



# **YOU CAN LEAD A HORSE TO WATER BUT YOU CAN'T MAKE IT DRINK**

What can the project leader learn from horse trainers?

Karen Woodrow

Thesis of 10 ECTS credits  
**Master of Project Management**

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Thesis of 10 ECTS credits submitted to the School of Science  
and Engineering at Reykjavík University in partial fulfillment  
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# **YOU CAN LEAD A HORSE TO WATER BUT YOU CAN'T MAKE IT DRINK**

- What can the project leader learn from horse trainers?

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*Paper presented as part of requirements for the degree of Master of Project Management (MPM) Reykjavik University - April 2016*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores what the project leader can learn from horse trainers. The research sought after the experience and knowledge of four Master horse trainers from the training association of the Icelandic horse. The research was qualitative and the interviews lead to the results being mapped into themes which were: utmost trust, empathetic approach, clear communication, playful project, powerful reward, enabling initiative, individual character and continuous learning. The field of research was wide and difficult to reach a common conclusions. The main findings indicate that horse trainers develop, through their work, a skill set that is proven to be an asset affective in leadership. These skills include empathy and communication, in this case communication with an animal of different ethology or what can be compared to cross cultural communication. It is in this area that the author believes that project leaders can learn from projecting experience of the horse trainers onto the project that they are leading.

Keywords: Project leader, non-verbal communication, leadership skills, emotional intelligence

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

I was 11 when it happened – in my mind I had hit the jackpot, working at a farm, with and around horses all day and it was a dream come true. Even for a young age, a 12 hour day didn't faze me, I just wanted more. This sun-kissed, tired, but very happy redheaded girl was hooked.

The author of this thesis is a qualified horse trainer and throughout her studies in the MPM course at the University of Reykjavík has found that she can relate many aspects of project management, especially leadership, to the processes of horse training. From this observation arose an interest in what the project leader could learn from the horse trainer. Working with horses can be a very physically and mentally demanding job, but nevertheless very rewarding. There is something compelling about communicating with an animal that has a completely different ethology from humans. It is not only the ethology, but also the language that is completely different. Features like exclusively non-verbal communication and the ability to make contact with a human on an emotional level, are not easily described. One could regard communicating with the horse as cross-cultural communication, but in this case it is also interspecies.

It was a Sunday and I had kept *Álfur* in a fence close to the stable overnight, so I could enjoy his company on my day off. As we rode across the meadow and then following the river it felt like we were one. Although he could not understand my words he understood what I was asking of him and answered every request.

An Icelandic horse weighs something under 400 kg (900 pounds) and has a spirit of its own and the question arises how may a horse be persuaded to embrace the trainers interest as their own?

The research question in this thesis will ask: What can the project leader learn from horse trainers?

To be able to answer the research question it's very likely relevant to investigate the horse to develop an understanding for the animal, how it thinks and learns. There is also reason to explore the human-horse connection, approaches to training and certain aspects of leadership to be able to draw conclusions on the matter. This thesis focuses primarily on the Icelandic horse as being the subject that is managed.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The horse

When interacting with horses, most would agree that humans, as Lynda Birke (2007) puts it, cannot "speak" horse and that horses do not use verbal language to communicate. Many modern trainers regard the understanding of equine ethology as significant to the training of the horse. Ethology is the study of animal behaviour in a natural environment and informs behavioural needs and preferences, value systems, learning and motivation. When studying equine ethology, it is important to keep in mind how natural selection has shaped horse behaviour and learning capacity. Equine ethology gives an understanding of how horses respond and predicts what reactions the horse might display when outside of its natural environment (McGreevy & Mclean, Roles of learning theory and ethology in equitation, 2007). Horses are herd animals,

favouring association with their own but also accepting other species as companions. For the ancestral horse, membership in a group was an important survival strategy that reduced an individual's chances of being consumed and increased the chances that an approaching predator will be detected (Goodwin, 1999). Houpt & Keiper (1982) believed that this survival strategy formed social behavior of the horse to minimise conflict within the herd and promote its stability.

