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Working with horses to develop shared leadership skills for nursing executives

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INTRODUCTION

The complexity and uncertainty of twenty-first century business environments diminish the effectiveness of traditional, hierarchical approaches to leadership. To create an adaptive, agile organization, capable of both noticing and responding to emerging trends and customer needs, leaders are increasingly required to act interdependently and share leadership. According to Pearce and Conger, authors of *Shared Leadership: Reframing the how's and whys of leadership*, shared leadership is a dynamic, unfolding, interactive social process among individuals, where the objective is to lead one another toward the achievement of collective goals and results in improved performance.

Healthcare organizations are faced with navigating the interconnected forces of the Affordable Care Act, political instability, shifting consumer demands, and all of the resultant evolving financial and regulatory challenges. The reality is that no one can predict what large-scale changes are coming next or their impact. Successful leaders are those who can deal with constant ambiguity, notice important patterns amongst the noise, and look at the world through multiple stakeholder perspectives. Shared leadership offers a way for leaders in the healthcare industry to navigate complexity and deal with uncertainty.

With respect to shared leadership, there remain many questions about how to move from an abstract, conceptual understanding to practically applied actions. The next step to advancing the practice of shared leadership is to develop and evaluate tangible models and experiences that enable learning and direct application of the concepts. The work presented here emerged from a test of learning based on one of the most sophisticated, sustainable models of shared

leadership in action, namely the shared leadership practices found in herds of horses.

WHAT DO HORSES HAVE TO TEACH PEOPLE ABOUT LEADERSHIP?

Horses have much to teach us about leading in complex, uncertain environments that result in agile, adaptive organizations. Horses have been creating healthy, sustainable communities for millions of years. They have learned to masterfully navigate uncertainty on a constant, moment-by-moment basis.

In a herd of horses, leadership is shared. When the time comes for the herd to move, the leaders move into positions that reflect their role and work collectively to ensure safe passage to their new destination. One of the most common herd formations is referred to as the diamond formation. The most well understood herd leadership roles are lead mare, lead stallion and sentinels. The leader's role defines their physical position in moving the herd. Usually positioned in the front of the herd (the top of the diamond), the lead mare sets the direction and pace of the herd. The lead mare's role is often called "leading from the front". Usually positioned in the back of the herd (the bottom of the diamond), the lead stallion keeps the herd together and protects it from predators. The lead stallion's role is commonly referred to as "leading from behind". A third prominent role in herd leadership is referred to as the sentinel. The sentinels are positioned in the middle of the herd (the outer sides of the diamond) on the outer boundaries and are charged with aligning the herd in the direction that has been set. The sentinel's role is referred to as "leading from the middle". These sentinels also detect potential threats that may be coming from the sides. In addition to responding to threats,

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the sentinels are often the ambassadors of the herd and are the first to welcome new members.

Each member of the herd has a role in protecting the health of the herd. All of the horses in the herd contribute to the socialization of new or young members, teaching them what behaviors are acceptable and correcting those who behave in ways that could compromise the health of the herd. The ever-present goal of herd leadership is health, harmony, and unity.

With the unpredictability that nature ensures, herd leaders are often presented with challenges that require them to either reposition themselves to respond to changes in the environment, or possibly even change roles to leverage their strengths differently. For example, when a threat emerges, like the new presence of a stranger or predator, the sentinel will often move from the center of the herd to the front where the threat appears. The sentinel will often redirect the herd away from danger. Once the lead mare senses the direction to safety, she will emerge back in front of the herd to set the new course. Once safe movement begins, the sentinel will return to the center position.

Even though there are distinct herd leader roles, all herd leaders are chosen based on their ability to demonstrate four capabilities. First, leaders must demonstrate that they are paying **attention** and can detect even the most subtle shifts in the environment. Second, leaders are able to give clear **direction** on how to respond to the shifts. Third, leaders are able to follow that direction with focused **energy**, providing the herd with guidance on the pace with which to respond. Fourth, leaders display **congruence** between their internal motivation and best interests of the herd.

When a stranger, animal or human, moves into the awareness of horses, the horses go through a process of deciding how to respond. First they use their attention to notice the stranger's presence. They will lift their heads, focus their eyes and ears, and lean in the direction of what they think the person or animal means to them. Then there is a distinct pause of discernment. In that moment they are making a decision on the direction to take with the other's presence. The horses discern whether they feel threatened enough to move away or feel safe enough to stay and get to know the stranger. The horses will also decide if they will follow an offer to be led.

Once the decision about their direction is made, they move. The decision to move includes determining the pace

needed to move in the direction chosen (i.e., walk, trot, canter or gallop). This decision is one about energy. What energy is needed to ensure the health, harmony, and unity of the herd?

