

JOURNAL OF CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY
AND LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS

Horse Sense Leadership: What Can Leaders Learn from Horses?

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/JCRL.2018.004>

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Abstract: Leaders' talent and IQ are no longer sufficient determinants of success. More attention is paid to their emotional intelligence i.e. emotions and behaviours, as natural and inseparable elements of interpersonal and business interactions. Studies show that leaders' emotional intelligence has a reliable impact on their and organisations' success. The development of emotional intelligence requires a greater level of introspection and reflexivity, so that leaders can consciously experience and control their emotions, especially in the context of their influence on interactions with others. Therefore, the leadership programs should place more emphasis on the development of emotional intelligence. To do so, business schools should provide possibly the most valuable and effective teaching methods to convey both: knowledge and practice in realistic, business environment. Especially, that emotional intelligence is nothing more than a constant experiencing, concluding and using these as references in the future. Experiential learning, called also a learning-by-doing method, has an interactive character, which allows participants to be fully engaged and, as a result, learning process occurs. One of the experiential learning methods is equine-assisted learning. This method appears to

be as effective and strongly engaging its participants in emotional intelligence development. It seems that active interactions with the horses improve human self-awareness, congruence, and social awareness. The purpose of this article is an attempt of evaluation of the equine-assisted learning method in the leadership skills development context. The article summarises the literature review on the role of emotional intelligence in management, the role of experiential learning approach in MBA curricula and the benefits of equine-assisted learning method implementation into leadership development programmes. Next, it verifies literature findings with the equine-assisted training itself to answer the question: “Can the equine-assisted training method be beneficial and useful in leadership skills development context?”.

Keywords: leadership skills, emotional intelligence, equine-assisted learning.

1. Introduction

According to authentic leadership framework, leaders are expected to present their genuine attitude, faithfulness to themselves and to what they believe. Authentic leaders are concerned more about others than themselves and constantly seek growth opportunities to develop and encourage trust with others (Sang-Woo, 2018). They also present ability to motivate and empower people to lead (George, Sims, McLean and Mayer, 2007). Authentic leaders are “deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” but also “have particular attributes such as the role of the leader is a central component of their self-concept, [...] achieved a high level of self-resolution or self-concept clarity [...] their goals are self-concordant [...] and their behaviour is self-expressive” (Sang-Woo, 2018, p. 114).

Authentic leaders’ attributes and skills are closely related to emotional intelligence. Paliga and Pollak (2017) research on the relationship between emotional intelligence and authentic leadership amongst Polish leaders showed a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and all dimensions of authentic leadership. The strongest relations occurred between emotional intelligence and self-awareness as

well as ethicality/morality of the leader. This relationship confirms that both emotional intelligence and self-awareness rely on the conscious tracking of emotional experiences of the individual and contribute to a fuller and deeper understanding of themselves and their own emotions (Paliga and Pollak, 2017). Kotze and Nel (2015) research on the relationship between emotional intelligence and authentic leadership also confirmed a strong link between these variables (Kotze and Nel, 2015).

Emotional intelligence is placed as the 6th of the most important skills in 2020 and expected to manage the 4th Industrial Revolution (World Economic Forum, 2016). That challenges leaders to get serious about developing their emotional intelligence as a matter of building authentic interpersonal trust, enhancing motivation and initiative, seeking more perspectives and solutions, and finally, being as much as it is possible aware and reflective of self, others and environment (Sang-Woo, 2018; Eurich, 2018; Kivland, 2018; Paliga and Pollak, 2017). Future leaders and leadership development demand therefore significant attention to identifying the most effective and creative teaching methods like action-based and experiential learning (Leonard, 2017). According to Goleman's (1998) words: "[t]he rules for work are changing. We're being judged by a new yard-stick: not just by how smart we are, by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and others" (Goleman, 1998, p. 3).

Leadership programs require a more experiential and learning-by-doing approach. Experiential learning allows students to learn with and from each other, solve problems and collaborate during experiences happening in real contexts (Murphy, Wilson and Greenberg, 2017). Equine-assisted learning, as a one of experiential learning methods, appears to be as effective as engaging its participants in emotional intelligence development. It seems that active interactions with horses improve human self-awareness, congruence, and social awareness.