Monty Roberts considers that the understanding of equine behavior and the deep footprint of natural selection and states that even though there are barely any wild horses left, horses that have never had interaction with humans, there is no question that their wild instincts live on within domesticated horses (Roberts, 1997). Roberts also states, and builds his training method on, that by studying the horse's social interactions and non-verbal communication, these social strategies may be applied to human-horse interactions, but data and scientific proof is lacking in this domain. McGreevy & McLean seem to disagree and suggest that signals that humans portray to an equine observer are crude:

“With no tail, fixed ears, a short, inflexible neck and only two legs we can hardly expect horses to regard us as equine” (McGreevy & Mclean, 2007, bls 108)

This is in line with how Roberts and Browning (1998) regard it as highly unlikely that most human signals will not be interpreted as homologous of horse signals. Training horses relies on subtle interactions between horses and humans and the correct application of negative reinforcement followed by classical conditioning of stimuli. Horses are highly motivated to remove physical and psychological pressure, so negative reinforcement is effective in training. Horses strive to meet their behavioural needs (food, water, companionship, comfort and sex) and they are primary reinforcers (McGreevy & McLean, 2005).

## **2.2 Man and horse**

It is uncertain to when humans began taming horses, but earliest evidence for horses being associated with human culture comes from cave paintings made in France and Spain around 15.000 years ago (Goodwin, 1999). According to Sveinsson (2010), early humans hunted wild horses for food and clothing. It is thought that the first communication between horse and human happened when nomads caught foals and reared them. This interaction would have provided later milk, meat and skins, and animals to carry their possessions. Some consider that from the instant someone decided to sit on the back of the horse, the horse had a different role and this strong animal became incremental in the development of humans. The horse has played a core role in transport, changed agriculture, gave the tools for winning battles (Anthony, 1984) and now provides opportunities for sports, leisure and companionship.

The horse played an important role to the habitation of Iceland. Research indicates that the origin of the Icelandic horse originates in Mongolia and then travelled to Norway. The Icelandic horse is closely related to the Shetland pony and a breed found in Norway called the Lyngen horse. It is relevant to mention that the Shetland Islands were conquered by Norway in 800 AD (Bjorgstad, 2001). It seems likely that horses travelled to Iceland with early settlers around the year 950. Throughout much of Iceland's history, horses were not only used for farm work but were also essential for travel and the transport of goods as the transportation options available were by sea, by foot or by horse (Þorsteinsson, 1990).

Some say that it is not an easy task to explain the relationship between horses and humans but as has been stated before, it is a relationship that has a long history. Monty Roberts (1997), who

has dedicated his life to working with horses, says that this long history, first as competitors for survival, then as friends and a team, has formed the basis of a special relationship between two very different species. An approach, also used by Roberts, to understanding the human-horse relationship is observing the communication between horses. Frasier (1992) explains that up to 75% of the kinetic activity of foals is devoted to play within peer groups. Play seems to serve an important role in the development of the horse and even in maturity it continues to be an important activity. In his work on game theory, Maynard Smith (1982) indicated that playing involves learning set of rules. Frasier (1992) states in his book that in the process of domestication, the naturally high levels of kinetic activity and social play has been integrated into horse training. The process of learning the rules of play can therefore explain the training of horses as interspecies social play.

### **2.3 Leading others**

Barret (2014) believes that as business ideology evolves from the information age to what he refers to as the age of human potential, leaders face different challenges. As neuroscientific findings highlight, leaders who are unable to tap into the full intuitive and innate intelligence of their bodies and brains can find themselves staring at a hindrance in the increasingly complex and volatile business environment (Cooper, 2000). Evolutionary psychology suggests that the humans need to belong resulted from natural selection since individuals who were affiliated with groups were more likely to survive, just like horses. Some group behaviours, including leadership, may be partially rooted in people's biological heritage and it is believed that 30% of a person's leadership tendencies are inherited, although certain personality variables are associated with effective leadership (D.R.Forsyth, 2014). Therefore, the motivation for companies to invest money and time to educate and train their employees to become effective leaders in order to keep their organizations healthy makes sense (McCallum & O'Connell, 2009).

