



OF HORSES AND MEN

Another experiential learning tool to develop effective leaders

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***“There is something about the outside of a horse which is good for the inside of a man”
(Winston Churchill)***

In conversations with clients, we are often asked, “What is the latest trend in leadership?” Or, “Have you discovered a new way of developing the leadership skills of our Executives?”

Great leaders learned by reading, by observing, by doing, by failing and by improving. I believe that leadership cannot be taught in the classroom alone. At IMD, developing leadership skills often takes the shape of experiential learning, such as group work on business specific issues, team coaching in the Swiss mountains, and by receiving and giving feedback through conversations with peers and coaches. One of the most revealing and revelling experiences for me has been coaching sessions with horses.

Why horses, you may ask? Why not dogs or other animals? Horses are prey animals. They run to flee danger. The first element which they need is safety. A horse needs to feel secure, as opposed to a dog, which wants to please its master. A horse is independent; it doesn't care about your name, your fame, your position, or your past achievements. If a horse could speak, it would ask simple questions like: “Am I safe with this person? Can I follow him or her? Can I embrace the space which is being given to me?” A horse has learned over centuries to develop its senses to best assess the environment. In fact, when one studies the auditory and visual capabilities of these animals, horses are all about senses. The heart of a horse is 10% of its body weight. Men's hearts only weigh 0.3%. It is the brain which is man's heaviest organ, not the heart... A horse communicates mainly through body language. A horse lives in the present; it brings us in the here and now. As a direct consequence, a horse has the amazing ability to assess our congruency. In order to be effective with a horse, our mind, emotions, our intention and body language must be completely aligned towards conveying the same message. If our thoughts are wondering off or if we suddenly doubt our action, the horse will sense it immediately and challenge our leadership. One final important element to be aware of when around a horse is that a horse challenges hierarchy by trying to invade our space.

1) How do you lead your team?

There are mainly two different ways to lead a herd: Usually, it is the lead mare who leads the other horses from the front. She signals dangers and fights for the herd to protect it. She also nurtures the herd by leading it to food and water. The stallion is usually at the back and pushes the herd from behind.

Coming to my experience in the field, as the coach was asking me how I usually lead people, my immediate response was that I like to engage a team like the lead mare who opens the way. However, my preference is when I can work alongside of people, in partnership with them.

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The first exercise was to lead the horse around obstacles without touching it. What was allowed was to talk to the horse and use body language. One could choose to use a stick as an extension of the arm to give directions, or use a rope to swing it in the air. It felt uncomfortable using either of them. So, off I went towards the horse not really knowing how to get it to follow me. My uneasiness and lack of clear intention must have been felt immediately, as the horse ran off in a split second. So much for trying to give security to a horse! ... What is encouraging about a horse is that it is always willing to give you another chance. The second time, I did two simple things which demanded full concentration: I gave the horse my complete attention and focused on my breathing. All I did was to breathe slowly, fully and consistently. Surprisingly, the horse started walking alongside of me, slowing down as I was doing so, quietly and steadily walking as I was walking. When I came to a full stop, the horse completed a small circle around me and stopped too.

What I learned from this simple exercise was that I needed to be resolved, firm in my intentions, calm, and connected with the horse through my breathing. My objective could only be fulfilled in respecting how I could effectively lead and guide the horse.

2) Why should your team members follow you or be led by you?

Back at the office, I was telling a colleague with enthusiasm how I finally managed to have the horse walking alongside of me. My colleague slowly got up, took me to the coffee machine in the hallway, opened a drawer and picked up a small packet of sugar. "Sugar!" he said, "it is all you need to have a horse follow you, or make it perform whatever you want!" Of course, sugar may work. But sugar or money are not the only drivers of performance. And some horses get tired of sugar too.

Like horses, human beings need a secure and safe environment in order to be creative and to perform. Uncertainty and fear do not help as we have been witnessing in specific industries recently. Space and freedom to operate, recognition and a nice pat on the shoulder, like horses need patting too, are often more valuable than sugar.

The herd follows the lead mare because they are confident that she knows where she is going. The lead mare is like an inspiring leader who never doubts where to go and always believes in the capabilities of the team.

The questions which are often asked on IMD Leadership Programs are: "Do you know what you need in order to be an effective leader? Do you know how best you can lead your team members?" And, "Do you know what your team members need in order to be effective in their work?" The horse coaching session obviously answered both questions for me more than any other tool I have been experiencing on our leadership programs.

Winston Churchill became a great leader by reading, by observing, by doing, by failing and by improving. He also developed many skills in order to reenergize

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himself and find a balance with the constraints of life and the demands of his duty: Painting was key in helping him overcome depression, particularly after World War I. He was a prolific writer by the number of fiction and non-fiction pieces he published. Winston Churchill also was breeding horses. He loved being in the company of these gorgeous animals. He used to say “No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle,” although I doubt the number of hours he did spend on a horse. When I picture him with horses, I can’t help but imagine that there must have been something very special for him to simply be around these animals which did not care about his title, his past, his achievements or failures in office. All he could do around horses was simply be and enjoy how they would accept him into their space and follow him. Hence his famous quote: “There is something about the outside of a horse which is good for the inside of a man.” Lastly and more importantly, Winston Churchill found great support and inspiration in his marriage and partnership with his spouse, Clementine, Lady Churchill. But this is another and very different story than horse coaching...

Horse coaching is currently used at IMD on the “Strategies for Leadership Program: empowering women executives”
[<http://www.imd.org/programs/oep/leadership/sl/index.cfm>], led by Professor Ginka Toegel

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