The final assessment is regarding the intention of the other being that is present. The horses assess congruence, meaning if the being's inner energy and outer energy matches. In other words, if a person's inner feelings and outer behaviors contradict each other, horses discern that that person does not know themselves and are therefore not safe to be around. Ultimately, what the horses need to know is if the stranger that is present has their best interest at heart.

In summary, horses share leadership by adopting roles that create collective accountability for the safety and success of the herd. To enable effective navigation through uncertainty, herd leaders are chosen based on their ability to pay attention, choose a direction, set a pace of energy that reflects reality, and demonstrate congruence with the best interests of their herd as their sole motivation.

THE DIAMOND MODEL OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

One of the fundamental leadership practices for navigating complexity is the use of simple rules to guide decision-making in moments of ambiguity and uncertainty. Effective leaders create and use simple frameworks that leverage the power of individual judgment and enable effective cooperation among people with diverse perspectives toward a common goal. Successful shared leadership becomes possible through the use of these simple frameworks that can guide collective adaptive action without the imposition of complicated, prescriptive or rigid directives that cannot account for an emerging reality.

The Diamond Model of Shared Leadership (Fig. 1) was developed at TeachingHorse, LLC as a simple framework to guide decision-making in the midst of complexity and uncertainty. The Diamond Model also represents the diamond herd formation and becomes a way to practice sharing leadership through the roles and actions of leading from the front, leading from the middle, and leading from behind using the capabilities listed above. TeachingHorse, LLC specializes in experiential learning and leadership development with horses. The basic premise of experiential learning with horses

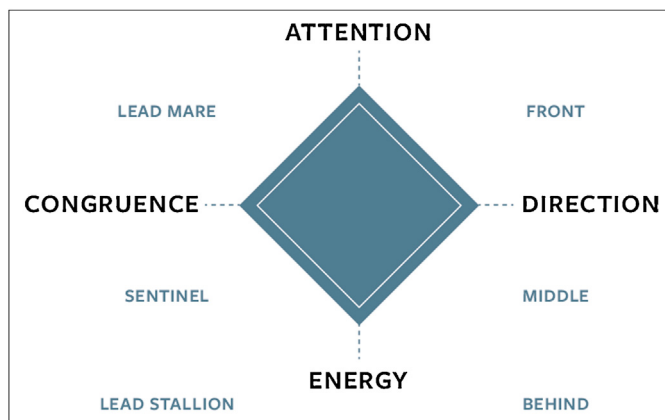


Figure 1 The Diamond Model of Shared Leadership.

is that the best way to learn what the horses know is to go straight to the source. When horses encounter people, they hold them to the same standards of capability that they would another horse. Horses will accept an offer to be led by people embodying the Diamond Model capabilities. Each of the learning experiences with horses is designed to develop individual and team capability to share leadership using enhanced skill in paying attention, setting direction, focusing energy, and being congruent.

EXECUTIVE NURSE FELLOWS PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The ENF program was designed to develop the capabilities of Senior Nurse Leaders to lead in the context of complex organizational systems. Much like in a herd of horses, Nurse Leaders must be able to scan the horizon to understand the rapidly changing environment of health and healthcare and in response provide direction, momentum and energy to support and create healthy and sustainable communities for their patients and clients. To do so, they need to know themselves and ensure that their leadership is congruent with the needs and goals of those they serve. They are unlikely to share leadership effectively if they are not paying attention to the environment, setting the right direction, or setting a pace for change that's too slow or too fast. Without mastering these key components of shared leadership, they may find that their "herd" is unable to effectively reach its goals.

In 2010, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) began partnering with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) to lead the Executive Nurse Fellows Program (ENF). The outcomes and competencies for the RWJF ENF curriculum fall into four major categories: Leading Self, Leading Others, Leading the Organization, and Leading in Healthcare. The ENF three-year curriculum for senior nursing leaders from all sectors of health and healthcare was comprised of seven face-to-face sessions, each one lasting between three and four days. Based on CCL's extensive research and experience in leadership development, the ENF program was designed with a conscious inclusion of both didactic and experiential elements. Action Learning and experiential learning were included as core and complimentary components of the ENF program to provide unique and disruptive learning technologies to accelerate and deepen learning.