It might be challenging to see the connection between horse training and project management, but in recent years the use of horses to train and enhance leadership skills has become quite popular. Ellen Gehrke (2009) suggests that while there is much anecdotal evidence indicating that leadership training in partnership with horses is effective, there seems to be very little published research and even less quantitative research on the matter. As she concludes on the issue, horses as partners in leadership training can lead to more consistent and sustainable leadership effectiveness. One of the most important skills of an effective leader is emotional intelligence (E., Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003). Emotional intelligence is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as:

“The subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action” (Salovey & Meyer, 1990, p. 189)

Like the skills used to train horses, emotional intelligence can increase throughout life when awareness of our emotions and those of others grows, we learn to manage these emotions and learn to be empathic. To develop emotional intelligence with regard to leadership and managerial skills, taking a simple classical course or reading is not sufficient (Goleman, 1998). This is where leadership training with horses is proving to be a useful and dynamic approach where there is a potential for transference and counter-transference and creating lasting leadership changes (Rector, 2005). Grisham & Derek (2008) present cross-cultural leadership skills as a wheel, where the hub is trust and without it, the “leadership wheel” cannot function. The spokes of the wheel are transformation, power, empathy and communication. Without any

one of these aspects, the wheel would be ineffective. Because of the difference between cultures it is important that the leader of international projects is transparent in communication, gives feedback in the right way, understands the impact of culture and is open to self-reflection.

## **2.4 From interspecies to interpersonal communication**

Communication skills can be considered the core of being able to interact with others in groups, and it could be said that without communication, there would be no group dynamics. In addition to verbal communication there is also non-verbal communication. Human non-verbal communication can take on varying significance depending on the situation, but as much as 55% of communication can be body language, 38% tone of voice and only 7% consists of actual spoken words (Merhabian, 2009).

Horses highlight the importance of non-verbal communication since they are primarily visual communicators. Body posture, or outlines, play an important role in communication as horse are extremely sensitive to the smallest changes in the body language of their companions (Waring, 1983). There are many variables to consider when communicating with humans, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, body language and mannerism, but this also applies to horses. A recent study presents the first evidence of horse's abilities to discriminate between different facial expressions. These results can give insight into interspecific communications (Smith, Proops, Grounds, Wathan, & McComb, 2016). Irwin (2001) believes that unlike people, horses do not lie, since there is no separation between what the horse thinks and what its body says. Horses always tell the truth with their bodies. Similarly, Kohanov (2013) considered that horses' ability to express emotion without being able to mask it makes them exceptional radars for incongruence. They can spot hidden emotions clearly and give immediate, honest feedback.

Emotions, cognition and perception are, considered by Mascia (2012) the three factors that effect human behaviour in all situations. She states that the process of ascribing meanings to events is strongly influenced by one's state of mind, role and comprehension of an earlier experience. Unlike horses, humans have a tremendous capacity for processing information but evolution has provided us with shortcuts to organise this information, which can sometimes result in broad generalisations that can lead to mistakes. Forsyth (2014) believes that an individual's emotional reactions to their group depends to an extent on their cultural backgrounds and others would add that behaviours and interaction are also influenced by an individual's personality (Comfort & Franklin, 2011). Communication is consequently effected by this and since communication can have an impact it also includes risk, a risk that needs to be managed within projects and is in the hands of the project leader. Communication styles that reduce risk are, for example openness and honesty (Mascia, 2012). According to Campell (2000), careful and open communication is the key to minimizing risk when evolving employee initiative.



### **3. METHOD**

The method for this master's thesis is qualitative. The goal of this research is to examine what wisdom there is to be taken from horse training and whether it can be applied to the field of project management.

#### **3.1 Research method**

The aim of the research was to get trainers to talk openly, to express their views and ideas. With this consideration in mind, a quantitative questionnaire with pre-defined wording was not an option. Also considered was the time of the year during which the research took place, which is the busiest in the horse industry among trainers and teachers. This would be a threat to the level of responsiveness of a quantitative questionnaire. To understand and describe certain human phenomenon, qualitative research can be of help. There is emphasis on the personal and to understand something but not to predict something. The qualitative research is used when it is not known what can be found and there is a quest to understand the subject in more depth. This form of research helps evaluate activity where goals are sometimes unclear and the reasons for results can vary. Interviews as a data-collection method require that the data be collected through a conversation where the participants reveal their experiences from their own perspectives. The interviews strive for deep coverage of the subject, from different angles *so as* to achieve as much depth as possible. For this project, a qualitative approach was chosen, including four semi-constructed in-depth interviews. A personal in-depth interview allows the subject to brainstorm and capture moments of experience relevant to the research. It also gives the possibility to learn from these people things that are outside the author's field of awareness (Halldórsdóttir, 2013).