The purpose of this article is an attempt of evaluation of the equine-assisted learning method in the leadership skills development context. The article summarises the literature review on the role of emotional intelligence in management, the role of experiential learning approach in MBA curricula and the benefits of equine-assisted learning method implementation into leadership development programmes. Next, it verifies literature findings with the equine-assisted training itself to answer the question: "Can the equine-assisted training method

be beneficial and useful in leadership skills development context?”. Direct observation and the questionnaire survey were used to answer this question.

2. Why emotional intelligence matters?

Let's not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realizing it

Vincent van Gogh

Emotional intelligence attracts more and more attention and increasingly plays a key role in the business environment. There are a few reasons for that. First, stress and pressure caused by the number of changes, turbulence, and uncertainty, disruptive economy, climate of mistrust, technology, and digital disruption. More than ever before we need to know how to deal with stress-caused feelings and emotions, and how to function in the constantly-stressed environment. The abilities to regulate stress and stress-related emotions (anxiety) and ability to reframe those emotions into constructive are critical (Benjamin, 2018; Lebel, 2018). Second, need for innovation and creativity. With creative and open-minded employees, as well as risk and fail-allowing culture, organisations will easier and faster respond to market and customers' growing demands (Sang-Woo, 2018). Third, we live in a global and service-oriented era. That implies the urgent need for soft skills development, so crucial in the services sector (Rubens, Shoenfeld, Schaffer and Leah, 2018; Benjamin, 2018; Bawany, 2017). The very future of the leadership and the leaders will be defined by skills and behaviours related to emotional intelligence (Zuckerman, Friedman and Castro, 2018; Leonard, 2017; Ovans, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016; Jensen and Bojeun, 2017; Beck and Libert 2017).

According to *The World Economic Forum Report* (2016), emotional intelligence is placed as the 6th of the most important skills in 2020, and expected to manage the 4th Industrial Revolution. The fact is, that skills placed as 1st to 5th require emotional intelligence involvement as well. The same report also points out, that the core skillsets in highest demand will mostly include emotional intelligence, social and problem-resolving skills: “Overall, social skills – such as persuasion,

emotional intelligence and teaching others – will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills, such as programming or equipment operation and control. In essence, technical skills will need to be supplemented with strong social and collaborations skills” (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 3). That makes emotional intelligence a critical and crucial employability skill at any level (Kivland, 2018).

Emotional intelligence has a reliable impact on business results but also is perceived as an obligatory and determining factor of entrepreneurship’ success. According to Chirania and Dhal (2018) research, emotional intelligence is related to entrepreneurship in multiple ways and entrepreneurs, who demonstrate high emotional intelligence degree display strong traits of successful entrepreneurship and future outcomes. The same research shows that high level of emotional intelligence represents entrepreneurs, who are more creative, oriented on finding solutions and who have a better risk-taking and risk analysis capacity (Chirania and Dhal, 2018). There is also a critical connection between emotional intelligence and organisational commitment and job satisfaction. Baba’s (2017) research discovered, that academic teachers with a higher level of emotional intelligence tend to be more dedicated and have strong working connections as well as be more satisfied with what they professionally do (Baba, 2017). According to Choerudin’s (2016) research, higher emotional intelligence also increases job performance (Choerudin, 2016).

Emotionally intelligent leaders, aware of their emotions, are able to control and use them to be more effective. They know how to use the right emotions to work effectively, and how not to be overcome by emotions that do not contribute to the goal. Working with others, leaders can recognise their emotions and react appropriately when they see that the escalation of emotions can lead to the conflict. By taking a wide perspective, they can use emotions to unleash a loss of position or reputation (Baker, 2018; Eurich, 2018; Jasper, 2018; Azouzi and Jarboui, 2014).

