

An Equine-Assisted Model for Developing Effective Leadership

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by

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Leadership in any group or organization is always of concern to all constituents. Leadership powerfully impacts direction, climate, creativity and success within and for an organization or group. In relation to business, As Yukl noted in his 1989 (p. 251) article, “the study of leadership has been an important and central part of the literature of management and organizational behavior for several decades.” In the decades since, any casual observer can see that the focus on leadership in its many forms continues to be studied, critiqued and developed in not only in business but all management forums including education, non-profits, church and other community groups.

Some of the most familiar types of leadership styles include: *servant leadership* wherein the leader places the needs of the followers first. (Greenleaf, 1977), *transactional leadership* which focuses on task completion and rewards and punishments (Burns, 1978, 2003), *transformational leadership* wherein a visionary, charismatic leader inspires followers toward that vision (Bass, 1985) and *self-sacrificial leadership* wherein leaders give up personal or professional advantages for the sake of the organization (Matteson & Irving 2006). Also familiar to most readers is Collins (2001) Level 1 - Level 5 leaders.

While many authors study the components of various leadership styles, Giampetro-Meyer, Brown, Browne & Kubasek (1998, p. 1728) ask a more basic question “Do we really want more leaders in business?” They theorize that calling for more or better leadership is viewed as “an antidote” that will “transform problems into opportunities” but without a clear understanding of what organizations want “better leaders to do or how they want better leaders to treat people.” Furthermore, they question whether it is

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possible to turn most managers into leaders. Even if possible, would this change promote an improved organization? And, if so, what would an improved organization look like?

Additionally, there is the problem of which leadership style for which organization at what time. There is some evidence that the style of leadership that builds an organization may not be the best style of leadership to maintain the organization. Also, a leadership style that is effective at the CEO level may be counterproductive at the front line. Hersey & Blanchard (1981) addressed this issue, in part, with their concept of Situational Leadership whereby leadership style is matched to subordinate characteristics. Other authors, have also attempted some level of specificity, for example Spears (1998) with 10 characteristics of servant leadership the details of the daily

interactions, and efficacy, of most leadership behavior is not well-documented.

In summary, most people would agree that effective leadership within groups and organizations is essential to the success of the organization. Similarly, most people would agree that while successful groups or organizations can be examined for their leadership styles, there is no real ability to predict what will be effective leadership in any particular group at any particular time. Furthermore, the question as what manner leadership should be developed remains as varied as the leadership styles themselves.

Thus has opened a door of opportunity for many schools of thought regarding leadership development. Interested students can attend seminars to learn a particular style of leadership, for example the Greenleaf Institute focuses on servant leadership. Other leadership entrepreneurs have focussed on process issues such as team building and decision making. The opportunity to attend seminars has not precluded many books on leadership development with titles such as “the 3 or the 5 or the 10 things you must know about leadership.” In fact, one might say that the business of leadership development is booming. A quick google of “leadership training” yielded 130,000,000 hits – and even the very last hit was right on target – leadership training from the Revell team.

Equine-assisted leadership development:

Given the number of excellent leadership development books, trainings and programs available, the question must be asked, “Does the world need yet another model for leadership development?” The honest answer is, maybe not. On the other hand very few leadership development programs can compete with this one for hands-on, experiential learning and flat-out fun. Putting on your boots and jeans and heading to a barn to have a horse teach you a thing or two about to getting along in the human world is empowering and humbling. In this approach, horses are given free rein (pun intended) to behave like horses. A facilitator and equine-

specialist work together to set up a problem situation involving the horses that requires participants to step out of their office and into the arena to solve the problem. The horses act as the problem to be solved, interference to the problem-solving, feedback to the participants’ efforts and, most uniquely, outstandingly patient and funny fellows to be around. This leadership development approach is unique in that it is atheoretical, or perhaps more appropriately, multitheoretical because the learning is participant constructed and driven. It relies on the facilitator to set up problem situations in a useful fashion, on the horses to respond authentically, on observers to report on horse and human behaviour and on the equine specialist to help interpret the horses’ behaviour. Most importantly, the success of this program comes from its reliance on the participants’ knowledge and experience to craft meaning and growth for themselves and their fellow participants.

Why horses?

Horses have two important characteristics that make them ideal as co-facilitators in leadership development training. Horses are prey animals. The consequence of this is that horses are always vulnerable because they are potential food for other animals – even humans. Horses are herd animals. The consequence of this is that horses have a social structure that allows them to function as a herd. In surprising ways, this social structure mirrors human social structure. In other ways, this social structure is very different than human social structure.