#### **3.2 Participants**

In choosing participants for interviewing, the author found it important to talk to people with extensive experience, those who have worked as trainers and riding instructors, and who have published articles about riding and training.

According to the former chairman of the Training Association of Iceland (FT), the qualifying for the test of a Master horse trainer requires:

Candidates have to have at least 12 years of professionally training horses and 8 years of riding instructing at the top level. In addition to completing all test levels of FT, there is requisite that they have published articles in recognized journals or books. To be applicable the candidate must be known for professionalism in every respect and shown great result in competitions and exhibitions (www.eidfaxi.is, 2013).

There are only six people globally who have qualified as Master Trainer of the Training association of Iceland. One has since passed away and out of the five remaining who were contacted, four of them accepted the request to be interviewed. The interviewees are: Benedikt Guðni Líndal (Benni), Mette Moe Camilla Mannseth (Metta), Sigurbjörn Bárðarson (Diddi) and Þórarinn Eymundsson (Tóti). In the results chapter the trainers will be referred to by their nicknames.

#### **3.3 Process**

Initially questions were put forward by the author, and they then were reviewed with input from three horse trainers and the supervisor of the project. A final questionnaire (see appendix I) was

revised according to the input. Possible subjects were contacted and a time was set to speak according to their availability. The interviews took place in April 2016 either via Skype or in person. The interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. All interviewees received the same description of the project. The author tried to keep the interviews flowing and to give the interviewers a chance to open up and offer further information, taking care to use wording such as: “how, why, can you elaborate on that” and so on. The questions focused on communication, problem solving, human/horse relations and success. When analysing the interviews, the author wrote down the main points of the interviews and sent them to be confirmed by the interviewees.

### **3.4 Limitations**

There are a few limitations that could have affected the results. First of all, the author is well acquainted with three of the interviewees, who have at some point been her riding instructors. Therefore, it is possible that this personal connection might have affected her interpretation of the interviews, even though she tried to stay impartial. Two of the interviews took place in person while two took place via Skype. The author found it more challenging to interview through Skype, especially since she ran into technical issues and the interview paused several times.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Since the research was based on interviews, the author has chosen to present the results and discussion together. While presenting the results, the author hopes to invite the reader to get a feel for the interviewees and by showing the answers in a form closer to an interview. During the interviews certain words, themes and emotions were repeated throughout. The author has categorized these themes into 8 subchapters. These subchapters have been mapped out as a result from the interviews. Following the content of the interview, every subchapter has a discussion part.

The themes are:

- |                        |                         |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Utmost trust        | 5. Powerful reward      |
| 2. Empathetic approach | 6. Enabling initiative  |
| 3. Clear communication | 7. Individual character |
| 4. Playful project     | 8. Continuous learning  |

### **4.1 Utmost trust**

The first thing that becomes apparent in all the interviews is the issue of trust. Diddi states that he sees the element of trust as a simple one.

The rider has to learn fairness in the leader role. You have to make sure that the horse can feel that he is capable of what you are asking of him, he [the horse] needs to believe and trust what you are asking of him.

There was a soft tone in Benni’s voice as he described the trust that needs to go both ways.

I have sometimes said that you cannot surprise the horses, one thing needs to lead to another. On occasion I have loaded the horses on a trailer and gone

somewhere else to train. It has often surprised me that in these areas where there is no support or restraint that the horses perform perfect circles on canter or pace in full speed completely straight. The horse is so completely with me that even though I relax the reins he doesn't even consider falling off track. From this perspective the horses can surprise us.