Bradberry (2017) defines emotional intelligence as “»something« in each of us that is a bit intangible [...] affects how we manage behaviour, navigate social complexities, and make personal decisions that achieve positive results”. It is also about the ability to recognise and understand own and others emotions and how they affect behaviour to use this knowledge to motivate others (Meinert, 2018). Mayer and Salovey (1997), who created the term of emotional intelligence, describe it

as “ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand the emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer and Salovey, 1997, p. 5). In 2001 Daniel Goleman generalised the concept of emotional intelligence, as “ability to recognise and manage emotions in one and others” (Goleman, 2001, p. 21).

There are three the most popular emotional intelligence models, each model is based on a specific set of skills that builds individuals’ emotional intelligence. A comparison of emotional intelligence models’ skill-sets is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of emotional intelligence models’ skill-sets

Mayer and Salovey (1997)	Bar-On (1997)	Goleman (2001)
– perception and expression of emotions	– intrapersonal skills	– self-awareness
– emotional support of thinking	– interpersonal skills	– self-management
– understanding and analysing emotions and the use of emotional knowledge	– adaptation	– social awareness
– controlling and regulating emotions in yourself and others	– stress management	– relationship management
	– general mood	

Source: own study based on: Mayer and Salovey (1997), Paliga and Pollak (2017), Goleman (2001).

The Goleman’s model, as emphasizing ‘non-cognitive intelligence’, ‘performance-based’ and ‘centred on the emotional development of workplace leaders’ has been supplemented with particular competencies – learnable capabilities in each skill of the set, allowing the leader to reach outstanding performance (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017):

- (1) self-awareness:
 - emotional self-awareness, which is the ability of reading and understanding own’s and others’ emotions as well as recognizing impact of the emotions on performance and relationships at work;
- (2) self-management:

- emotional self-control, which means ability of controlling disruptive impulses and emotions;
 - adaptability, as a skill responsible for adjustment to a new environment/situation;
 - achievement orientation, as a way to achieve an excellence in standards;
 - positive outlook, which means positivity-orientation rather than seeking problems and obstacles within relationships, situations and events;
- (3) social-awareness:
- empathy, which means ability of sensing and understanding others' emotions and feelings;
 - organisational awareness, as ability to read group's emotional currents and build networks;
- (4) relationship management:
- influence, which is the ability of being persuasive and engaging;
 - coaching and mentoring skills which help developing others with feedbacks and guidance;
 - conflict management i.e. the ability to de-escalate disagreements and finding solutions;
 - teamwork i.e. the ability of promoting cooperation and building teams;
 - inspirational leadership, the ability of taking responsibility and inspiring others.

According to the authors, using those competencies may be beneficial as a way of the development plan. Each competence needs a specific way of training. Nevertheless, developing all of them needs to keep the overall balance, according to individuals' strengths (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017).

“Effective leadership starts with self-awareness” (Baker, 2018, p. 55), which is the basis of emotional intelligence (Beenen, 2017). Self-awareness is about having an accurate view of own strengths, weaknesses, and limitations, being assertive and presenting confidence (Beenen, 2017). Self-aware leaders take responsibility for their mistakes, are open to feedback and seek constructive criticism (Beydler, 2017). For some of the leaders, self-awareness is a synonym for better decisions, stronger and healthier relationships, effective and smooth communication. For others it may be a synonym of a more effective

and satisfied team or a more profitable company. Whatever they think or feel about self-awareness the level of their actual self-awareness can be surprising. Eurich's (2018) research highlights that only 10 to 15 percent of people are self-aware internally or externally. This is an important discovery in the context of determining further directions of leaders' self-development. People internally self-aware (well-known themselves) are more retrospective – they see their values, aspirations, and passions, understand their preferences and primary motivational and behavioural mechanisms. Moreover, the more internal self-awareness people have, the more satisfied relationships they make. The same regularity is visible with happiness, personal and social control. In contrary, the less internal self-awareness people have, the more stress, anxiety or depression they can experience. People externally self-aware (well understood how others see them) are conscious of their perception by the others as well as the impact, they have on them. In addition, leaders externally self-aware are more likely to empathise with the others, have a better relationships with their followers. Both types of self-awareness – internal and external – are crucial to optimise and maximise the benefits of self-awareness (Eurich, 2018). Eurich (2018) identifies four archetypes of self-awareness, each with particular areas to improve:

- Introspectors (low external and high internal self-awareness), who know who they are, but do not verify their views with others, what may harm their relationships and reduce their chance of success;
- Aware (high external and high internal self-awareness), who also know who they are, but unlike the Introspectors, they seek and value the opinions of others;
- Seekers (low external and low internal self-awareness), who are not yet aware of who they are and how others see them, what can cause them blocked and frustrated;
- Pleasers (high external and low internal self-awareness), who are more focused on the desired image among others than focusing on themselves, what may result in their further, not self-oriented, choices.

