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Horse Leadership

What Horses Tell Us about Our Ability as Executives to Lead

By Rajiv Ball,
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Horses, stables and the scorching California sun do not provide the most obvious backdrop for working with executives on their leadership development. Yet, during the past year, we have been doing just that. Last summer, we took a group of 20 executive MBA students from the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, to nearby stables to work with horses and explore the question first posed by Goffee and Jones in their seminal Harvard Business Review article of 2000, namely, 'Why would anyone want to be led by you?'

Initially somewhat diminutively dubbed by the MBA students as the 'My Little Pony Class', students rapidly and profoundly learned that horses provide a leadership mirror that brings into sharp focus who you are as a leader and how you lead others. Students left the class with deep learnings about their leadership style that they could apply the very next day at work.

So, why are horses such a powerful tool in executive leadership development? And how might we use horses more in the development of executives?

Why work with horses?

The involvement of animals in therapy settings actually dates back over 1,000 years when patients cared for birds in a Belgian hospital. The beneficial effects of therapy with horses on physical health and function are well documented in the literature. Only recently have the psychological benefits been examined. For example, bonds with horses seem to help people overcome trauma, and young offenders who were taught horsemanship skills showed reductions in incidents of violence, bullying, and social conflict. Most closely related to the leadership and professional development domain, horses have been successfully used in therapy with socially anxious individuals and in helping children and adolescents build social competence.

The use of horses in the leadership development of executives is a more recent phenomenon and still very much a niche offering. And yet it works on many levels. First, horses create a 'zero-base' because very few executives know intuitively how to work with them. In that respect, it is different from a typical business school case study or role play, where one executive may have an advantage over another.

Second, horses provide honest, accurate feedback in real time. They respond instantly and without judgment to the participant's intent, energy, and behaviour. This impartial, real time feedback is something that is difficult to stimulate in classroom contexts due to natural biases and judgments we hold as humans.



And, third, horses provide multiple entry points into exploring the topic, 'Why would anyone want to be led by you?' and, in particular, the 'softer' side of leadership. Through exercises that align intent with behaviour, getting others to join your cause, leading from the front/ from behind, and giving and receiving feedback, horses provide a natural mirror into how you lead as an executive.

Horses are highly sophisticated social animals – and provide a direct mirror into how you lead

As prey or 'flight' animals, horses are highly attuned to danger, which they interpret through in-the-moment energy and movement. They are well equipped to doing so by their perceptual abilities that are superior to those of all other domesticated animals, and in particular, their visual system, which is especially sensitive to movement and changes in the horses' surroundings. Additionally, horses have an excellent memory and the ability to easily categorize experiences as fear-inducing, positive, or neutral.

Horses live in social groups and, thus, have a range of social skills, including the ability to recognize social status. Within a herd, certain horses will serve as sentinels, each facing outward north, south, east, and west. Interestingly, the lead horse is often illusive to a human as he/she calmly grazes, blending in with the rest of the herd. One of the key ways in which horses exert dominance is by moving their peers around. They also rely on complex patterns of body language that involve the position of their entire body, their head, and their tail as well as facial expressions. By observing ear position and gaze, they are even able to determine what other horses are paying attention to, a skill that helps them locate food or predators.

As members of social groups, horses have advanced conflict resolution skills. For example, when conflicts occur, horses rely on reconciliation. In its simplest form, one of the conflict parties will start to approach the other. In other instances, a third horse that was not involved in the original conflict may get involved by showing affiliative behaviours to the two partners of the conflict. Younger horses are socialized by the older herd members to acquire conflict resolution and aggression regulation skills.

Although horses relay a wealth of information to each other using body language, they also rely on the tone of their 'voices' to communicate. Their vocalizations (whinnies) carry reliable social information. Horses can tell familiarity, sex, body size and social status of