Because they are prey, horses must be alert to their environment for possible danger even when they are grazing or at rest. If they become aware of danger, they immediately take flight. This is their primary defense. Because they are better protected with flight than fight, their ability to sense danger in time to flee is paramount. To facilitate awareness of danger they have wide set eyes, far above the grass line, which allows them to see almost completely around them when they are grazing. Their vision is sharp and their hearing is acute. Their ears can swivel around to listen in

all directions. Their ears also can move independently from each other which gives the horse the ability to attend to several stimuli at once. Horses have a large gut and long spinal cord which acts as part of their nervous system and which provides them with the ability to sense those things that may be unseen and unheard. As part of the herd, a horse is constantly giving out information about what they feel: anger, fear, fatigue, relaxation or submission. Unlike people, “horses don’t lie – they always tell the truth with their bodies. There is no separation between what a horse thinks and what its body says” (Irwin, 2001, p. 65). This is in sharp contrast to the human’s requirement to be as Irwin says “less than forthcoming” about thoughts and feelings, but in order to work with horses the human has to learn to speak “honestly and confidently” with their own body language.

In this equine-assisted training, before participants are allowed to enter the arena, the equine specialist reviews what we have termed “horse etiquette.” The equine specialist teaches the participants the basics of horse behavior related to its status as prey and the social structure of the herd. For example, the horse is able to sense human emotion better than many humans are at sensing and identifying their own emotions, let alone another human’s emotions. Therefore, the equine specialist instructs “if you are afraid instead of following the old adage ‘don’t let the horse know you are afraid’ admit that you are afraid but that you are going to proceed. Horse, I’m afraid, but I’m going to do this anyway.” At this time the equine-specialist might direct the participants to watch the horse herd and pick out which horses are the leaders and which horses hold which other positions. This is followed by a discussion of what horse behavior indicates the previous observations. The equine specialist also teaches the participants how to approach the horse in a respectful fashion and reviews the important physical characteristics of the horse: eyes, ears, teeth, front and back feet. For example, the horse knows where their feet are but they don’t really pay attention to where your feet are. Knowing that, if you get stepped on, whose fault is it? The equine specialist also demonstrates a quick technique for moving the horse off your foot should you not watch yourself and

get stepped on. The emphasis throughout is on self-observation, self-responsibility and respect for the horse.

Setting the stage:

Once the preliminaries are completed the facilitator sets up one of many different problem situations for the participants to solve. Generally, 5 – 6 problem situations are used in a half day session. For most of the problem situations the basic set up is the same. Generally we use with two or three horses without halters, left to wander at will about the arena. Each problem situation requires different props such as horse treats, hay, rails, or jumps. Participants self-select (with the caveat that eventually everyone will have a turn) and gather in the arena. Observers stay behind the fence to watch the individual reactions and the interactions of the horses and humans. The facilitator and equine specialist remain in the arena.

Example Exercise:

The following exercise sets up a problem situation with many levels of communication along with changing leadership, limited resources and a time crunch. The number of group members can vary but 5 – 8 is optimal. Participants are instructed to “use whatever resources are available in the arena, make a circle, select a horse and put that horse into the circle. When you are done say “we’re done.” Participants may not speak to each other except as follows, and may not touch the horse. Participants line up about 5 feet apart from each other with a cone to mark each spot. Whoever is at the head of the line is the leader, for that time, and will decide on a course of action. Whoever is at the end of the line is the gopher and will follow the leader’s direction. However, the leader can’t communicate directly with the gopher, but instead most decide on the directions, move forward 5 feet to the next participant, give the direction, and then remain at that new cone. The participant who just received the direction then moves forward to the next participant, gives the direction as understood from the leader, and then stays on

that new cone. The process is like the old game of telephone, except that everyone moves forward one cone to give the direction. Once the gopher completes the task as directed (or understood) then the gopher moves forward and becomes the leader. Each cycle is timed by an observer. Once time is called, the new leader (the gopher) must start, even if the gopher has not acted. The new time starts immediately after the original time expires.

Horse reactions:

The reactions from the horses are different from each other but often predictable. As the participants are listening to directions, some of the horses are curious and come up to sniff the participants as a way of getting acquainted or to see if they have any treats. Some horses will really shake down the unwary participant with a mint left in their pocket. Other horses might ignore the participants and stand quietly away from the group. Once the group starts moving and laughing some of the horses will pick up this energy and start running around. Often the first horse the participants pick to move into the circle will not cooperate and will move away; sometimes slowly and sometimes very quickly. Sometimes the horses will gather together far away from the participants and look at them with very comical expressions. Sometimes the horses will just hang around the participants in an affable, leisure like fashion and but won't cooperate. On many an occasion a horse has picked out one of the more vulnerable (for what ever reason) group members and provided them with some extra attention in a non-threatening way.

Typical group responses:

Initially, participants are distracted by the horses wandering about and coming up to them. They are often both pleased but a little fearful of the attention from the horses. Usually it takes much iteration of the directions before everyone understands the task and the rules well enough to proceed. The time given, usually around 30

seconds, initially does not give enough time for the initial leader's directions to make it to the gopher. At first a great deal of fun and enjoyment occurs, but after a few times around, some members settle down to a more serious mode and will run between cones and begin to make progress toward the goal. Communication frequently proves difficult and often the gopher will be perplexed as to what to do. The directions often become muddled in the lengthy chain of command. Some groups have difficulty coming up with a plan and sticking with it, changing ideas with every leader as to how to make the circle or how to move the horse. Some groups will stick with one horse, some groups frequently switch targets. Often, participants will learn to modify their behavior toward the horses in order to accomplish the task, for example, if they start running toward the horse, the horse runs away, so the participant must slow down even though there is a time pressure. Some groups try to move the horse into the circle by enticing it, some by trying to get it to move forward. Some members begin "thinking out of the box" to achieve the goal by redefining the parameters. For example, some leaders will instruct that a line be drawn around the horse rather than move the horse into the circle.