Eurich (2018) also points out that leaders should work on both i.e. internal and external awareness to clarify their overall awareness and get feedback from others' perceptions of their' awareness (Eurich, 2018). Without self-awareness, this constant introspection, people are

not able to make a precise insight and lose potential opportunities for development and improvement (Eurich, 2018; Meinert, 2018).

Self-awareness significantly affects leaders' success and the effectiveness of leadership (Ashley and Reiter-Palmon, 2012). Hougaard, Carter and Afton (2018) survey of more than 1,000 leaders in more than 800 companies in over 100 countries found, that leaders at the highest levels tend to have better self-awareness than leaders lower in the hierarchy. According to the authors, stronger self-awareness accelerates the promotion process, or self-awareness enhances as leadership responsibility increases (Hougaard et al., 2018).

The second dimension of emotional intelligence is self-management. In short, it is the ability to control one's own negative emotions and to be trustworthy (Muyia, 2009). In other words, it is about getting own emotions and using them to produce a particular behaviour (Meinert, 2018). Leaders with self-management skills are highly motivated and passionate about the work they do. They are open to seeking new development opportunities and changes (Beydler, 2017). Self-management also improves clear thinking instead of impulsive reactions (Beenen, 2017).

Leaders cannot be successful alone, they have to motivate, influence and lead their followers to achieve goals. Leaders, as participants of social interactions, need to be socially aware, focused more on others than themselves and their planned narrations (Meinert, 2018). It is the ability to be aware of other peoples' reactions and understanding the reasons causing those reactions (Mumford, Campion and Morgeson, 2007). It is also about seeing other's goals, demands and needs. Leaders' social awareness allows them to read the emotions of others (Muyia, 2009) including verbal and non-verbal signals (Meinert, 2018). It is also called empathy.

The last, but not least, emotional intelligence dimension is relationship management. It helps the leaders to influence and inspire others, manage conflicts (Muyia, 2009). It is a matter of monitoring 'emotional climate' within the group and interacting accurately, by expressing owns' feelings with regard to the group and others' feelings (Meinert, 2018). According to Mumford et al. (2007), it is the ability to influence and interact with others and to establish relationships, as well as being able to coordinate, negotiate and persuade people to work efficiently towards organisational objectives (Mumford et al., 2007).

People are mostly unaware of theirs' and others' emotions and have no understanding for this. TalentSmart research found out, that only 36 percent of people can accurately identify their emotions and their impact on others as they happen (Meinert, 2018). Lack of emotional intelligence can be devastating to the workforce and cause serious damage in leader-followers relation. Regardless how successful a leader is, if cannot mediate in a proper way to all parties or has misconnect with his team, when motivation is needed – will fail (Taylor Christensen, 2018). Lack of emotional intelligence causes leaders' inefficiency by low employee engagement, low morale and personal trust decrease, high turnover and professional relationships erosion, miscommunications, and conflicts (Baker, 2018; Zuckerman et al., 2018; Meinert, 2018, Kivland 2018). Often, leaders do not see the necessity to recognise and perceive their emotions well as their social awareness. Thinking about “what will I say next” they are as losing precious clue, especially nonverbal signals, that authentic interaction with others gives (Meinert, 2018). Frequently, leaders do not allow emotions to appear and they reject the possibility of expressing them at work, perceiving them as hindering decision-making and performance (Lebel, 2018). But the mechanism of suppressing emotions works differently. Ignoring owns' emotions consumes vital and life energy which consequently results in burnout, performance decrease and inappropriate decision-making (Lebel, 2018; Meinert, 2018).

