

A photograph of a brown horse looking out from a wooden stable stall. The horse's head and neck are visible, framed by the dark wooden door of the stall. The background shows the interior of the stable with wooden walls and a window.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP

Animal-assisted therapy has become increasingly popular. Apart from dogs, horses can also help human beings with development in the social, psychological, and even leadership aspects.

HORSE SENSE

TWO PSYCHOLOGISTS HAVE COME UP WITH A NEW IDEA TO MAKE A BETTER LEADER THROUGH HUMAN'S BEST FRIEND, HORSES.

By **GAVIN NAZARETH**



They've made a career studying people, understanding how their minds work and helping them with emotional, social, and work-related issues using conventional tools and methods.

But now Professor Siriyupa Roongrerngsuke and Dr Andreas Liefoghe want to use a little horseplay as a psychological intervention tool in a new leadership coaching program.

The two are teaming up to introduce Equine-guided Leadership Coaching at the Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration as an effective way of developing management skills in business executives. According to them, the program could build one's potential in areas of work or life effectiveness, identify, and fulfill personal mission, address specific challenges related to work or personal life, make powerful improvements in areas of work-life balance, relationships or personal well-being, build trust, and discover one's authenticity and power. All this with the help of an animal that weighs almost half a ton.

While the knee-jerk response might be to ask them to stop horsing around, both the good doctors know what they are talking about. With expertise that includes cross-cultural management, organisation development and change, leadership branding and coaching, the former in her role as executive director, Human Resources Program at Sasin, has been the driving force in developing Sasin's Human Resource Management Program into one of the best in Asia.

The latter is a Programme Director, Coaching, and a Reader in Organisational Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London, a lifelong horseman, a chartered psychologist and psychotherapist, and an equine therapist at Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, who has published extensively on issues such as trauma, bullying and relational approaches to human functioning. The two have also collaborated on a book titled *Unlocking Leadership in Thailand*.

Indisputably, the bond between humans and animals is an old and complex one. For centuries, man has kept animals as pets, used them for work, and also as a source of food, clothing, and tools. In more recent times though, scientists are studying the therapeutic powers of animals, and a growing body of research is proving that our pets can also

keep us healthy too. In fact, animals are already being used in many types of psychotherapy, physical therapy, and crisis response.

"We all know that when you work with animals your well-being increases," says Dr Liefoghe. "For example, there have been programs with elderly people who are lonely, if they have someone with a dog visiting, their blood pressure goes down, and their heart rate goes down. They feel a lot healthier through that. I think the link between animal companionship and well-being has been established for quite a long time."

Horses too, he says, have been

used in a therapeutic way for a very long time. And through the ages the therapeutic benefits of riding for the disabled has been observed beginning with the inclusion of riding in a chapter on "natural exercise" by the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates. Being herd animals, horses are also inherently social and relate to humans in a fascinating way. While they can't be fully tamed like dogs, they can still form intimate bonds with humans. Thus, to connect with them, we have to return to our wilder self. Being prey animals, their survival depends on a highly developed ability to maintain near-constant surveillance of their environment and accurately anticipate the intentions of predators such as humans, which translates into their keen knack of interpreting our behaviour and intentions. As a part of a herd, horses look to each other for protection, offering affection, and setting boundaries. Anger aggressiveness or anxiety spook them and they will do anything to escape such negative energy, edging or running away, or in some cases rearing, kicking, and biting. This means the feedback to a particular person's vibe is immediate and "an authentic mirror reflecting things you don't already know about yourself. They give you feedback right from their core instinct, whether they like or accept you," says Dr Siriyupa.

Unlike human beings, horses don't lie, flatter, or fake it, she says. "In the office, an executive's secretary or other staff might not like him but they continue to smile and pretend, but a horse won't do that."

And here's how it works in brief: A person is put in a field with as many as three horses, less if the subject has a nervous temperament. An equine specialist is on hand in case things get out of control. Then the life coach or psychotherapist, depending on if you want development or therapy, gives you a series of random tasks to perform with the animals. The task could be as simple as gesturing to a horse or getting the horse to move to one end of the field without touching it or speaking to it. Initially it's not as easy as it sounds, and the horses might not respond at all, but eventually the subject develops an almost telepathic connection with it. This ability to connect helps you to understand yourself in new ways, which ultimately allows you to transform your life.