There is a typical flow to developing the teamwork necessary to accomplish the goal. At first the group has to become efficient with their communication method, then they have to try various the methods to accomplish the task and finally settle on one method that they all pursue. Each group is different, however, because the skills each member has and the lessons each member has to learn are different.

In one training session with adolescents, it took less than 10 minutes from start to completion. In that group only a few minutes were taken to understand the task and only a few minutes to establish the communication process and each participant ran quickly to the next cone. However, in another training session with a different group of adolescents, only two members of the group showed any evidence of wanting to achieve the goal. The other members sauntered from cone to the next cone, seemingly unconcerned about the time or task. In one training session with adult professionals the

entire group seemed to simply fall apart. The participants began moving their cones in what appeared to be a random fashion but was discovered later to be a coup attempt by someone in the middle of the chain of communication. This participant, using hand gestures, elicited support from several other participants to move the cones around the horse. In that group, after about 5 minutes of chaos, (because the other participants either did not participate or did not understand the hand gestures) the gopher finished the task on their own. In another training session with middle and upper level managers, all from the same organization, did not make any progress toward even meeting their communication need (they frequently did not have time for the gopher to act) and after 20 minutes simply gave up by stating “we’re done.”

Lessons Learned:

Because equine-assisted leadership training presents an actual problem to be solved in the here and now, the manner in which people approach the problem, how they take or assign leadership, or how they deal with conflict are their characteristic responses to all problem situations. That the responses are characteristic is critical to the process of leadership development; understanding one’s own behavior as well as the behavior of others. People can observe their own or other’s behavior in other circumstances, but in the arena the behavior is very clear – almost magnified. The problem situation in the arena is unencumbered by a lot of talk, role expectations or other social trappings of an organization.

Frequently discussed processes in the leadership development literature are: how goals are established, how decisions are made, who will make them and who will implement them. Other themes from the literature include: team development, conflict resolution, task management, communication and relationships. All of these areas are very obvious in the equine-assisted leadership development. The facilitator takes a very neutral role, in most cases, only pointing out interactions that others have not reported. What

participants learn about all those processes and themes is how they react, how others react, what is felt but not said, how to change behavior, and the like. In the previous examples it was obvious that the goal established by the facilitator was not always shared by the groups. In one group, the participants accepted the goal and accomplished the task readily. In other groups, individual goals of the participants interfered with the stated goal. Some of those individual goals might have been: to do it my way, to not look like a dork (in the case of the adolescents), to make sure I don’t embarrass myself. How people treat each other is also interesting to observe. For the participant and followers who staged a coup with the cones, it is useful to discuss their priorities and how this might play out in an organization. Other observations that have been made by participants that are related to the issues as stated previously. For example, it is difficult for some people to decide on a course of action and be able to give directions. For some people it is difficult to follow directions. Some people have a way of carrying themselves that make others look to them for direction.

The lack of ability to go back and forth with the communication is always observed as is the difficulty of changing leadership with different methods. One question that is always fascinating is “who or what in your organization does the horse represent.” The answers vary by horses and their behavior, but the issue that the participant raises is always pertinent to that participant and their organization. It has to be pertinent because it originates from the participant not the situation. The horse is only behaving like a horse. Any meaning has to do with the individual and their experience.

The time frame simulates the realities of getting a task completed on time and as well as a resource issue. Observers are very important to the process because they are able to reflect and comment on the horse behavior as well as the human behavior in an objective fashion. Observers will comment on how the participant chose the horse, what their strategy was to move the horse, or their use of resources within the arena. When observers are empowered to be honest about the processes they observe, real learning can occur

about organizational interactions. For example, in the training session that resulted in the “coup” observers were able to identify some salient issues related to choices that were made for the benefit of short term achievement (breaking with the group to implement the participants’ own plan) while simultaneously hurting potential long term achievement (in that a certain level of trust was violated).

If the participants are able to complete the task there is a great sense of accomplishment and camaraderie. If the participants are not able to complete the tasks as assigned they will often want to “try it again” after the processing and learning has occurred.

Summary:

Equine-assisted leadership development is powerful tool that is multitheoretical. Particular problem situations target particular types of issues within organizations that are typical to all organizations: decision-making, team building, communication, conflict resolution and task management. Participants construct meaning from the experience as it relates to their own style and organizational structure: they decide what they want better leaders to do and how they want to be treated.

Horses are curious and amiable companions whose behavior helps people understand what they are feeling even if that person doesn’t know what they are feeling. Horses are powerful mirrors.

Does the world need another leadership development model? Maybe not, but the participants in this equine-assisted leadership development program all give it high marks for experiential, hands-on learning and flat out fun.

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