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What Horses Can Teach Us About Leadership

By Leila Valoura

March, 2016



The horses assume the role of the client or student and use reflective feedback to demonstrate how the leadership, facilitation, or therapeutic style of the learner is affecting or impacting them (p. 387 - *Walking the Way of the Horse, Exploring the Power of the Horse-Human Relationship*, by Leif Hallberg).

After a busy season, I am now able to sit down and share an eye-opening lesson of communication and leadership I had in the Hudson Valley, NY. This lesson was given to me by, believe it or not, a horse named Napoleon. That's right, I said a horse. In my research for leadership learning practices that incorporate nature, I came across Cori Nickols, a certified equine assisted learning specialist and owner of [Nichols Field Riding Club](#). Equine assisted learning (EAL) incorporates horses experientially for personal development with the focus on education and learning of specific skills as defined by the individual or group. Examples include improved product sales for a company, leadership & communication skills, resiliency training, among others. I had the opportunity to participate in one of Cori Nichol's EAL sessions and I am excited to share this learning experience with you.

Two hours North from New York city, there I was on a bright and sunny day of Fall entering a pasture with the mission of bringing a 700+ lb horse, Napoleon, to a 50ft diameter round pen. In the pen I was going to participate in a horse assisted learning session which, at that point, I was not totally sure what it was about. While preparing the horse, a beautiful dark brown animal with white spots, my instructor was telling me that horses, like humans, are social animals with a herd nature, which makes them always expect to have a leader in the group. Because of this herd nature, she warned me that if I didn't lead Napoleon, he would lead me which, as you can imagine, scared me a bit.

Determined to lead Napoleon, I grabbed the rope attached to his halter and walked with decision to guide him towards the round pen. At the same time, I was also trying to communicate to him that he could not eat the pasture and had to walk, which did not always work as he kept trying to eat. While walking, my instructor told me about the *five fair ways* that I should keep in mind to get a desired behavior from horses but also from people. "Just follow the five vowels of the alphabet", she said:

A = Ask

E = Encourage

I = Insist

O = Order

U = Undo

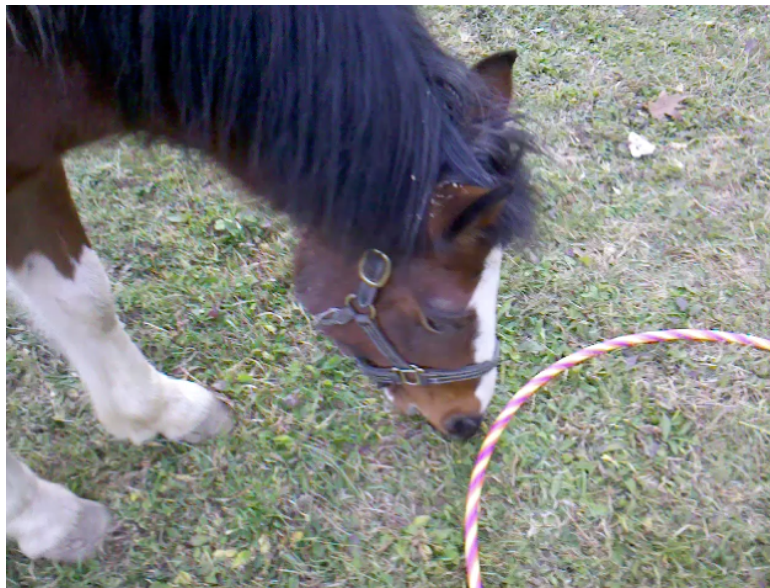
She told me that her range of request follows this scale like in an old stereo, where you have a button for volume, a dial. "You start to communicate with the low volume signal and then, if necessary, you increase the volume until it works. But you always have to undo whatever way you are doing by turning any pressure all the way down and thanking the horse or person who you are working with", she said. I could not help but think about the number of leaders who would benefit from this scale to lead their teams into a desired direction without neither starting at the *O* of *ordering* nor being stuck in the *A* of *asking* when this strategy is not resulting in the desired behavior and it is actually allowing others to 'walk all over us', as Hallberg wrote in her book *Walking the Way of the Horse, Exploring the Power of the Horse-Human Relationship*:

Many of us struggle to walk the thin line between aggression and assertion within daily communications. Either we are too gentle and thus allow others to 'walk all over us' or we are too harsh and send a message that we later regret (p. 122).