Metta tells a story about her 14-year-old stallion *Háttur* that can be seen as reflecting trust. Having trained him since he was 3, Metta knows him well. She speaks with care and refers to him as a horse with a big temper and says that even though he is highly educated, he still shows some of the behaviour of a wild horse. During spring, he becomes stressed and struggles because he is very sensitive to his surroundings. Metta enthusiastically says:

When I let him outside he runs around with his neck raised high and is obviously full of energy and stress. When in this state of mind, the best thing that I can do for him is to saddle up and the moment I get on him, he lowers his neck, can finally relax and sighs – and he feels good again.

Throughout the interview, Tóti frequently brought up trust and continually referred to the question: is the trust there?

In order for things to go well, it holds first place, that you have to establish trust and this goes both ways. There also needs to be mutual respect, considering the horse's needs and making sure that he feels well – this is how you earn respect and trust.

When discussing how his experience training horses has transferred into other aspects of life, he mentioned the importance of building confidence, both within the horse and also people around you.

#### **4.1.1. Discussions**

The project manager is often faced with difficult challenges and during those times, it is important that the team members trust their leaders, even if they might not agree with them. If the trust is not there, “the wheel” cannot function properly (Grisham & Derek, 2008). But this can also be turned around, if a project manager has chosen team members well and has taken the time to build up trust, he has to let them “go” – just like the trainer has to trust his horse to perform in a certain way and maybe leave space for the element of surprise.

#### **4.2 Empathetic approach**

All interviewees referred in one way or another to the idea that a trainer must be able to see the experience through the horse's viewpoint. Diddi became very enthusiastic when he talked about “psychoanalyzing” the horse and believed in a sense that working with horse and with humans is very similar.

We are always dealing with the same issue of analysing and defining the soul. Things like character, intelligence, how much you can expect from them [horse and human] how much softness you need to show to bring out [their potential]. Others you need to show assertiveness and then there are the ones that need constant praise. [You] need to build on what qualities the individual has, cradle and build on it.

Diddi insists that it's a part of the job to read the horse before you start working with it. Benni uses a similar term and chuckles when he refers to himself as a sort of psychoanalyst, both when

working with the horse and humans. And he emphasizes that you shouldn't overstep either's limits.

The trainer has to be able to read the horse, know everything about its ethology and sense. This way you can build up [the training] so that one thing leads to another, that nothing surprises the horse.

Metta talks about the horse ethology and brings up the empathetic approach and that the trainer should try to see what you ask the horse to perform from his point of view and ask yourself: how does the horse feel about things? Tóti points out the fact that horses and people do not speak the same language. If there is a question to be asked, you can just ask people and he adds, laughing, that they don't always speak the truth.

You can't in fact ask the horse, but through interaction the horse has a way of answering, it just uses its own ways.

Tóti pauses and adds with an element of hesitation in his voice that you can never really know how one feels, that it is a grey area.

People can have experienced traumatic incidents and don't realize how they feel and let alone put it into words. This is the same for the horse and this way it is difficult to realize if something is going in the right direction – how can you ever really know?

When he speaks of the training methods of the future, he believes that knowledge and research might help us on the matter and will form the way of training for coming generations.

#### **4.2.1 Discussions**

There is a sense of contradiction when talking about empathy regarding horse training. The horse did not choose to be captured, tamed and ridden; this is the decision of humans. So it should be considered whether or not it is ethical for humans to ride horses for their leisure and entertainment. Putting this concern aside, there is strong indication that horse trainers have to have high levels of empathy towards their subjects, the horse. Research indicates (Rector, 2005) that people with no horse experience can benefit from working with horses and change their way of leading. Nevertheless, according to the author experience of working in the field of horse training, there are trainers who reach great heights of success who have limited communication skills. This brings up the question whether they can in fact project this skill on to humans.

#### **4.3. Clear communication**

Focusing on solid foundations and keeping things simple was an issue that all the interviewees referred to over and over again. When discussing tasks and how to ask the horse to accept the trainer's interests as his own, Diddi insists that the horse has to perceive that the task will reach a point where it ends. Things need to be kept simple and he refers to this as his motto in life:

Nothing is complicated [pause] unless you want it to be!

Diddi tells two very different stories with the same bottom line: when things become too complicated, people simply cannot understand and they become frustrated. He believes that you should always try to avoid putting people into that position.

