



# HOW HORSES TEACH US TO LEAD

By Catherine A. Held, Ph.D

Photo: William T. Stacy

*This group of bachelor stallions in Nye County, Nevada, crosses the plains in the diamond formation.*

**W**e marvel at how horses can thunder across the landscape in unison, swaying this way, then that way as a group, as if a choreographer were directing the moves of a chorus line, in and out like a large school of fish. Today, corporate management teams turn to horses, with the help of their human facilitators, in search of the leadership skills that produce that kind of teamwork.

Years ago, I encountered leadership lessons at my first equine guided education workshop. Lisa Walters' EquuSatori in Sebastopol hosted a Linda Kohanov workshop that I attended with eleven other participants. Kohanov had published *The Tao of Equus*, a book that hit a cultural nerve. The author was one of the first to articulate the magic, mystery and healing capacities of the horse-human partnership.

## **Practicing Leadership with Diora**

One of the exercises that weekend was with Lisa Walters' mare Diora. The bay waited for us in a large paddock under the covered arena. We were told to go into the paddock as a herd. One person at a time was assigned the task of being the lead mare or lead stallion. Our task was to take direction from our leader and invite Diora to be a member of our herd.

The first woman/lead mare set off in a counterclockwise direction at a fast clip, leaving her human "herd" behind. She was distracted and had not absorbed the directions. We struggled to catch up with her. Diora never joined us, and our coach told us that we needed to have a clearer group direction to capture Diora's interest. The second woman went slower around the enclosure. We were all excited when the mare came up to us. Unfortunately, Diora went right up to the designated leader and split our human herd into two parts. The woman was so pleased to have Diora with her that she didn't notice that the mare took the lead and some of us were again left behind. On our third try, we were led by the only male participant in the group. He seemed depressed. We walked together slowly. As the exercise progressed without Diora joining us, he became more dejected and looked at the ground, despite

the coach's urging to focus on the intended goal.

We all felt the sting of the three "failures." Assimilating the advice of the human coaches from our previous attempts, instead of focusing on Diora, when it was my turn, I focused on the goal of being such a high-functioning team that she would naturally be attracted to join us. When we went in the paddock, I asked everyone to practice centering, breathing and becoming present. As I laid out the course we would follow, I asked them to imagine our destination in their minds and reminded them that we were a team. Several paces in, Diora joined up in the rear. We broke out into goofy grins as she followed us to the gate that I had selected. It was magic.

In the debriefing, we learned that Diora was not attracted to us when we were distracted, disorganized or lacked motivation and energy. We were told that a leader who does not notice the needs of the individual herd members is not trusted, which is why she tested the second participant and then took over the role as lead mare.

## **The TeachingHorse Diamond Model of Leadership©**

In subsequent years, I have participated in other leadership exercises that have given me a context for my earlier experience. June Gunter, a pioneer in the field of equine guided education from North Carolina, has developed the TeachingHorse Diamond Model of Shared Leadership©, based on her studies of how horses organize themselves, especially when they are in motion. She found that the main roles are lead mare, lead stallion, the direction setter and the sentinels. They form a diamond shape. The lead mare is typically in front of the herd, which is the north or top of the diamond, while the lead stallion provides the energy and impetus to move from the south or rear of the herd. The sentinels, alert to changing conditions, are on either ends of the west-east axis. The direction setter can take any position.

In this model, every member of the herd is needed and responsible to the others. Gunter's model also has four attributes



that ensure the smooth working of the herd: direction, attention, energy and congruence.

In my earlier experience, the first participant did not have a clear **direction**. The second did not pay enough **attention** to the dynamics of our "herd." The third participant, who was depressed, lacked the **energy** to motivate Diora to join us. So what is **congruence**?

In the 2000 film *28 Days*, the Sandra Bullock character Gwen is an out-of-control alcoholic and addict. At a recovery center with equine therapy, in the course of trying to clean Tennessee's hoof, she is told that congruence is when her "insides match her out-sides." She can't do it when she is professing her desire to be sober but still scheming to get high. The horse doesn't trust her. In the context of Gunter's leadership model, congruence occurs when the internal motivation of the individual is aligned with the needs of the group. When a leader is not congruent, neither horses nor humans trust their leadership.

The foundation of the horse's distrust harkens back to the prey/predator syndrome. As a prey animal, the horse is potential victim if the predator's inside intentions do not match its outside appearance. The horse is instinctively alert to this split energy.

When I am working with others at work or at the barn, if communication breaks down or plans go awry, I will ask myself: Is my direction/intention clear? What needs my attention/awareness? Do I have the energy/motivation for my task? Am I congruent/authentic?

It has been many years since that brief exercise with Diora, but it has had a lasting impact. Newly divorced at the time, I found it helped me recognize my own capacity for personal leadership. At work and in my volunteer work, I was used to being a follower, someone more comfortable taking secondary positions. That short exercise nudged me to take more responsibility in different arenas of my life. 🐾

**MICHAEL MURPHY**  
EQUINE ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT CONSULTING



PO Box 2705  
Sebastopol, CA 95473  
m\_murphy@sonic.net

ph 707 332-1195  
fax 707 823-8311

**Michael C. Murphy**  
DRE #01299702  
Realtor

Glenda Sales Real Estate, Inc.  
330 Shiloh Road, Bldg 44, Ste C  
Windsor, CA 95432

(707) 332-1195  
Office (707) 836-7180  
m\_murphy@sonic.net  
michaelmurphyhomesandland.com



Hang your hat with Michael Murphy



ALL THE KING'S HORSES

Boarding • Clinics • Lessons  
Multidisciplinary Training and Young Horse Starting  
with Erin King  
Senior Maintenance  
Complete Equine Care • Pasture & Stall Boarding  
Bridging the Gap Between Classical  
and Natural Horsemanship  
Safe, Ethical, Humane Foundation Training  
15 minutes east of 101 in Santa Rosa  
5 minutes from Calistoga



Full service facility, owner operated with 24/7 care.  
On 14.5 gorgeous acres in the Mayacamas mountains.  
[www.allthekingshorsesranch.com](http://www.allthekingshorsesranch.com)

**Contact Erin King**  
**erindking@yahoo.com or 415 385 8354**

**What would you rather be doing?**



**We'll help you work toward your vision.**  
Financial Planning | Investments | Wealth Management

**Denise Gilseth**  
Vice President/Investments  
Branch Manager  
(707) 542-3521 | [gilsethd@stifel.com](mailto:gilsethd@stifel.com)

**STIFEL**

3554 Round Barn Blvd., Suite 200 | Santa Rosa, California 95403  
Stifel, Nicolaus & Company, Incorporated | Member SIPC & NYSE | [www.stifel.com](http://www.stifel.com)

