to those who engage in communication with them. Exposing participants in these newly evolving programs to the partnership with a trained facilitator and willing horses is proving to be a useful and dynamic new approach for creating lasting and meaningful leadership changes. There has been a great deal of research and training in the area of leadership development...so you may ask, why is this different and does it work and will the learnings “stick” or be sustainable?

First, it is different because when a human comes face-to-face with a horse, the horse can only work within the boundaries of the present moment and offer a communication environment that

is grounded in honesty and truth. Horses are not capable of lying as humans are and thus make excellent partners in the leadership transformation process.

It works because it allows participants to experience the alignment or misalignment of the energetic moment in the present and make changes in the real time present moment, not process something back at the office, thinking about it for awhile, or getting advice from someone else.

When work is done with the horses, it is delightfully, or painfully, obvious how effective a person or team is at leading for the safety of each other and the performance of the organization.

Cross Cultural Training at New Levels with Horses

The author has been teaching a course in cross cultural management for several years. Her evaluations and continuous contact with students would be enough for some folks to consider her efforts to be quite successful. However, it was not until she brought her cross cultural management class out for a day of leadership training did she realize how significant the horses were in breaking down all boundaries of difference and coming to a state of complete appreciation, care and support of others, no matter who they were or where they were from.

This particular class consisted of about 20 students who, themselves, originated from diverse countries such as Kenya, Brazil, Turkey, Mainland China, Taiwan, Thailand, Peru, Germany, Sweden, Russia, Tunisia, Mexico, Italy, Egypt, and the USA. The students were asked to participate in several leadership exercises with the horses as a part of a day at the ranch on leadership and culture. It was apparent that the horses didn't care what nationality these students originated from, they only cared how these people treated them and if they were good leaders.

Many students commented that they had never experienced anything like this in the United States, that it was always them adapting to the American situations or the scenarios presented in classroom discussions. Some of the participants experienced a few tears of joy at the connection

they realized with another being and how good it made them feel. They also stated that they felt an intense desire to care for the horse and to be a good leader and aware person. The walls between all the cultures came tumbling down that day. The debriefing after the exercise was as raw and exposed as any activity the professor had ever conducted. Journals were submitted proclaiming that the “horse experience” was the most profound in all their education in any of their countries. It was the first time they experienced themselves and others with no cultural boundaries only how they interacted with one another from “the heart” and that the heart knows no cultural boundaries. The professor had two sets of parents send her messages from China asking what she had done to their children that had given them so much courage and confidence to continue their studies in the US in such a determined manner. All she could respond was that it was gift from the interaction with the horses.

Leadership Development and Horses

The author also included a horses and coherent leadership segment in her leadership and management of change class in the MBA curriculum. During a preliminary activity to prepare the students for coming out to the ranch she worked on their awareness of their energetic fields. One student from Turkey had been particularly aggressive during the practices activities and the professor suggested that the student not attend the horse session if he was going to be that aggressive around her horses. He did show up for the session and transformed so significantly during that class that he later changed from a stressful and unfulfilling job to a challenging and engaging organization and job environment. He also broke up a relationship that had proven dysfunctional for several months. He became more serious about his studies and changed the aggressive angry presence he initially exhibited into someone who was quite pleasant to be around. It almost seemed too fast of a change. The author relayed the results to colleagues from

the clinical psychology department who stated that those kinds of changes would normally take months or years not just a few weeks and were very supportive of the results, confirming that the training with horses was very successful for instigating profound change.

How does this help us understand organizational systems?