Specifically, during Session 2, Executive Nurse Fellows form into Actions Learning (AL) teams with a goal of developing and implementing an organizational, regional or nationally focused leadership project. Action Learning is one method used in the ENF program to promote learning about and applying shared leadership skills to a health or health system issue of significance. The other experiential learning method was the TeachingHorse module that occurs during Session 3, after the Fellows have begun to grapple with shared leadership in their AL teams. Working with horses in their AL teams provides another opportunity to learn about how they function as a team when facing a new and novel challenge. AL coaches observe their teams' time with the horses, debrief the experience with their team, and reinforce application of what they learn about themselves and how they contribute to team functioning under conditions of shared leadership.

DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WITH HORSES PROCESS

What did the experience with the horses entail? Participants arrived at a local equestrian facility and gathered in a clubhouse that served as a classroom to provide an orientation to their experience. During the orientation, participants received an overview of the agenda and processes they would experience that afternoon. In that briefing, it was emphasized that prior horse experience was not necessary and that the horses would not be ridden. Participants were also informed that an in-depth safety demonstration would occur in the equestrian arena prior to any interaction with the horses. The horses at the equestrian facility were a part of a therapeutic riding program and routinely worked with people who were not experienced with or even used to being around horses.

The second step was to provide an overview of the Diamond Model of Shared Leadership. Using stories and examples, participants learned about the roles that horses play when sharing leadership and how they demonstrate the capabilities required to be chosen as herd leaders. During the overview it was made explicit that horses require the same capabilities of people working with them as they do of other members of their herd, and that the experiential learning activities were designed to develop their shared leadership capabilities. After a brief period of questions and answers, participants moved to a seating area inside a covered equestrian arena.

The third step in the process was to provide a safety demonstration. During the safety demonstration, participants learned how to interpret horse behavior and position themselves for safe interactions. Specifically, the safety demonstration covered how to:

- Set boundaries and invite connections
- Understand what gets a horse's attention
- Inspire confidence that you are paying attention
- Set direction and align energy with the direction set
- Demonstrate congruence

Participants were given ample time for questions and answers regarding how to interact with the horses safely.

In the fourth step of the process, participants were organized into their Action Learning teams and given instructions on how to engage in the next experience. The activity involved three primary challenges that included:

1. Develop a connection/trusting relationship with the horse
2. Practice using the roles of leading from the front, leading from the middle, and leading from behind
3. Practice paying attention, setting direction, focusing energy and being congruent to lead a horse through an obstacle course set up in the equestrian arena.

During the activity, a team of trained equine experiential learning facilitators guided the participants through the process. The role of the facilitation team was to observe the interactions between the participants and horse, offer insight about how their behavior is affecting the horse, and

offer coaching about how to adjust their thinking or behaviors to achieve their desired results. The facilitators were also accountable for ensuring the safety of both the people and the horses. Each Action Learning team had their AL Coach present also in an observer role. Their follow up in facilitated discussions provided a rich forum for translating the learning from the equine experience to how their teams were functioning and learning together for the Action Learning project. After each AL team's experience with the horse, a debrief conversation was held to process learning and make connections to application opportunities in their own places of work. Once all of the AL team experiences were completed, an additional synthesizing application conversation occurred to prepare participants for using the experience and the Diamond Model of Shared Leadership back at their work setting.

THE QUESTIONS WE EXPLORED

The specific aims of this study were to assess (a) perceptions of the learning experience itself, (b) the transfer of learning to a concurrent shared leadership project, that is, the Action Learning team, and (c) the application of shared leadership concepts into practice in the Executive Nurse Fellows' workplace.

A qualitative survey was conducted to assess learner perceptions of the impact of experiential learning with horses and the Diamond Model of Shared Leadership. We wanted to hear the stories told by the participants to gain an understanding of their experience in their words. All Executive Nurse Fellows from the 2011, 2012, and 2013 Cohorts received electronic surveys with the following open-ended questions: 1. Describe your most vivid recollection from your TeachingHorse experience in terms of the effect it had on you while it was happening. 2. What, if anything, was the impact of experientially practicing shared leadership with the horse and the team with whom you worked? 3. What, if any, impact did your experience with TeachingHorse have on your workplace or other professional shared leadership efforts?

Surveys were distributed to 60 Executive Nurse Fellows and 50 Executive Nurse Fellows responded (Response rate = 83.3%). Responses to each question were reviewed and each comment was assigned one of four attitude response categories: positive, mixed, negative, and no response. Comments were coded as positive if they described a favorable experience (e.g., recognizing the surprising impact of working with horses on their learning.) Comments were coded as negative if the experience was described as unfavorable (e.g., not seeing the connection to learning leadership through working with horses). Mixed comments represented a blend of favorable and unfavorable descriptions of their experience. "No response" indicated the respondent did not submit a comment for that question. All coauthors participated in the identification of common response themes.