CROSS-CULTURAL PROGRAM

Although proven to be efficient in the Western world, both psychologists say that the equine-assisted coaching program has to be adjusted to fit the Thai context before implementing it next year.





Says Dr Liefoghe, "If you put a couple of horses together you already get a natural dynamic, because if you take them from various herds they settle into a pecking order or hierarchy very quickly. The equine specialist present can identify immediately the leader, who is at the bottom, and in the middle."

At first we might ask the subject to observe the horse and just tell us what they see. And in some ways this is the most revealing part for us, because people will make attributions to these horses that are very interesting and have nothing to do with the reality of the horses. For example they may say a horse was very aggressive because he just stamped his foot, when in reality he was just swiping a fly. We ask, 'What does that say about the person?' He must feel threatened in some way."

"The next step would be to ask them to choose one of the horses and introduce themselves to it. We observe how the horse is interacting with the person; very quickly we get a sense of where in the hierarchy they perceive him to be. You can usually tell whether the dominant horse is interested in you or not. If they are not, it tells us you don't have an energy that is going to challenge them for the leadership. If you do bring in a lot of leadership-type energy, he/she (because in most cases the mare will be the leader of the herd) will come and check you out."

"In our everyday lives, people always have the sense that leaders are the ones in the front. Not so with horses. The leadership is right at the back, because most times the stallion hangs back and doesn't get involved much with herd at all. But the COO of the herd is the alpha mare, who looks after all the operations, of who's in, who's out, and the day-to-day running of the herd. And the way she keeps control, particularly of the young males, is by pushing them out of the herd, because outside of it is where it is most dangerous. So if you don't behave

you get pushed outside. Then they ask permission to come back in and if she thinks it's all right they can come back in. The herd moves all the time and usually the pregnant mares come to centre of the herd and the stronger ones will be on the outside. And through the understanding of these dynamics we can understand about how they see you, what kind of energy you bring."

Dr Siriyupa says that very often in a group session, the horses might respond more to the PA than to the CEO, as she might be more powerful of the two, because of the energy she brings to the field. "To the horses the title doesn't really matter, they can't distinguish who the boss is, or whether you are a taxi driver, chef, or executive. They just see a person and react to the energy radiating from that person. A life coach might find it difficult to tell a top executive that he is arrogant, but a horse will unmask him and reflect his attitude exactly as it perceives him."

Drs Siriyupa and Liefoghe have plenty of examples that demonstrate the efficacy of equine-assisted learning. "One time, we split up a group into different departments in an organisation, giving them conflicting instructions. They are not allowed to talk to each other. One group got a card that said 'take three horses to the left corner of the field', while the others were told that 'under no circumstances are any horses to be let in the left corner'. Organisations often experience conflicting information, explains Dr Liefoghe. "After a while they stopped the exercise and said 'we can't do this task, we give up'. After some processing of what had taken place, there was a moment when they realised that the one thing they did was to give up when things got tough. At that time there was an energy shift and the horses in the field came over and stood with the group. It was the one of most powerful experiences."

Another time, says Dr Siriyupa, an executive was asked to lead a horse to jump over a barrier. "The horse wasn't in the mood to jump, so the executive tried to encourage it by jumping over it himself several times. It is very funny to see the kind of logic that people use."

After a pilot session in May, the duo is in the process of summarising, revising, and packaging the program for the launch date. "We have to take the weather into consideration as we will take the executives to Farm Chokchai. The tentative start date is planned for October-November next year," says Dr Siriyupa. "But we will do some smaller promotional/educational events before that."

"As such a program has never been done in this part of the world before, we want to make sure the package works in the cultural context of Southeast Asia," says Dr Liefoghe, adding that the frequency would depend on its reception. In addition to working with executives, the plan is also do some charitable work and use the program to work with autistic kids or those suffering from mental health. •