When explaining something just keep it as simple as possible. Make sure that you are talking the same language.

Benni is focused on a solid foundation and if there is a problem or miscommunication, he takes a break and thinks things over. Then he tries to find a simpler focal point to train that particular horse.

The foundation needs to be there, then you can start building on top of it.

Metta discusses the issue of keeping both communication and tasks simple. She explains the training process and observes that initial training is simple and the message is clear: one cue/aid means a certain thing and that is that. If you make a mistake, you cannot simply explain that mistake to the horse. As training progresses, the messages can start to get unclear to the horse. For example, when the trainer asks the horse to increase its energy level, the horse is asked to go forward but also to slow down at the same time. Contradictory aids can lead to the horse getting stressed, becoming unresponsive or even closed off. Tóti talks about the importance of breaking down the goals into many tasks:

In my opinion it is way too common that the final goal is trained too early. You have to make sure to care for the small things to build a solid foundation so that the final goal can be achieved.

One should never teach a horse something that one doesn't want manifested later on. He adds that horses are fast learners and there is no room for a lot of inaccuracies. If there is a problem, go back and break down the project into smaller jobs that the horse understands 100%. The right setting is also of importance.

Let's say you are presenting your horse to a new project – make sure to choose the right setting to help you. Don't choose a busy and distracting setting for when you need the horse's full attention on the task.

#### **4.3.1 Discussion**

Since horses do not talk the same language as humans, their trainers have to continuously reflect on their work to make sure that the horse responds the way they are asked to. The master trainers all talk about the need for simplicity and the author speculates whether the reason is in fact because they are aware of the horse's ethology. This would entail knowing how the horse learns and therefore going through a process of their communication instead of reacting by ascribing human meaning to events. They have a way of seeing things clearly and simplifying things; or in other words making sure that they deliver the message clearly. If the trainer fails to do so, the horse learns the wrong thing, which leads to confusion and inefficiency.

#### **4. 4 Playful project**

Didi puts great emphasis on play in most aspects of life. He believes that even the most mundane project or task can become interesting - if it is fun. He considers this important for both the trainer and the horse.

Playfulness is the sense of excitement to finishing a task and should be a part of everything. To be able to keep going and looking forward to the next step.

Benni talks passionately about play and believes that if there is playfulness and joy, it is more likely that the horse sees a reason to perform.

When I am working with young horses I turn training into a game similar to the ones that are played by young horses in their herds. Some are higher ranked than others and there is a lot of escapades and playfulness but there is also listening and attention to the environment. If the training is successful you are able to keep the young horse's curiosity and they are more likely to ask: what to do next?

During the interview with Metta the word playful does not come up but when asked to describe working with horses, she does talk about the connection, partnership, being a leader and a friend. But she points out that it has to be clear in who makes the decisions.

You have to be ready to make decisions for the horse, but without supressing it [the horse].

Tóti doesn't bring up the word play, but his response is in line with what Benni talks about regarding the development and training techniques. He believes that when you start working with the horse, it knows a lot from its upbringing and he states that you have to utilise what the horse knows already.

#### **4.4.1 Discussion**

The author wonders if mentioning play in regards to training has anything to do with the fact that most trainers follow this carrier path because of passion and because of the joy and fulfilment that the horse brings them. There seem to be two viewpoints on the matter, one being the nature of the horse and then the general positive and playful outlook on life but both have seemed to work for the interviewees. Since horses communicate non-verbally, the communication is affected by energy that the trainer portrays towards the horse. This is possibly something that project leaders can draw wisdom from.

#### **4.5 Powerful reward**

Diddi is reward-focused and makes sure that the horse knows when it is performing correctly. He believes that using a verbal reward and rewarding for every step in the right direction is key. By doing so, the horse becomes focused on the verbal cue and looks for the way to get the reward again.

If the horse gets positive feedback, then he wants to do it again – even though it is hard.

Benni believes that timing is essential, both in terms of when you start and, more importantly, when you stop.

The moment you feel that your horse is content and he offers you something, this is the moment that we have to take care and make him feel comfortable – were we want him.