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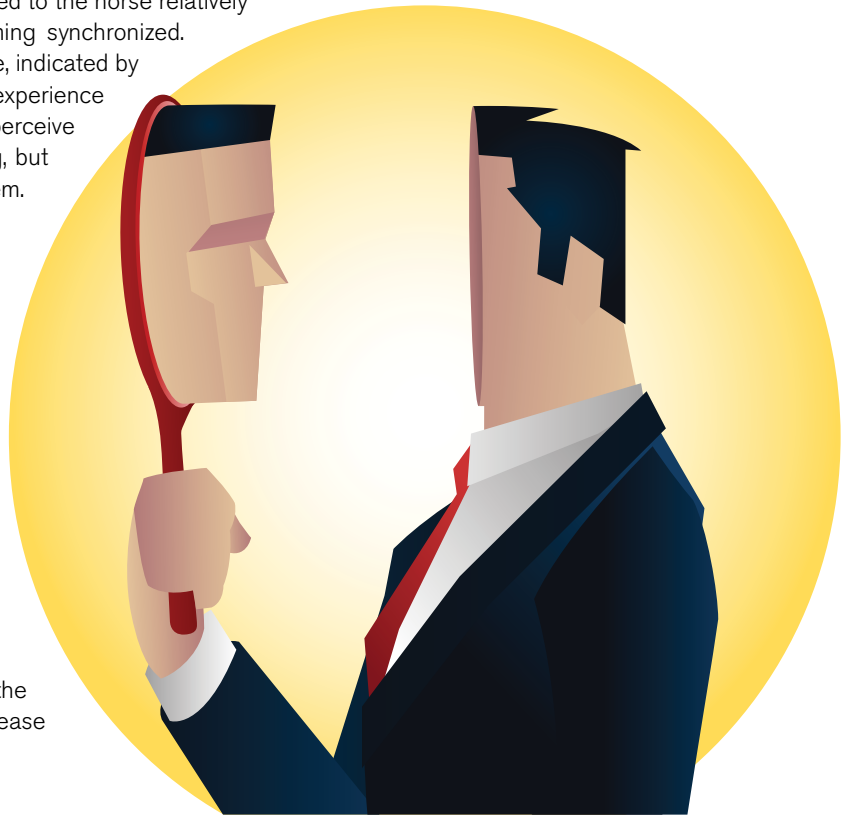
another horse simply by hearing their 'voice', even if the other animal is not visible. They are also capable of expressing complex emotions through their vocalizations. The acoustic properties of horse whinnies vary depending on the characteristics of the elicited emotion, which can indicate alert, relaxed, happy and sad based on frequency.

In this context, horses are particularly able to provide a direct mirror on how you lead as an executive. First, horses are non-judgmental. They show us if our actions are congruent with our intentions and emotions and if we are able to engender trust. In particular, horses are finely tuned into the signals being given by the body language of a human being. Often referred to as the 'third ear', a concept introduced by psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, we rely more on the practice of listening to nonverbal cues: body language, emotion and energy. Statistics vary, but some claim that words count for as little as 7% of what we interpret when communicating with others, the remaining 93% is body language and emotion/tone. Experts, such as Amy Cuddy at Harvard University and Dana Carney at the University of California Berkeley, reveal that we can change other people's perceptions – and even our own body chemistry – through our body language. Rather, we tend to think more about our verbal expressions. Interacting with horses seems to improve people's awareness of horses' – and most likely other people's – body language.

Second, horses are very aware of the state that the human they are interacting with is in. A person's emotional state can be transferred to the horse relatively easily, as indicated by their heart rates' becoming synchronized. When a person becomes nervous around a horse, indicated by an elevated heart rate, the horse also tends to experience a rise in its own heart rate. When horses perceive incongruences, such as a person who is smiling, but internally very upset, this will signal danger to them.

And third, recent findings at the UK's University of Sussex determined that horses can even read human facial expressions. When the horses saw angry human faces, their heart rates sped up, and they were more likely to turn and look at the angry faces with their left eye, which is a reaction often used for perceived negative stimuli. Notably, the horses were capable of distinguishing positive and negative human emotions even on still photographs! Furthermore, by observing a person's head position and gaze, horses can determine what their human interaction partner is attending to.

To see how some concrete examples of the exercises that we have run with executives, please see insert 'Exercises Summary'.



Where to from here?

So far, the evidence that horses can help people develop their leadership and social skills is mostly anecdotal since working with horses in the executive leadership development space has not yet become mainstream.

Like with any leadership development program, it will be important to examine whether people actually show improvements in relevant leadership domains, for example, by obtaining assessments from colleagues or measuring their performance before and after training. In addition, it is unclear how long improvements last and whether it would be beneficial to conduct refresher trainings and how often.

And, finally, a key challenge with working with horses is scaling up the program offering. This is still very much a niche field: it requires facilitators who are properly trained in the topic; and horses who can work with humans in such a program. The cost per program participant is still high compared to the more standard executive courses taking place in classrooms.

Conclusions

Executive leadership development is a new, post-1945 phenomenon. One of the meta-trends that have changed this field in recent years is the shift from lecture-based learning, to experiential/action-based learning. Working with horses, while still a niche offering, takes experiential learning to a whole new level. Participants leave our programs with a deeper sense of who they are as a leader and plenty of new insights into the question 'Why would anyone want to be led by you?'

Working with horses takes experiential learning to a whole new level. Participants leave our programs with a deeper sense of who they are as a leader

A fully referenced version of this article is available on request from editor@iedp.com

Exercises Summary

The following gives an overview of a selection of the exercises that we led executives through during the day.

Exercise # 1 -- 'First Impressions'

The goal of this first exercise was for participants to get to know each other and the horses and to practice observing own and others' behaviour and to report back on it with specifics. Each team got a set of tools (e.g., brushes) to groom one of the horses. Participants did not receive instructions on how to use these tools; instead, the 'task' was to figure out the likes and dislikes of their new 'teammate', the horse. To prepare for the subsequent reflection and discussion, we asked participants to pay attention to how they were entering into a new team/situation, what the first impression is that others form of them, and how they form first impressions of others.

