

Possible Uses for Animals in Corporate Leadership Development

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Abstract

Corporations have seen the need to develop effective leaders for some time. Some of them spend millions of dollars per year in developing and implementing leadership training programs for their staff. There is also a growing expectation that employees will have the leadership skills necessary for management before they are given an opportunity to manage. This has led companies and individuals to look for ways to practice their leadership skills outside of the work environment. One example of this is companies sending a group of its managers to do rope courses together and then talk about how to implement what they learned. Top trainers in the canine and equine industries have also been touting the importance of becoming a good leader. They have come up with various ways to get people to be effective leaders for their animals to improve the relationships people have with their pets. This paper will examine what skills or qualities might be transferable from people's work with animals into the corporate environment. It will also look at if the techniques used with animals may be adapted to human leadership skills.

Keywords: leadership development, animal training, animal psychology, education, training, management

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How would you like it if your relationship with your dog or horse could help you get ahead in business? People have animals in their lives for many different reasons, but most people probably don't look at them as a tool to help them get ahead in their professional lives. There are already programs in place to use animals for developing leadership skills in adolescents, so perhaps there are also ways they could be used to help adults. (Pollyea, 1997)

The purpose of this paper is to see if leadership skills acquired through learning to be an effective leader with animals can transfer into the corporate world. My hypothesis is that there are many similarities between the two fields and that becoming effective in one can give people tools to be effective in the other.

Methods

I explored this topic by doing a review of literature available in the areas of corporate leadership development, the psychology of training dogs and horses, and techniques used in both fields. The resources I used include journal articles, books, animal training program materials, and websites by people considered to be experts in their fields.

First, I wanted to see what characteristics corporations are looking for in their leadership teams. I also looked briefly at methods currently being used in corporate leadership development programs. Second, I found prominent theories in dog training and natural horsemanship methods to see what the top professionals do to be effective with their animals. I limited this to dog and equine professionals who have well received programs that are designed to teach non-professional adults how to effectively train their own animals. I tried to see what qualities they think are important for animal training and what techniques they are using to teach

these qualities to other people. Last, I compared the important leadership qualities required for corporate leadership and animal training to see if there were similarities. This comparison was used to draw conclusions about what skills or qualities might be able to be developed while working with animals for the purpose of using those skills in a corporate setting.

Findings

Corporate Leadership

Corporations have been trying to find effective ways to train their leaders for a long time and have spent a lot of money doing it. Many different methods are being used including traditional classroom training, mentorship, retreats, and simulations (Strauss, Rosenheck, D'Aurelio, & Rosenheim 2008; Weinstein, 2010). Regardless of the method being used there are some trends in the qualities corporations are seeking in their managers. Some of these include the ability to illicit respect and trust, communicate clearly, possess confidence, have a strong focus, and patience (Veazie, 2006).

Companies look for these traits in their leaders because people look for these traits in someone they want to follow. The difficulty is to teach people how to display these characteristics when they may not come naturally. Many companies have leadership development programs set up to help employees move into leadership roles. Mentorships and one-on-one coaching are also commonly used to help people get to the next level. Some companies will give a person the opportunity to lead a small group project to see how they do. This can be used to assess whether or not the person has the capacity to lead in a more significant way. The challenge with these methods is that there is not a lot of time to practice or room for error. There is also limited opportunity for feedback from those being lead. Simulations can be

used to come as close to real life as possible, but they can take a very long time. People also may act differently during a simulation than they would in real life because they know they are being watched (Backus, Keegan, Gluck, & Gulick, 2010; Helgesen, S. 2011; Weinstein, M. 2010).

Animal Leadership

Dogs and horses are both gregarious animals just like people. Also, like people, dogs and horses both have a social hierarchy by which they organize themselves. One key difference between dogs and horses is that dogs are predators, they eat meat, and horses are prey animals, they are the meat. Humans are also predators. This means that people have the same basic motivators as dogs. They are praise, recognition, and material things. What falls into each of those categories might look different for people and dogs, but the categories are the same. This is why it is relatively easy to get along with dogs. Horses, on the other hand, are naturally going to be wary of people because they think we may want to eat them. Their main motivators are safety, comfort, play, and then food. Despite these significant differences in the psychology of each species, professionals working with both dogs and horses agree that the single most important thing to effectively training them is strong leadership skills (Deeley, M.; Parelli, P. 1993) .

The leadership skills necessary to train dogs and horses are the same as those sought after in corporate leadership. There are also a few other concepts in Parelli Natural Horse-Man-Ship that help develop those leadership skills. First is the ability to be assertive without getting mean or mad. Pat Parelli, founder of Parelli Natural Horse-Man-Ship, uses the analogy of being as steady as a fence post. This means that a horse knows exactly what to expect from you and you

are consistent without waiver. It is hard to get upset at a fence post if you run into it and get hurt. Along these lines, even if a person needs to get firm, there does not need to be emotion associated with that firmness. Horses will not get offended by a strong action as long as people are consistent and unemotional about having to go to that level of action (Parelli, P. 1993).