Metta talks about the horse ethology in this aspect and laughs when she explains:

You can talk to people, you can make excuses – you can't tell the horse: this isn't what I meant.

According to Metta, this is the reason that reward is so important to the horse, this is how you tell them that they have done a certain thing correctly. She tells the story about Hnokki another

stallion from her breeding. Horses respond well to a vocal reward and become extremely proud of what they are doing. If Metta uses verbal reward when working with Hnokki on the lunge, he starts showing off. He has learnt a few tricks and exercises through verbal reward, but she states that if she gets too pushy, the joy of performing goes away and he doesn't seem to enjoy it anymore. Hnokki seems to have taken a certain exercise extremely seriously and now performs in front of other horses when in the paddock. One of the things that Tóti emphasizes is the foundation as preparation for how powerful the reward can be for the horse.

All of a sudden the horse starts offering you what you wanted without you having to ask. If you make sure that the horse can perform the task you are asking of him and you reward him/praise him, and he can manage the project he will start asking you: how much [do you want]?

#### **4.5.1 Discussion**

Although there is knowledge about how the horse learns, there is a feeling that there must be something more, however, whether it is the horse's very strong urge for comfort or if it is emotional response to performing is not the question asked in this thesis. But it is difficult to ignore that all these trainers have reached great heights within their field through the power of feedback in form of reward. And the author wonders whether this mindful way of rewarding can be applied by leaders.

#### **4.6 Enabling initiative**

All the interviewees spoke about this factor and it is their general feeling that a horse with a solid foundation will often show initiative and they talk about it as a positive thing. Diddi talks about the training of the horse as being about continuous improvement, but the trick is to never empty its tanks. If the horse feels that there is no more effort to be made, there will be a wall to climb and this wall will follow in the training. The soul of the horse becomes numb and initiative disappears. Benni takes an example from a pace race common in the Icelandic horse scene and refers to when you are going down the pace track at high speed:

If we feel it is coming from the horse's soul/core that he wants to go faster, it is a clue that the training is a success. But on the other hand, if it is the other way around – then you have started abusing the horse's flight instinct.

Metta believes that a vision of what you want is important, but on the other hand, there has to be room for the horse surprise you. Sometimes the horse gives the trainer an offer that has to be grabbed. Tóti says that it is then up to the trainer to choose to grasp it or not and adds that it depends on the individual, both horse and trainer, how accepting the trainer is of the offer.

##### **4.6.1. Discussions**

Humans and horses have free spirits and minds of their own. When leading another (whether a rider or human) there is a certain aspect of joy when the person you are working with shows initiative and wants to succeed and shows a sense of ownership. The interviewees' speculations about whether to allow for initiative is supported by suggestions that there is risk associated with initiative (Mascia, 2012).

#### **4.7 Individual character**

When talking about horses, there wasn't a lot of generalization about the way that horses respond and act. The trainers spoke of horses as individuals, like humans. Diddi spoke:

Horses, like people, are different individuals. Some have very little character, just like some humans. You can divide them into categories, horses with strong characters and so on. Then there are the ones that have charisma, a proud horse that shows another level of dignity and is in higher regards than other horses – but those horses are few and far between.

Didi humorously starts blinking his eyes and starts telling me that a lot of his horses have quirks, some not good, that he wants them to keep. He believes it is important for the horse to keep special characteristics, just like the man who constantly blinks his eyes. Benni says that the horse has to be able to think and move freely, that is its nature. By allowing that trainers are ensuring that the horse keeps its independence and character.

You should look for the positive in every horse and have it as a starting point as well the assessment of ability and talent.

Metta speaks clearly about certain horses as individual characters but she also emphasizes that one should not humanize the horse.

Even though horses are similar to us in many ways, they do not have the ability to be actors or lie. Many people believe this and assume that they do. When we realize that this is not the case, everything becomes easier when you don't suspect the horse of something. They are very straightforward [pause] a horse is a horse.

When Tóti discusses both horse and rider, he tries to focus on personalized training and basing it on strengths. That there are certain questions that one should ask when analysing the subject: what does he know, what type is he, what is my best approach?