As previously stated, horses live in herds and are prey animals. Thus, they depend on their ability to “read” the intention of other animals for their survival. They depend on their ability to relay, or what we often hear as the term mirror, this information non-verbally to others in the herd in order to maximize herd survivability. They have a keen ability to sense emotional energy of those around them and respond in a synchronous manner. These instincts allow the horse to be an ideal partner in working with humans to help us rediscover our own ability to sense the environment and communicate whether there is a “threat” or safety to ourselves and others. It is this ability to discover the energetic field of human interaction that makes this type of work so relevant to good communication and organizational effectiveness. Horses hold humans accountable for being congruent and coherent while interacting with them. They are quick and instinctual in sensing the emotional field and this helps encourage us to learn how to develop trust, to operate with integrity and fairness, to be clear in communication and intention and to accept how things go without criticism and judgment. These lessons, which horses so generously and patiently teach us, can be solidified at the cellular level in our physical selves and be helpful in improving our relationship with ourselves and others.

Breaking Through Resistance: Lisa releases her anger

Lisa (name changed) is a single mother who experienced a difficult divorce. She is a doctoral student in organizational psychology and participated in an experimental doctoral class which the author led, called Chaos to Coherence. Part of the class included group and individual coaching

sessions with the horses. When Lisa arrived at the ranch she seemed tired and sad. One activity involved a grooming experience where participants often shift into a higher level of energetic connection with the horses and themselves. She had a profound experience when she worked on an activity which is often called a gestalt with the horse. These were her words about the experience.

“This experience has truly changed my life. I am a very skeptical person by nature and I am not easily swayed from my personal beliefs. However, the horse coaching experience has changed my personal beliefs about energy and connections between people and animals. It also allowed me to break away at a wall I have built around myself for some time.... I really found myself trying to “think” Rusty over to me, which, of course, yielded no results. When Rusty did come over to me I really felt this warmth between us. I really noticed a difference when I was “in my head” and when I wasn’t. The horses responded so much to me when I was experiencing emotion in my heart. I spend a lot of time in my head and it took a lot of focus to remain in my heart. This experience taught me that I can be “big” and energized and powerful and still be liked and effective. It also taught me that the wall I built was truly pushing people (and animals) away from me and almost unsure of how to approach me. (At one point, Rusty, came half way down the arena and stopped as if to say, “Do you want me around or not?) I couldn’t imagine trying to be a leader with people afraid of how to approach me. I also learned that I am so much more effective when I am “in my heart” as far as connections go. The day at the ranch was the most time I have spent in my heart in years. I left feeling so much better and more myself. “

Often, you will hear that horses tend to be mirrors for human emotions and are able to allow us to understand ourselves and make changes in the present. In reality, horses actually assist in demonstrating the consequences of emotion driven behavior - without the support of verbal communication. If a horse does not trust your intentions then they will not be as responsive to your leadership - remember, their survival depends on the emotional clarity of the herd leader to keep them safe. For example, if we work with a horse when we feel angry, frustrated or depressed, the horse does not necessarily become angry, frustrated or depressed...but what they will do is respond to the emotion we generate in ways that humans may tend to censor themselves. When humans “fake” happiness, confidence, support then this only serves to deny or

misread the congruence of how others may actually feel or want to react to our emotional energy presence. Lisa learned this when she had her coaching experience with Rusty.

The social pressures of our society have taught humans this learned “fake” behavior. And, as the top predators in the food chain there has not been any incentive to rewire this “dishonest” behavior. The horse senses, very quickly, a human’s frustration, anger, confusion and they may do three things.

- 1) try to leave the situation by running away
- 2) freeze and not be responsive to any requests or interactions from the human source of the confusion, or
- 3) they may become aggressive towards the source or others nearby.

This is not unlike situations which we find in most organizational environments today.

The energy of the emotion is something horses sense very quickly and respond to. If they do not sense you as a congruent leader, they will not look to you for leadership or safety.

By observing ourselves in relationship with horses and becoming aware of their reaction to our emotional energy, this then becomes a learning opportunity for making changes in how we authentically manage our emotions and our ability to lead in relation to self and others.