FINDINGS

For each of the questions used in the survey, a measure of response attitude and a summary of common themes are presented, followed by sample participant comments. In

comparing the response of each cohort, it became clear that participant ratings of positive, mixed or negative were not influenced by the time between the experience and the completion of the survey. Therefore, the findings reported below reflect responses from all three cohorts analyzed as one sample.

Question one. Describe your most vivid recollection from your TeachingHorse experience in terms of the effect it had on you while it was happening.

Ninety percent of respondents reported a positive experience. The six percent of mixed responses to this question were about the individual's discomfort working with horses and/or skepticism about making the connection from learning with the horses to their work roles. The four percent of negative responses reflected individual concern with the vulnerability they felt engaging with learning experiences outside of their comfort zone in a highly visible group setting.

Several respondents commented on their surprise at the success of their teams in getting the horse to move with them on their chosen path. Many participants were impressed that the horse would only follow the team when everyone was clear on the direction and focused their energy on moving together. Sample comments included:

"When we were all working together and performing our roles appropriately, magic happened. The horse moved in the direction we wanted him to."

"A profound effect of the TeachingHorse experience to leadership development for me is the imperative for leaders to be able to set direction, pace, and share responsibility."

Experiential learning with horses intentionally takes people out of their comfort zone in an environment safe for experimentation. Inevitably, in the midst of navigating through the confusion of the activity, someone will try to take control and lead the horse alone. The strategy is recognized as ineffective as one participant described:

"I quickly recognized that the person out front isn't always leading like they think they are. You had to be in a place where people (or the horse in this case) wanted to follow. This helped me to further enhance my beliefs around shared governance and teams."

One of the vital roles in herd leadership is the lead stallion that is often in the back of the herd, creating momentum for moving forward, while reinforcing the direction set by the lead mare out front. It was a powerful experience for the participants to practice leading from behind, while trusting another person to get out front and set direction. As one participant described,

"I was deeply impressed (and continue to remember) that we can guide with our energy and lead from behind. I'll never forget what it was like when, by focusing our collective team energy and working as a team, we were able to lead the horse without touch, and "from behind."

Next we explored how the experience with the horses transferred to how they operated as an Action Learning team. Transfer was defined as the learning from the experience with horses that was applied to the participant's work after

completing the session. The immediate transfer for the participants was to their Action Learning team.

Question two. What, if anything, was the impact of experientially practicing shared leadership with the horse and the team with whom you worked?

Ninety percent of the respondents reported a positive experience. The two percent of mixed responses to this question were skepticism about making the connection from learning with horses to their team roles. At the same time, they found the model and conversations about shared leadership relevant and useful. The eight percent of negative responses reflected dissatisfaction with the size of the learning team that, in their view, limited the amount of individual attention and coaching available during the group experience.

Many of the participants commented on the impact of experiencing what happens when aligned direction and congruent communication are in place and when they are not. Sample comments included:

“I thought that this was one of the most powerful experiences. Our AL team going into this was working well together and had developed a mutual trust. Another team was fighting and struggling amongst its team members and it was clearly visible in this learning experience when they could not get their horse to move in the direction that they wanted.”

“Good communication is essential. You cannot assume others know what you think. Leaders going in different directions, even when the desired outcome/end point is well understood and shared by everyone, will definitely cause frustration and delay the desired outcomes; horses taught us the lesson in 5 minutes.”

Several participants mentioned the impact the experience had on making patterns of leadership behavior visible as a useful source of feedback. Sample comments included:

“It really showed how each member of the action learning team typically worked and how we wove this together... and it was the same as when we were doing our project.”

“This experience gave our team a “trial run” of what we may be facing in our action learning teams. It’s interesting now to be a few months out and reflect on what the characteristics were of certain members, and what has exhibited in our group meetings.”

Participants reflected on the impact the experience had on enhancing the relationships among their Action Learning team members. Sample comments included:

“As a team, it was a bonding experience – and I learned things I did not know about my teammates.”

“It helped to strengthen our team’s bond, promoted trust within the team, and solidified our team interactions.”

Finally, we examined how the participants applied their learning in the context of their work environments. Impact was defined as application of the skills of shared leadership beyond the Action Learning team experience and into the participants’ respective organizations.

Question three. What, if any, impact did your experience with TeachingHorse have on your workplace or other professional team efforts?

Eighty percent of participants reported a positive experience. The seven percent of mixed responses to this question reflected an acknowledgment of the powerful experience and the belief that the long-term impact on their leadership skills was either still emerging or not yet visible. The three percent of negative responses were statements of no long-term impact. Ten percent of the participants did not respond to this question.