#### **4.7.1. Discussions**

Horses are individually different and subsequently need different training approaches. There are similarities here to other results chapters in that is the horse trainer has to analyse its subjects in order to be able to get them to perform. If what the trainers state is true, that you need to analyse the horse, one can assume that these trainers have great insight and feeling for their subjects. The author wonders if this can be correlated with motivation and interactions between humans.

#### **4.8 Continuous learning**

When discussing success, Didi makes it very clear that one never finishes learning and the moment that you think that – you're done. Didi claims he is always learning something new, things that he cannot believe that he could have lived without.

When things are not going well, I never blame the horse. I sit down and really dissect myself, what am I doing wrong, why am I losing where I have previously been victorious? I might even analyse my competitor. I had lost a few races to a certain individual. I had been on the top for 4 or 5 years and then all of a sudden I start losing, tournament after tournament always in the same distance race. Maybe he was just better than me, well he clearly was at the time. I decided to step back and not participate in the next two tournaments and I went and observed this competitor. I watched and analysed, what were his strengths but at the same time contemplating his weaknesses. At this point I had to do my homework and really focus on my problems where he was succeeding me – and I turned the thing around.



Diddi believes that his success happened because he is highly ambitious and is very self-disciplined.

I never believe that I have made it the whole way. I'm continually discovering something new – and I can't believe that I have been without it. Even at the times when I have reached the highest possible at the time, you have to be humble.

Benni believes that a person has to constantly revise him or herself in order to succeed with the horse and this is where experience comes into play. When younger, he did things unconsciously but over time he became more aware of his actions.

Working with horses has taught me to be respectful and to be true to my convictions.

The training of horses is an endless educational road and Metta feels that what training horses has given her is a better understanding of human personalities. She believes her passion has taught her composure. Metta believes that the fact that she is curious and that she tries to be fair.

As a child and a teenager I wasn't very calm, in fact I was quite irritable and temperamental. That doesn't work when training horses, you have to be so honest but also to be able to overlook problems. Maybe this kind of inner peace happens to everyone with time. This balance of mind enables me to deal with the unexpected, there is no use in panicking.

Tóti believes that the trainer has to want to improve and become shrewder, seek knowledge and to learn from others. He also talks about the importance of experience and developing deeper knowledge on the subject.

Training horses gives you different skills and maybe some deeper understanding of certain things. Training horses has benefitted me in many ways, it has taught me the value of patience, preparation and being consistent. And this transfers over to other aspects of life like raising my children, teaching.

#### **4. 8.1 Discussions**

All interviewees seem to take pride in learning something new and see the importance of personal development order to improve their work. Since training horses doesn't seem to be an inborn trait but rather something that develops with experience, just like leadership (D.R.Forsyth, 2014). The author wanders how linear the bond between the skillset of training horses and emotional intelligence.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As the field of this research is very open it is difficult to reach a common conclusion. But what can the project leaders learn from horse trainers? Even though there are lessons to be learned from all the themes, there are strong indications that horse trainers develop a skillset that is proven to be an asset affective in leadership. The trainers show what could be considered as high level of emotional intelligence through continuous self-inspection and empathy towards their subject. The author also believes that one of the main reasons for this is that there is not a lot of room for error due to ethological and learning perspectives. This is where good communication, feedback and empathy comes into effect, and it is in this area that the author believes that project leaders can learn from projecting experience of the horse trainers onto the project that they are leading. Future research in the field might benefit from a wider group of subjects, with a quantitative approach to compare project leaders and horse trainers.

The author believes that *Álfur* had an impact on the 11 year old and, along with all the horses that followed him. In hindsight that girl learnt lessons from these horses that have helped her hold the reins as a project leader.

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## **Appendix I**

### **Questions submitted to subjects**

Education

Year working in the field

Previous employment

Employment now

What is special about working with horses?

What is the difference in working with horses or humans?

What is important so that the training is successful?

How do you see training methods of the future?

What is your approach to training horses?

What do you believe is the reason for your success in training horses?

How do you deal with problems in training?

How do you get the horses to understand and do what you want?

Can you give me an example of when something went really well and mirrors your approach to training?

Does the ability to train horses influence any other parts of your life?

How does horse training skills apply to leadership?