In this exercise, what becomes immediately apparent is the division between those who are task-focused -- participants who literally go and groom the horse and come back -- and those who are relationship-focused, petting the horse and building a relationship with the animal (while sometimes even forgetting to complete the task at hand, namely, grooming). The exercise provides executives with an instant mirror against which to view their leadership style.

"One of my development areas in building trust, is the intimacy portion as in the trust equation. I have been taking steps to develop this area further, but they have all been conscious active efforts. So I was blown away to see that without even knowing I was doing it, I had my hand on Blaze the entire time. Is this a part of me that I have always had, but didn't know? Or is it easier to connect with animals at the most basic level, without words? I think I will need to reflect on this more, but this simple experience did prove one thing, I do have it in me, naturally." **Executive MBA Student.**

Exercise # 2 -- 'Building Awareness of and Modifying Leadership Styles'

The goal of this exercise was for participants to become aware of their leadership style. We emphasized that there was no 'right' or 'wrong' way to lead, but that different people have different styles and that different approaches may be effective in different situations. In this exercise, participants were guided by the questions 'How do you lead a new team member (the horse)?' and 'Which effect does your behaviour have in this specific situation?' Their task was to lead a horse away from their group to the end of an enclosed area and back. While completing the exercise, one of their peers recorded a video that they later reviewed together. In a second round, participants had a chance to re-do the exercise, incorporating their own and their peers' suggestions for changing their approach. We prompted them to think about what it felt like to adopt a different leadership style and what effect it has.

In this exercise, executives adopt a variety of leadership postures -- some leading assertively from the front with others leading gently from the back, some leading with energy and conviction with others leading with fear and doubt, some holding the horse on a short line with others giving the horse freedom to explore. These are typically the leadership styles executives use back in the workplace and, in this way, the exercise provides executives with real time feedback on their leadership style.

"As we learned by looking at the videos of our interaction with the horse, when we believe we are acting in full confidence, there are small gestures, body positions, voice tone or looks that will either tell others about a lack of confidence, doubt or create contradictions. It is surprising to see how what I was thinking I felt, was not

reflected in the body language. On the second go, by simply going in my head through a checklist (body up and big, hands position, head up and deep breaths to prepare the voice) I was better able to match the image of confidence that I was already feeling. I have already started using similar techniques in both business and social interactions, and the results are such that even my wife praised me on my improved confidence."
Executive MBA Student.

"I learned about asserting authority, control, and command without being offensive, overbearing, or, God forbid, mean. When I first led our horse from one end of the paddock to the other, he stopped a few steps along the way. I stopped too. I then leaned in closer to him and asked him what was wrong and assured him 'it was okay.' I don't know if that was necessary or effective but it felt natural. In teams, I need to do the same. If someone stops or expresses discomfort, I need to stop too and acknowledge that something might be going on beneath the surface. He also started to push me to one side and I stayed firm in the direction we were heading. So, though we got a little off course, we accomplished what we needed to do without too much deviation. Again, this applies directly to working in teams. Sometimes one or more team members might go down the proverbial rabbit hole resulting in lost time. It's important to know when to steer back on course and how to do it without offending."
Executive MBA Student.

Exercise # 3 -- 'Team Challenge'

The goal of this exercise was for participants to become more aware of how they work within a team, answering the questions 'How do you enter a team, and which role do you adopt?' as well as 'How do you contribute to the team's effectiveness?' In groups, participants were asked to maneuver a freely moving horse without a lead line, without touching the horse, and without talking to each other around an obstacle course. Participants had 15 minutes to complete the exercise; they were allowed to use the first three minutes for planning and asked to remain silent after that.

This exercise provides a tremendous opportunity to help reflect on how they work in teams: do they take the lead or do they fall behind? How do they course correct when things do not go according to plan? How do they create energy and excitement to attract the horse and encourage it around the obstacle course?

"One of the drills, a team exercise was the highlight of the day. The drill involved having to convince the horse to go through and over some obstacles in a large field. Once we were in the battlefield, the whole strategy went out of the park! The horse was not ready, we waited till it was, and effectively collaborated as a team and communicated our way to success. Several lessons learned from this exercise. I was glad that we maintained positivity throughout and showed flexibility when things did not go our way. In our daily lives effective change management is important. To achieve success, we need to be flexible, understanding, motivated, confident, collaborative and most importantly humble. It is the only way we can effectively lead!"
Executive MBA Student.



Rajiv Ball's mission is to enable global leaders to fully unlock their potential. He is a Partner at THNK, the School of Creative Leadership in Amsterdam, and a Lecturer at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, where he teaches courses on leadership. Additionally, Rajiv works with a number of other clients around the world on top team facilitation and the design and delivery of leadership programs. Prior to joining THNK, Rajiv was a Partner at McKinsey & Company, where he was responsible for the leadership development of McKinsey's 1,500 Partners globally. Rajiv has a PhD from the London School of Economics.



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Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

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