Second is the concept of phases. Pat uses four phases when asking for a horse to do something. The first phase is as subtle as you would ever want to be and the fourth phase is whatever it takes to be effective. Phase two and three are somewhere in between. If a horse is being taught something new then each phase is equal in duration. If the horse is already familiar with what is being asked then phase one last longer and if the horse doesn't respond appropriately the human would move quicker through the other phases until they are effective. Important components of this technique are to quit asking the instant the horse does the right thing and to always begin the request at phase one. The idea of moving up the phases is that a horse will start to notice what happens before phase four. In other words, the horse will notice the subtle phase one and start to respond at that point because it knows that phases two through four will follow if it doesn't respond. For most horses, phase four will only need to be used the first couple of requests because they will quickly learn that it is easier to do the right thing sooner. The challenge for humans is that our nature tells us to go straight to what worked the last time we asked instead of starting every time at phase one. If we go straight to phase three or four then the horse never has an opportunity to show us that it knows how to do what is being asked lightly. We also will end up having to put in a lot more effort over time because higher phases require more effort on our part and we will not be allowing the horse to be responsible for acting like a partner (Parelli, P. 1993).

The third key concept in the Parelli program is that pressure can motivate but it is the release that teaches. This means that when we release pressure is what lets the horse know that it has done the right thing and the horse will start to look for ways to get you to release. As people progress in the program they develop a better sense of timing and feel for when to release. This allows people to achieve a lightness and ease of communication with their horse that is almost imperceptible to other people. Outside observers could easily confuse this communication for being a trick the horse knows to do because they cannot tell the person has communicated something (Parelli, P. 1993).

With dogs we see a huge desire to please people. Because they are so motivated by praise, recognition, and material things, it is relatively easy to teach them “tricks”. They are always looking for the next treat or “good boy” in a training session. However, dogs still require their human to be a strong leader in order to develop true communication. If the person is not a good leader the dog will either try to take that roll or become insecure. The most noticeable time a dog is being the leader instead of the human is when a dog is pulling on their leash during a walk. This is the most obvious because the dog is literally leading its human. Aggressive and destructive behavior can be either a sign of dominance or insecurity but in either case it often means the human is not a strong leader. Other signs of insecurity in dogs are separation anxiety, pacing, self mutilation, hyperactivity, and excessive barking. In his television show, Cesar Milan shows how being an effective leader can solve all of these issues. He talks about doing this by being calm and assertive so the dog can feel comfortable with the humans’ leadership (Deeley, M.; Kelly, R. 2010; Mech, L. David. 1999).

With both dogs and horses there is a distinction between a trick and communication. A trick is when the animal learns to respond the same way every time the same stimulus is

provided. For example, a dog can learn that he will get a treat or pat every time he puts his rear end on the floor when a person says “sit.” This is a trick. Communication is two or more individuals sharing and understanding an idea. Most communication also does not happen verbally. An example of this would be when a dog puts its ears flat and lays down when it knows it has done something wrong. This is one way he can show his understanding of the human’s idea that he did a bad thing (ASPCA - Virtual Pet Behaviorist; Parelli, P. 1993).

Comparison

There are many similarities in the traits desired for people in corporate leadership and dog or natural horsemanship training. To be very effective in either area a person should possess a strong focus and good communication skills. They should also know how to illicit trust and respect, and have patience with those they are trying to lead. The goal to achieve a particular outcome or to efficiently accomplish something is also the same. Corporations have come up with many different ways to try to teach people these skills. Some equine and canine professionals have also come up with ways to teach people the same skills. There are pros and cons to each of the approaches and not every method will work for every person. However, the desire to produce effective leaders and what characteristics an effective leader has are consistent in both areas.

Discussion

I think this review clearly shows that there are commonalities in the traits desired for corporate leadership and for canine or equine training. This leads to the possibility that there may be a place for animals in the development of corporate leaders. Concepts like using phases,

being assertive without being mean, and releasing pressure at appropriate times may work well with people as well as animals. The principles, and some of the techniques, taught in these animal training programs may be able to be transferred into a corporate setting without a lot of modification. Also, for corporations that are already doing retreats and other experiential learning activities they may want to consider having their leaders participate in an abridged version of one of these animal programs. One benefit to using dogs is that many people already have one and they are portable enough to bring to one central location.

This review also shows some areas of possible future research. I think it would be of value to see if people currently participating in these animal training programs feel as though they have learned skills that they can use in other areas of their life, including at work. How have they implemented these concepts or techniques in their work or home life? Do they feel as though they have gotten ahead professionally as a direct result of skills acquired through working with an animal in this type of program? This is qualitative information that may be able to provide insight into if we should, and how to, effectively transfer these skills into the work place. It would also tell us if there is a perceived value of these programs in the work place even one cannot be quantified. There could also be a study set up to see if there is a measurable difference in the leadership skills of someone who participates in a program using animals to help teach these skills versus someone who learns using methods more traditional in the corporate environment.

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