3. Experiential learning in leadership development

*The road to learning by percept is long, but by
example short and effective*

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Historically, curricula of leadership skills used to be mainly focused on technical and practical skills only. Intra- and interpersonal skills were not the subject of interest (Zuckerman et al., 2018). According to revised AACSB accreditation standards (2017), interpersonal relations, teamwork, reflective thinking, the social and ethic context of the organisation are obligatory elements in curricula of accredited business courses and studies. Due to this revision, business schools should also have an ongoing improvement in five major themes: Innovation, Knowledge, Lifelong

Learning, Leadership and Global Prosperity (AACSB International, 2017). Nevertheless, recent studies underline that business educators are still unable to relate management theories to practice (Farashahi and Tajeddin, 2018) and “leadership based solely on MBA-trained logic is not always enough for delivering long-term financial and cultural results [...] is often detrimental to an organisation’s productivity” (Hougaard et al., 2018, p. 3). For example, MBA leadership courses in the United States offer a wide range of leadership theories and concepts, but they do not provide self-reflection and self-awareness cognition and development: “While MBA students often learn to conduct a strategic analysis and assess a company’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), they do not typically conduct this same type of introspective assessment on themselves” (Rubens et al., 2018, p. 2).

That is why leadership development has to be a strategic process and MBA curricula need a broader understanding, critical and reflexive of self and the others (Vohra, Rathi and Bhatnagar, 2015; Cunliffe, 2009). Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2015) also recommended a much broader view of leadership – more humanised, trustful and socially valuable, as an opposite to leadership focused only on career advancement and economic effectiveness (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015).

Students can significantly benefit from assignments requiring their reflection and introspection on their strengths and weaknesses in leadership-related skills. According to Hoover, Giambatista, Sorenson and Bommer (2010), learning process occurs more likely when the learner is engaged. It does not occur until the learner makes it happen (Hoover et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, future leaders and leadership development demand significant attention to identifying the most effective and creative teaching methods like action-based and experiential learning (Leonard, 2017).

Experiential learning used to be described in short as the “knowing by doing” learning method, or the learning method from life experience. Experiential learning involves students physically so they can be actively engaged. Novel situations, in which students are involved let them break old patterns of thinking and leave their comfort zone. Also, group dynamics allows students to learn with and from each other. Other advantages of experiential learning are problem-solving encouragement, boosting trust and group awareness, self-concept enhancement and risk-taking promotion. But the key feature of this method is emotional stimulation – experiencing true emotions forms the basis

of learning. The same happens with leaders' professional experience – every single emotional experience they gain at work plays an important role in a learning process (Raelin, 2018; Murphy et al., 2017; Vohra et al., 2015). When it comes to efficiency of this learning method, Aukes, Geertsma, Cohen-Schotanus, Zwierstra and Slaets (2008) research proved, that undergraduate medical students were able to reflect in ways similar to third-year medical students as a result of participation in a new enhanced experiential learning program (Aukes et al., 2008). In experiential learning, the lecture is also important but as a reference element. The reference process happens after an experiential process is done and a teacher/instructor can provide theory-based debriefing. A debriefing process provides an opportunity to consolidate experience with the possibility of referring to it in the future (Gunter, Berardinelli, Blakeney, Cronenwett and Gurvis, 2017; Leonard, 2017).

So, experiential learning provides the most realistic environment for practicing leadership skills by working in the context of real personal problems and challenges (Leonard, 2017). Still, leadership theory is important, but “[..] leadership itself is about behaviour [...] and the learning needs to be experiential [...] memorable in order for it to be applied” (Duff, 2010, p. 26).

4. Equine-assisted learning for emotional intelligence improvement

*There is something about the outside of a horse
that is good for the inside of a man*

Winston Churchill

One of experiential learning methods is equine-assisted learning. Equine-assisted learning is a quite new and unexplored way of learning, however being able to manage the horse is a very old form of leadership (Duff, 2010). It involves horses to help develop leadership skills within an organisational context. Participants learn about themselves and how to manage their emotions, reactions, and behaviours. The impact and learning itself opens participants perception, that they are more likely to develop their leadership skills: problem and conflict-solving, setting boundaries, non-verbal communications, and emotional intelligence. Horses themselves, as emotionally intelligent animals, can be as a valuable source of knowledge as perfect coaches of emotional intelligence (Stock and Kolb, 2016; Duff, 2010).

