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# Equine-Assisted Experiential Learning

By Karen L. Stock and  
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For some, the concept of equine-assisted experiential learning may be a surprising topic. The idea of using horses as a training tool for management development is certainly unexpected and brings with it aspects of novelty and wonder. What can a horse possibly teach us? Is this just a fad, or is there something insightful in this experiential approach to learning that can be truly beneficial? The prevalence of equine-assisted training programs targeted for business professionals is growing, and not just in the United States. We know of programs in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, South Africa, and Australia, claiming to provide business professionals with tools to improve communication, teamwork, and trust. These positive outcomes are beneficial at both the group and individual level. At the group level newly formed teams, intergenerational teams, as well as groups of varying hierarchical levels in an organization benefit as a result of the experience. At the individual level, when managers embark on equine-assisted experiential learning, the outcome is not only memorable, but it has a profound effect on participant’s self-perception and their ability to work with others. Thus, this unique experience allows managers to essentially “get over themselves,” as one plant manager described it, stating that where other types of training on-site with consultants had failed, this type of training helped to improve teamwork.

While this concept is growing in popularity, there has been little research on

the use of horses as a training instrument for organization development. This article provides new insight into this type of training experience based on a qualitative study, and also provides a glimpse into what takes place during a typical training session and the results that follow.

## Why Horses?

The application of horses helping humans is well documented in other fields. In psychotherapy horses have been shown to help patients suffering from trauma experience bonding, reduce psychological distress, and improve well-being (Herbette, Guilmot, & Heeren, 2011; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). In the medical field horses have been shown to help medical students hone their communication skills prior to working with patients, develop compassion, and practice presence (Carroll, 2013; Steakley, 2011; Walsh & Blakeney, 2013).

The premise of using horses in these contexts is derived from the fact that horses are “flight” animals, as opposed to “fight” animals, indicating that a horse will flee when sensing danger as opposed to confrontation. Horses also have the keen ability to detect intention and authenticity in people and are known to “mirror” behaviors they are picking up from others (Roberts, 1997, 2001). Horses have also been proven to be able to detect positive and negative human emotions based on facial expressions (Smith, Proops, Grounds, Wathan, & McComb, 2016).

## About the Training Experience

Based on first-hand observations, a typical day of equine-assisted training can be described as follows. A group of individuals enrolled in an executive education training class arrive at the farm early in the morning. They depart from their cars a bit apprehensively and proceed to convene as a group. They have been instructed to wear comfortable clothes in preparation for a training experience involving a herd of horses. The group is greeted by the proprietor of the farm, who explains the agenda for the day. After brief introductions among her staff and the group, she starts with basic safety instructions about how to interpret the horse's body language. She emphasizes the need to refrain from any quick, sudden gestures, and from making loud noises. Afterward, the group is asked to sign a waiver to release responsibility for any injuries that may occur.

Meanwhile, the herd is grazing freely in the pasture and is within sight as this orientation occurs. Group members are instructed to enter the herd environment and meet the horses. They proceed to enter the pasture to approach the horses and are followed by trained facilitators who have experience working with the horses, as well as training in the various activities the group will perform that day. As the participants approach the herd they notice how the horses react differently to different people. When approached from behind one horse merely walks away as if uninterested. Another is startled and moves to be closer to another horse when confronted. As the participant engages in this interaction, the facilitator stands back and observes. Later,

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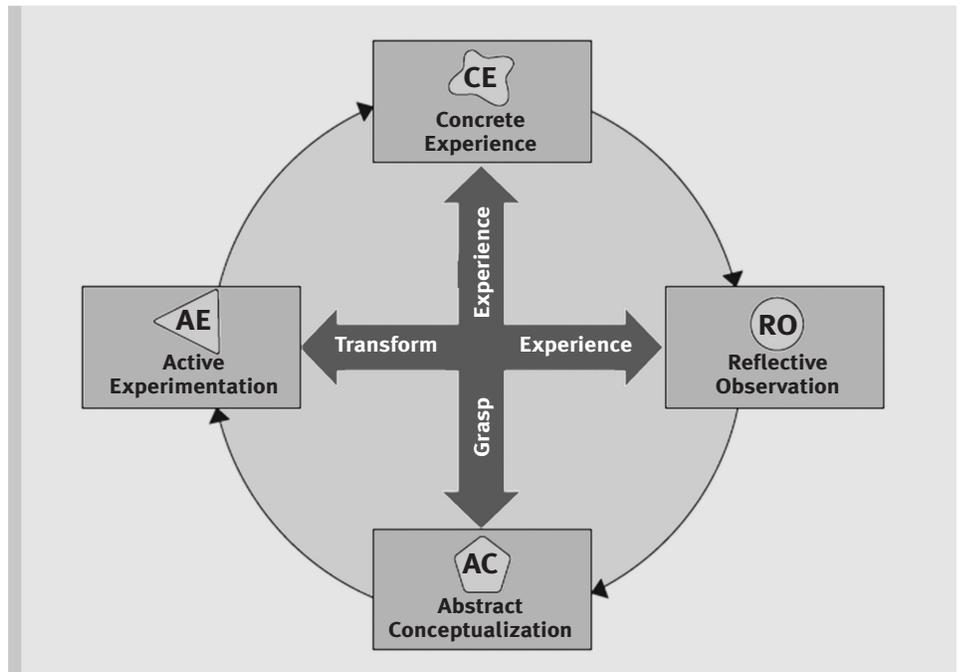


Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015)

the facilitator will draw a few participants together to reflect on what has just happened. They probe to ask participants why the horses may have reacted in such a way. They also inquire about what this occurrence might tell the person about their own actions and how this knowledge could relate to a work experience they may have encountered. Then they ask the participants to think about how this insight may alter future behavior in order to get different results.

This type of interaction is typical throughout the day as participants conduct various activities such as bridling the horse or leading the horse through an obstacle course. With the help of a trained facilitator, the horse's response and the participant's response are examined as a potential learning opportunity.

## The Training Framework

The basis for which this type of training is conducted aligns with Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 2015, p. 51). Emphasis is placed on the process of learning over the outcomes. Kolb developed ELT based on the principles of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, as depicted in *Figure 1*.

The model proposes that learning occurs through a 4-stage cycle which begins with a concrete experience that leads to reflective observation about the experience. Abstract conceptualization follows in which models, paradigms, strategies, and metaphors are applied to the results of the experience. Active experimentation concludes the cycle as the concepts are then put into practice, thus generating new concrete experiences.

The equine experience follows this learning theory in the way that is introduced and the manner in which participants interact. The session begins with concrete exercises that individuals conduct with the horses. Throughout the day, the participants interact with one another and reflect on the exercises they conduct

with the herd of horses to determine how they may be able to relate their discoveries to their work or their personal lives in an abstract way. Experimentation follows as participants are engaged in different activities on-site where they can practice what they have learned in a new setting and begin thinking about how they will apply this knowledge to their lives moving forward. The 4 stages are also discussed at the conclusion of the training session during a wrap-up group discussion. The activities performed during each stage, as well as representative quotes from participants showing evidence of these stages are depicted in *Table 1*:

### About the Research

A qualitative study was conducted with 28 participants from corporations from varied industries, including consumer appliances, transportation, and light manufacturing. The participants were interviewed following their experience, which consisted of a daylong session, typically 6–8 hours in length, at a single facility that provided equine-assisted training. The

training facility was selected based on client references. These references include a prominent Northeast Ohio university that utilizes the facility as part of a leadership development program for executive education, corporate training consultants, and discussions with past attendees. Prior to conducting the interviews, an ethnographic approach was taken to begin the research, since several days were spent in the field observing the training before conducting interviews (Van Maanen, 2011). Field notes were kept during that time, which ultimately influenced the development of subsequent interview questions.

The purpose of the qualitative study was to answer the question, “What factors of experiential learning in the context of equine-assisted learning contribute to management development?” Due to the nature of this study, a grounded theory approach was deemed appropriate since it allowed for theory to emerge from the data gathered from the lived experiences of those interviewed (Charmaz, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately an hour were conducted using an interview

protocol to understand the experience of engagement with horses in an organizational learning exercise and how participation in this exercise benefit individuals on a personal and organizational level.

From the 28 interviews we conducted, 309 pages of transcribed text were analyzed and 763 codable moments were identified using a coding software program (MAX-QDA 10). These codable moments initially fell into 68 codes. Through constant comparative method, the number of codes was reduced as similarities in the data were identified and thematic categories emerged, which allowed us to generalize our findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### The Effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Training

The reflection that takes place for those who are partaking in equine-assisted experiential learning has been shown to help managers deal with the turbulent business climate they face and enhance working relationships. Evidence of this is described below as key outcomes of the training.

Table 1. *Stages of Equine-Assisted Learning*

Learning Cycle Stage	Activities	Representative Quotes
Concrete Experience	Greet the horse, put a halter on the horse, and lead the horse through obstacles.	“We got to disperse into the field as the whole class and choose a horse, so to speak. And then you just kinda followed that horse, and then you tried to do things with the horse in terms of interaction and things like that.”
Reflective Observation	Stop and observe horse behavior and participant’s actions. Reactions may be verbally expressed or quietly acknowledged as prompted by the facilitator.	“She’d (the facilitator) say, ‘Think about a time when you were having to deal with new people and the feedback you were getting from them, and how did you respond? How did you act? Is that similar to how you acted with the horses?’”
Abstract Conceptualization	Try different approaches and think metaphorically about how the actions can be related to a work setting.	“The horse might be happy one day and it might be ticked off the next day because of something else that’s happened, I guess. So the same thing goes with people. You just gotta take it one step at a time and see how it goes.”
Active Experimentation	Planned changes to behavior are made.	“I guess I’m trying to be more open and honest and take on tasks that I initially thought I couldn’t handle.” “I have seen more of a difference in the relationship with my direct reports. I have a better perspective and realize that their input is very critical – it is more important I guess than maybe what I would’ve thought in the past.”