Both the experience with the horses and the Diamond Model of Shared Leadership became anchors for making changes in the Executive Nurse Fellows’ leadership practices. Sample comments included:

“I have often thought back to the times with TeachingHorse and asked myself if what I was doing would cause the horse to follow me.”

“I have used the model to reframe my own leadership thinking (at different times). I have also used it with my leadership team (managers) and with my MSN students.”

“It helped me to think about how I lead and work with others within my leadership role. Again, gave me a different lens, context, and framework for leading and sharing leadership with others.”

Attempts to guide a horse on a path through obstacles often revealed that the agreed upon direction and plan was not as clear as the team believed or that assumptions that all team members were on the same page were not accurate. These experiences sparked exploration about whether the direction the participants had set for their organizations was as clear to others as it was in their own mind. Sample comments included:

“The TeachingHorse experience further helped me to promote the principles of shared leadership and the imperative of setting direction.”

“I need to keep reflecting on am I providing clear direction and are my actions congruent with my direction and energy – or am I scattering ideas everywhere.”

SUMMARY

Executive Nurse Fellows are experienced leaders with demonstrated track records of creating aligned, focused organizations. And yet, the visible impact of alignment and focus is often abstract and delayed. Seeing the impact play out in front of their eyes with the horse reinforced the greater power of shared responsibility for aligned direction and energy in creating momentum over depending on individual heroic effort. The success of the experience motivated leaders to make conscious decisions about ways to improve shared leadership within their organizations. This practice field for experimentation allowed the participants to see the direct impact of improving their team’s ability to align direction and use communication to increase congruence and ultimately the effectiveness of their shared leadership actions.

Practicing the defined roles of herd leaders opened participants to new potential roles they could take on within their organizations. One of the pivotal points of learning was that the leader in the back had the broadest perspective on all that was occurring with the team and the surrounding environment. The person leading from behind made it safe for the one out front to take informed steps forward. Leading from behind created a clear, active role for supporting others to step up to advanced leadership accountability. Learning to “lead from behind” became a core reference point for practicing shared leadership.

The feedback participants received from horses was immediate, and without judgment. If the person changed their behavior, the horse changed its behavior, without attachment to historical experiences. Seeing the horse respond to positive changes in the participants’ leadership behavior created a willingness to apply the new skills to their interactions as a team and their organizations.

Nursing leaders are focused on simultaneously improving quality, service, and affordability. Improving patient safety and health outcomes requires using new paradigms that promote the development and diffusion of innovations through complex systems. Creating these innovative solutions will never be accomplished by one individual in a position of sole authority. Navigating complexity requires adaptive and effective shared leadership with collective action. One of the most effective strategies for navigating through complexity is using simple rules to guide decision-making among people with diverse perspectives when there is not one “right” answer. The Diamond Model of Shared Leadership served to create a simple, common language for operationalizing shared leadership through collective attention, direction, energy and congruence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS AND LEADERS

Using experiential learning with horses to support learning and application of shared leadership is a relatively new endeavor. Even so, several universities and organizations across the United States use experiential learning with horses as part of their training and development for nurses, medical

students, and leaders. Alan Hamilton MD, professor of Neurosurgery at University of Arizona, developed an equine experiential learning program to teach effective non-verbal communication skills to medical students. Stanford University medical students participate in a program called Medicine and Horsemanship™, developed by Beverley Kane MD. The Stanford Red Barn Leadership Program offers leadership, team building and youth development training using experiential learning with horses. The use of experiential learning with horses is growing rapidly. Qualified professionals are available throughout the United States, Europe, Latin America, South Africa and many other countries. Several associations of qualified equine experiential learning practitioners are working to set professional standards and establish processes for credentialing.

It is possible for those who cannot have a direct experience with the horses to benefit from the use of the Diamond Model of Shared Leadership. Multiple large healthcare organizations have adopted the model as a way to educate leaders and promote the use of shared leadership and shared governance. Development can occur through conference presentations and other interactive experiences that allow for direct application of the capabilities and roles. Tools have been created to support real-time application through structured reflection questions that guide leaders in navigating through uncertainty. An individual electronic self-assessment has been developed that assesses the level of leadership confidence in using each of the Diamond Model capabilities. Based on assessment results, leaders receive weekly customized, brief emails with suggested on-the-job learning experiences to further their development in the areas they would like to grow their confidence.

The results of this study are encouraging in that this method of experiential learning was well received by senior leaders who could readily adapt the experience and learning to their own organizations. Possible further study could include measuring the learning, transfer, and impact on intact teams attempting to share leadership more effectively within an organization. Other inquiry within the healthcare arena may include the effects of shared leadership on patient outcomes, quality standards, and cost containment.



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