Classes with horses are usually associated with physical therapy. Meanwhile, horses also have a great potential for psychological work – bonds with horses help people to overcome anxiety (Holmes, Goodwin, Redhead and Goymour, 2012), control their behaviours, gain a sense of self-efficacy, responsibility and empathy for others (Burgon, 2012), develop trust, improve self-control, increase self-confidence and life satisfaction (Bachi, Terkel and Teichman, 2011) but also build social competencies and improve psychological well-being (Wach, 2014; Ball, Notthoff and Hirschier, 2016). Equine-assisted learning does not require previous knowledge or experience in working with horses, classes do not provide literal horse riding and take place on the ground. That makes equine-assisted learning easier to provide and more available for those, who are not horse-experienced at all.

Horses, as a species, were preyed animals and had to tune to constant uncertainty. They survived only because of their perceptive and fast reaction time and their acute senses of sight, smell, hearing, feeling, and taste. Their unique abilities and unconditional sense of awareness make them perfect detectors of incongruence of human emotions, behaviours, and verbal and non-verbal communication (Blakeney, 2014). The undeniable advantage of working with horses is their instant, authentic and honest feedback with no judgment. In human-human relation, impartial feedback is practically impossible to achieve, due to human nature and its natural tendency to judge (Ball et al., 2016; Klontz, Bivens, Leinart and Klontz, 2007). Horses also discern people, whose inner feelings and outer behaviours contradict each other – they ‘read’ them as not knowing themselves and, as a consequence, they avoid them (Gunter et al., 2017). They have mastered authenticity detection (Blakeney, 2014) and can easily read emotions and tensions, even if they are not visible on humans’ face. However, horses detect positive and negative human emotions based on facial expressions as well (Smith, Proops, Grounds, Wathan, and McComb, 2016). The same happens when it comes to human attitudes – horses react immediately and accordingly to human demeanour (Williams, 2015). The saying “Straight from the horse’s mouth” has much in common with that.

Human-horse relation requires a specific communication system they both can understand, their bodies play the role of the medium i.e. communicate a wide range of emotions, behaviours, and desires (Brandt, 2004; Burgon, 2012). However, a horse body is not the only medium of communication. Horses use also their vocalizations (whinnies) to

communicate social information like social status, familiarity or sex but also to express complex emotions. Each emotion has its own vocalization frequency depending on characteristics of emotion (Ball et al., 2016).

Horses play a naturally leadership mirror role, showing the person who is a leader and how to lead the others (Ball et al., 2016). Thanks to this, participants gain immediate insight into their own actions and their reception and interpretation by the rest of participants. Working with horses can also teach how to give more space and time instead of forcing and pressuring (Williams, 2015). Horses, like humans, differ from each other and work with different horses might be beneficial as it teaches to cope with different styles (Duff, 2010). In addition, horses are natural followers and will follow the leaders they trust. Trust, as a key element to carry out a series of exercises with horses, can be also improved and easily transferred into human-human relationships (Stock and Kolb, 2016).

Horses can also teach a lot about sharing leadership. In a herd of horses, each role is naturally assigned. The herd leaders' role, in general, is to define herd's physical position – when a herd needs to move on, leaders move into positions that reflect their roles and cooperate with the rest of the herd in order to move safely to a new destination. There are three popular herd leadership roles: the lead mare, the lead stallion, and sentinels. The lead mare sets the direction and pace of the herd and takes place in the front of the herd. The lead stallion's role is to keep the herd together and protect it from predators. To do so, the lead stallion takes position in the back of the herd. The sentinels are responsible for herd's security, by detecting potential threats from the middle of the herd position. Herd leaders need to demonstrate: (a) perceptiveness and vigilance for changes in the environment, (b) clarity in giving directions, (c) energy and direction-orientation, (d) congruence of internal motivation and best interests of the herd. All herd leaders, in general, take responsibility for a herd – its safety and comfort. The roles of all members of the herd are protecting the health of the herd, socialisation, and adaptation of herd's new members. All these roles keep the herd in health, harmony, and unity (Williams, 2015; Gunter et al., 2017).