I entered the round pen with Napoleon, while Nichols closed the gate and remained outside. I looked around and saw three objects on the ground: a hoolahoop, a swim noodle, and a long whip. Before I even asked what they were for, my instructor told me that I was going to have a defined space within 15 ft diameter from the center of the round pen, while the rest of the area was going to be Napoleon's space. Also, she told me that I had to make the horse run around the pen without touching him. Meanwhile, Napoleon was eating pasture and did not seem to care

much about the activity. Despite his lack of interest, I embraced my challenge with the confidence of a communication professional, looked at him, and said: “Napoleon, move.” What happened? He continued having his bite as if nothing had happened. Clapping my hands in an attempt to turn up the volume of my communication dial to the *E* level of *encouraging*, I said: “Come on, let’s move!”. No success, he continued eating.

I looked around, saw the whip but instead grabbed the hoolahoop. Frustrated with that lack of communication, I started shaking the hoolahoop in hope that the sound would make him move. At that point my instructor gave me a hint: “You need to show him that it is not ok to eat now. Be his leader!”. As in an instinct, I decided to place the hoolahoop in between Napoleon and the pasture. I had just increased the volume of my communication a bit more to the *O* level of *ordering*. He immediately stopped eating, stood up and kept looking at me, waiting for my lead about what to do next. I had finally found a way to communicate with Napoleon. However, despite that first success, I still did not know how, without touching the horse, to tell him to run around the pen. It was not surprising that, without having a lead, I lost his attention and he went back to eating pasture.



I was feeling as if I did not know anything about communication, like a child who is learning how to speak! As a communication specialist and professor, you can imagine how frustrated I was feeling. “I don’t know how to communicate in this situation!”, I said. I looked at the swim noodle and started moving it in front of Napoleon with no success. At that point, my instructor gave me another hint: “Are you driving or blocking him?”. I realized that the message I was sending to Napoleon was the opposite of what I wanted when placing an object right in front of him. I then grabbed the whip and started moving it up and down behind the horse and he immediately started running. I had finally communicated with Napoleon and was driving him. How many times we want to lead but we are actually blocking our team by obstructing them and not knowing how to “speak” their language?

Now that Napoleon and I were communicating, my instructor challenged me to change his direction. Feeling more confident, I immediately realized that I had to block him to point a new

direction. Thus, I found my way to place an obstacle ahead of that horse, which clearly communicated to him the change of direction in my leadership. However, it was interesting to notice that there was a right moment and place where I should show the obstacle to be understood by him. It was not too close to him but ahead, leading him and not suddenly blocking him.

Finally, after changing his direction a few times and learning how to communicate a boundary limit to him as he was coming way too much into my space to make his run shorter, I communicated to Napoleon that it was time to stop. It was time to turn down the dial to the *U* level of *undoing* the pressure, and thank him, which was done with a nice petting on his head and some time to eat pasture.

From this equine assisted learning experience I learned that interacting with a horse mirrors my communication process with humans in a complete way because it is about showing my intention with my whole body through tone, activity, quick movement, slow movement, and a number of body language signals. Moreover, compared to other trainings that use verbal-communication, the training with horses was much more powerful as their non-verbal feedback gives us a clear picture of what we need to improve and challenges us right there, in the moment, and not as a theoretical abstraction. Napoleon is a concrete metaphor of a team member we still don't know how to communicate with, or a new culture we step into and have to learn how to navigate through.

[Leila Valoura](#), a Brazilian, Portuguese, and now American citizen who resides in the United States, is an educator, researcher, and consultant specialized in cross-cultural communication in organizations. Leila is a doctoral candidate in Leadership & Organizational Studies at Northeastern University who teaches in the Department of Communication at Bristol Community College in Massachusetts. She has over 10 years of experience in the communication & culture field in the US, Brazil, Canada, and Sweden, having published in peer-reviewed journals such as [Culture Unbound](#), and books such as [Creative Districts Around the World: Celebrating the 500th Anniversary of Bairro Alto](#). Valoura holds a B.A. in Communication Studies from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro; an M.A. in Applied Cultural Analysis from Lund University in Sweden; and an MBA degree in Project Management from Getulio Vargas Foundation in Brazil.