Effective Team Building Result

During one of the author’s corporate programs the organization had asked for some team building activities with the horses. To help the group understand the energetic connection the group was asked to form a circle and stand at least 5 - 10 feet away from one another. One of the team leaders came into the center of the circle to direct the exercise which was to ask a horse to move from person to person around the circle one direction then to turn and go back the other way. The team was not allowed to touch the horse or move it out of a walk or get it upset. The group got very excited and started yelling at each other. One person came in and tried to lead the

horse from person to person themselves, the leader quit directing the activity and became quite frustrated. It was apparent that the energetic connection was being sacrificed for the sake of trying to just get the task done. However, the horse was not doing what they wanted it to do. However, the horse WAS doing what they wanted it to do since it was responded to their energetic communication of frantic, take over, blame, frustration, etc. The debrief was powerful when they discussed that this is exactly how they conduct their teamwork back at the office. It was a very sobering experience for them. A few weeks later they asked if they could come out to the ranch and do the activity again. This time they were calmer, they focused on the energy and how the horse was responding. They were more successful this time and had told the author how much they had been working on recognizing and being aware of the energetic connection of how they all worked together.

If a human approaches the horse with an agenda and goal and not from a position of openness and awareness then it is unlikely that results will be fulfilling. However, when the human tunes in to the energetic field of others and responds appropriately then more often than not it leads to successful communication and leadership.

When a human approaches a horse from an emotional state that is happy, content, open, allowing and non-threatening then the horse may look to you for leadership, support and companionship. As previously stated, the horse's heart is 4-5 times larger than the human heart and capable of sensing a magnetic field via it's heart much stronger than we as humans. This may be the reason it "feels good" to us when we have an energetic connection between ourselves and a horse. It has proven to be stress reducing, physically, mentally and emotionally healing.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Unlike other training programs where we may need to go away to work on things we learned about ourselves, horses allow us to make those changes immediately. A horse is not judgmental. If you are angry and fearful and can use tools or resources to change that emotional state then the horse will immediately respond to the change in a positive manner- without “holding on to how you were before”. This ability to make a positive change and rewire or anchor it in our emotional state, real time, is the primary reason why this work with horses is so powerful for helping to improve individual, group and/or organizational effectiveness. Plus, it is fun and memorable. Horses enjoy the companionship of humans and respond with love and appreciation to honesty, sincerity and care. They will try to please a human who offers this type of leadership. Interesting, humans are like this too!

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Trait Approach Leadership. *The material for this class came from Leadership, Theory and Practice by Peter G. Northouse. Chapter 1, Trait Approach. Sage Publications, ISBN 0-7619-2566-X. Trait Approach to Leadership. This style of leadership gives more credence to the qualities a person is born with rather than what they develop or the relationships they develop with followers. Leadership trait theory is the idea that people are born with certain character traits. This is the style that is attributed to a leader who others see as "a born leader". The innate qualities and characteristics possess Modern approaches to leadership. Are good leaders made or born? This is probably one of the most difficult questions considering that every individual has different perspectives on what a good leadership is. Being a leader is not an easy task because you have to serve as a role model a mentor at the same time. That is why leaders should build a strong character and deeper understanding of what it takes to be a successful leader "someone that people would look up to." If you have a new position at your current employer or start at a new employer, the habit of asking questions naturally becomes even more important. And, indeed, working environments where asking questions, not only by managers, is commonplace tend to work better and achieve better results. Definition and Meaning of leadership Leadership is the ability to influence individuals or groups toward the achievement of goals. Broadly, there are four distinct approaches to leadership, viz. Traits theory, Behaviouristic theory, Contingency theory and Charismatic theories of leadership. Traits Theory. Employee centered behavior: when the leader is interested in developing a cohesive work group and in ensuring employees are satisfied with their jobs. These two styles of leader behavior were believed to lie at the ends of a single continuum. Likert found that employee- centered leader behavior generally tended to be more effective. Leadership begins and continues with an intense exploration into oneself. Without understanding your strengths and weaknesses it is difficult to build a Leadership style that leads to successful outcomes. These are the traits I try to follow; 1. Personal Responsibility. 3. Understand Breadth, Depth, and Context. "One of the most important things is context. It's how your company fits in with the world and how you respond to it." 4. Company alignment and personal time management. "Set the example by spending your ti.