Equine-assisted learning is based on Kolbs' Experiential Learning Theory, according to which a learning process appears through experience, not the outcome (Stock and Kolb, 2016). Experiential Learning Theory itself is described as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the

combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Stock and Kolb, 2016, p. 44). Experiential Learning Theory divides the learning process into the 4-stages cycle: (1) having a concrete experience or reinterpretation of existing experience which is followed by (2) reflective observation of it that leads to (3) the formation of concepts and conclusions, (4) used in the future as a reference to new experiences (Stock and Kolb, 2016).

According to Experiential Learning Theory, equine-assisted learning starts with concrete exercises performed together with horses (e.g. greeting horses or leading them through obstacles). Interactions with horses and the rest of the group allow the participants to reflect constructively on the relationships and regularities that result from these interactions (e.g. by observing horses’ and participants’ reactions and behaviours) and to construct abstract concepts (by metaphoric thinking, trying different approaches) to transfer them into professional or personal life. Active experimentation follows as participants undertake the series of different exercises and try out, what they have learned from reflective observation and conceptualised (Stock and Kolb, 2016). Research clearly shows that equine-assisted learning contributes to leadership development by improved workplace relationships and self-awareness (Stock and Kolb, 2016), attention, mindfulness, assertiveness, focus, authentic relationships in verbal and non-verbal communication, awareness of incongruence of intention versus behaviour, boundaries respect, fear confrontation and confidence (Blakeney, 2014).

Summarising, equine-assisted learning is all about building participants’ emotional presence, vulnerability, and trust – being constantly aware of owns’ and others’ influence on emotions and behaviours, acting with no strive for perfection in uncertainty, and finally trusting unwaveringly.

5. Facing the equine-assisted learning

It always seems impossible until it's done
Nelson Mandela

Last December (2017), a group of twenty two Executive MBA students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń were taken to a nearby

stable to work with horses as an exercise of their leadership skills and emotional intelligence development. The training itself was a daylong session (6–8 hours). The training included activities such as: leading horses on the rope, leading horses through an obstacle, and dealing with horses at liberty. Exercises were carried out alternately, involving several horses to perform as many exercises as possible, and to compare doing the same exercise with different horses. Therefore, each student was able to benefit from all the time, and all activities of the training.

Before entering the stable, students received an overview of the learning processes and safety demonstration due to secure interaction with the horses. Some of the students started the process with some anxiety. For some of them, anxiety resulted from previous, bad experiences with horses. For others, it was anxiety of something new and unpredictable. Especially, in the context of cooperation with such a big and powerful animal.

While leading horses on the rope and through an obstacle students experienced and exercised making a connection with the horse and practiced paying attention, setting boundaries, space, and direction, focusing energy, confidence, and congruence. All activities were provided and supervised by instructors, who were observing the students-horses interactions, offering insights of how human behaviour affects the horse and how to think or behave to achieve desired results. Especially, what horses reactions might tell students about their own actions.

Students were positively surprised by the nature of the training. Despite that some fears and doubts were noticed, some of the students managed to break down their barriers and earlier fears of horses. The training also generated a lot of interesting and valuable reflections, mostly concerning verbal and non-verbal communication, body language, positive and negative emotions, personal influence, and the transferable linkage between human-horse and human-human relationships.