### 1. Know yourself.

Since the horse acts as a mirror to one's own actions, participants gain insight into their own actions and are able to see how their actions are interpreted by others. One participant described the training as a way of "learning about myself, kind of more of a self-awareness and self-reflection; more of a temperament too. If I receive feedback that maybe I disagree with or that isn't necessarily favorable, I'll kind of go back and look in the mirror more and try to take it from the other side and evaluate it from there." A participant also described the

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training as a way of seeing more solutions by stating that "when you're dealing with a problem, there's always more than one solution, or 99 times out of 100, more than one solution." Another noted that "some people took different approaches to doing that. And you got to see the results of those approaches on different horses and different people."

### 2. Level the playing field.

A shared powerful experience creates an opportunity for equal dialogue. Whether the groups contained union and non-union participants or managers and direct reports, the experience provided a means of "getting together to try to participate in activities with common goals." Unique about the equine experience is that "working with animals that are 1,800 pounds, that speak a different language, and are somewhat unpredictable levels the playing field for people." This was illustrated very clearly, as one executive described by stating, "Horses give you really clear, unadulterated feedback. They could care less if I'm a CEO. It didn't matter to them. I'm not a CEO in their environment."

### 3. Build trust.

As a result of working with the horses throughout the day, participants learn to develop trust with the horse in order to conduct the various exercises that then translated to trust in each other. One participant described having to "develop the trust to get that horse to follow you and allow you to touch it, to do things, and it required a lot of effort to get that to happen." And at the conclusion of the day, another participant noted that "we were sharing things in conversation that we would never ever do outside of that environment."

### 4. Recognize your role as part of a larger system.

The connection to the physical environment and to the animals builds compassion and empathy in participants that they otherwise did not express. Being in nature has a restorative effect on learning. This concept dates back to early writings that recommend when the capacity to focus becomes fatigued, urban dwellers should seek recovery in nature (Olmsted, 1865). One participant describes this restorative effect as follows:

"When I first made a connection there was one horse. He was a little skittish, so I gave him a little more time, and then he came up to me and then I was able to pet him, stand with him, and then I turned and started talking with the group. He came up kind of like right up behind me nudging me. In a matter of a few minutes we were out there I went from being intimidated by this animal and apparently him afraid of me to within a few minutes making a connection where he was comfortable coming up to me, and I

was comfortable with him coming up to me."

The physical setting of the horse ranch and the environment also allowed participants to fully engage in the experience. Merely slowing the pace of learning allows a deeper kind of knowing to occur, which some attribute as the source of true education through a direct experience with nature (Orr, 1994). This is illustrated by one participant in the following quote:

"I think spending the day out there and doing something that was kind of slow-moving, with a lot of thinking and interacting with the horses where you are trying to read their signals was valuable. There was a lot of quietness. The busy working mother like I am, who is married, two kids, works 60 hours a week – we never stop and think about anything. There's no time to stop and think."

Thus, making a connection with the horses, being part of the natural environment, and slowing down to take it all in essentially gave participants a different perspective and deeper sense of belonging.

Overall, the impact of equine-assisted experiential learning contributes to management development by improved workplace relationships and self-awareness. Participants described seeing things from a different perspective, which in one example resulted in changing the order of work for given tasks to improve productivity. They also describe being better able to take stock of their own actions and the impact they have on others.

### Conclusion

The link between horses and the field of management was made long ago. The very origin of the word *manage* dates back to 1560 and is translated as "to control a horse" (Harper, 2016). This research has uncovered yet another link to management due to the evidence of ways in which equine-assisted experiential learning contributes to developing managers and "sticks with them" as evidenced during

interviews with participants who were able to recite step by step actions of the day of training even when a few years had lapsed. As the following quote from a participant indicates, this recall of what was learned proves beneficial and continues to be powerfully meaningful: “I’ve been able to use it in my interactions with coworkers on a daily basis. So I was unexpectedly surprised that it all tied together and I’m drawing the parallels. I’m still drawing them now every day that I interact with the people at work.” As a result of having attended a training session involving equine-assisted experiential learning, these managers are left with episodic memories that create useful scenarios that benefit human interactions.

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