Six weeks later, students received the post-training qualitative questionnaire survey, and were asked about (1) what they have learned from the training, (2) have they found anything difficult on the training, (3) what gave them satisfaction during the training, and (4) did they have any expectations of the training, and if so – were they fulfilled. The results of the questionnaire survey are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the post-training qualitative questionnaire survey

Questions	Qualitative answers with original students' citations
1. What have you learned from the training?	<p>the connection between students' experience from the training with their personal and professional context: <i>"I recognised my employees even more. I know how to handle certain, everyday situations"</i> <i>"I have learned that my attitude influences the actions of others. By appropriate behaviour, I can 'control' the actions of others"</i> <i>"Team cooperation makes it very easy to achieve the goal. The ability to find yourself in a group is the most important and depends on the strength of the individual"</i></p> <hr/> <p>similarities in human and horse behaviour: <i>"[...] people behave in a similar way to horses"</i> <i>"The power of personality influence on animals/people"</i></p> <hr/> <p>human-horse relation: <i>"Control the emotions in relation to horses"</i> <i>"Approaches to horses"</i></p> <hr/> <p>skeptical: <i>"Training horses is an occupation for professionals"</i> <i>"That horses are a combination of beauty and danger"</i></p>
2. Have you found anything difficult on the training?	<p>low temperature</p> <hr/> <p>connection with the horse (due to lack of previous horse-experience or fear of horses): <i>"First contact with the horse, because earlier I did not have direct contact with these animals"</i> <i>"Overcoming the fear of animals"</i></p>
3. What gave you satisfaction during the training?	<p>human-horse communication and cooperation: <i>"When the horses reacted to my signals"</i> <i>"Possibility of influencing the horse's behaviour"</i> <i>"The animals listened to me"</i> <i>"Mastering the most unruly animal"</i> <i>"Contact with horses"</i> <i>"Natural environment"</i></p> <hr/> <p>social aspects: <i>"Meeting with friends"</i> <i>"Watching others' satisfaction"</i></p> <hr/> <p>connection with the horse (due to lack of previous horse-experience or fear of horses): <i>"The fact that I stopped being afraid of horses"</i> <i>"Breaking the barrier in contact with the animal"</i></p>

Table 2.
continued

Questions	Qualitative answers with original students' citations
4. Did you have any expectations of the training? Were they fulfilled?	<p>positive surprise: <i>"The workshop surprised me pleasantly"</i> <i>"It surprised me positively"</i></p> <hr/> <p>a limited amount of individual attention: <i>"[...] individual analysis of participants was missing"</i></p>

Source: own study.

The main limitation of the post-training questionnaire survey is its pilot-nature and short-term orientation. The possible further study should be carried out to verify (1) the impact of training on a larger number of participants, (2) possible long-term effects of the training, and (3) the necessity of repeating it, due to the consolidation of the learned skills.

6. Discussion

Basing on students' opinions, equine-assisted training might be beneficial and useful in the leadership skills development context for a few reasons. Besides general, positive surprise of this method itself, the most appreciated results of its use are: (1) noticing the connection between students' experience from the training with their personal and professional context, (2) initiating and sustaining human-horse communication and cooperation as a transferable basis to human-human(s) relation(s), (3) socialising with the group and supporting others' progress during the activities, and (4) breaking down owns' barriers and earlier fears of horses. Critical feedbacks are associated with: (1) weather conditions (low temperature), (2) insufficient time for a deeper, individual analysis of each participant's work, and (3) sceptical attitude. Although this experiential learning method might be as effective as useful in leadership skills development, some logistic aspects (weather conditions, duration of the training) need to be improved to optimise the learning process.

7. Conclusions

Emotionally intelligent leaders are more efficient due to their improved awareness of own and others' emotions as a natural and inseparable element of the human behaviour. Their emotional control allows them to cooperate with the others more effectively, share knowledge and information as well as manage interpersonal conflicts. Emotionally intelligent leaders much easier and faster build strong and authentic relationships based on trust, understanding, motivation, and commitment but also constructive criticism and creativity.

Amongst the methods of developing emotional intelligence, equine-assisted learning turns out to be an effective and efficient tool. This specific method of experiential learning was well received by the students taking part in the workshop and allowed them to see their own and others' emotions and behaviours as well as the direct impact they make on others. Vivid, and sometimes surprising, emotional and behavioural incongruences improved students' persuasion, trust, confidence, empathy and communication skills. It turned out that students in contact with horses can be more open, reflective and attentive. Being with animals in their natural environment was also noticed by the students as beneficial and intensifying creative reflection. According to students' words, this experience was as much memorable as useful and transferable in their professional and personal lives, which have a lot of emotional dependence.

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