

Getting Ahead by Leading from Behind

By Kelly Wendorf, Founding Partner of EQUUS



You know the real beauty of someone not by their appearance, but how you feel about yourself when you are with them. - Unknown

Many years ago, my father had a friend and colleague who was a professorial mentor. Dr. Hoffman taught and mentored many amazing, high profile, visionary people. His mentee list was a veritable who's who of change agents, high performers and influencers from all around the globe. While in my early twenties, when I was consumed with finding the right career, my father arranged for us to meet over a brief lunch at the university cafeteria.

As I walked anxiously across campus to our appointment, I had some subtle expectation to be a little awe-struck by this much-celebrated 'leader of leaders'. I imagined him to be, like my father, larger than life, the center of all attention, the bearer of the ring to be kissed. At the very least, I imagined, I would be impressed.

Yet, while we conversed over soup and sandwich, I noticed something fascinating: I was not impressed. There was in fact an absence of suggested veneration or self-importance. This surprised me because I was always under the impression that leadership greatness created a hierarchy,

and naturally occurred alongside reverence of that person. This was especially prevalent in the world of my father, the great halls of scientific academia.

But there wasn't just the absence of hauteur; there was something else.

Sitting across the table from Dr. Hoffman, I observed a very specific sense emerging in the space. It was a feeling of infinite possibility. I felt exceptional self-confidence and sparkle—not in him—in me. I felt, well, remarkable, as if I had super powers and could do anything I put my heart into. It then dawned on me that this was his gift—he saw, and therefore evoked, greatness in others.

He didn't do it so much by what he said, but a field he projected, and a way that he 'saw' others and spoke to that which he saw. It was an unusual blend of humility, quiet confidence, curiosity and delight—a combination of qualities that are not commonly attributed to those positioned as leaders. In response, I was not so much inspired to follow him, as I was inspired to

take the lead in my own life, with confidence and clarity.

That day over lunch, many years ago, demonstrated to me the skill of real leadership—an ability to inspire others to step forward into their own strengths and gifts. People like Dr. Hoffman lead from behind encouraging others out front, instead of leading out front asking others to follow.

It reminds me of the way our horses see the true nature of people. Scott likes to say, 'Our horses see everything that you are, minus the story you tell yourself about yourself.' In a similar fashion to Dr. Hoffman, horses (given the right conditions) evoke the best in people. There is a reason for this. It allows everyone in their midst to rise to the challenge of being a herd together, by leveraging everyone's strengths.

When clients are with our EQUUS herd, the horses do not differentiate in the way we might imagine. They do not think, 'Those two-legged creatures are not horses, therefore they are not part of the herd.' Once the herd establishes a person or people are safe, then it is incumbent upon them to 'bring them on' as a herd member, and teach them herd ways. Otherwise, their presence could be a detriment to the herd.

What is the onboarding process exactly? The horses will develop their new human herd members through three very deliberate processes: instruction, modeling and reflecting. And if you watch very carefully, and notice all the very subtle nuances, you will see that the horses are not creating followers, but leaders. They are creating conditions for the best to emerge in every person, so that each person can be an asset to the herd (it's of course up to the person if they wish to take that invitation – but that's another article).

Horses lead from behind. This is demonstrated not just in how they instruct, but how they physically move the herd. The lead horse positions himself or herself behind the ones in their charge, and literally pushes them ahead. This encourages the horses being lead, to actually be out in front. Just spend some time in any pasture of horses, and watch the dynamics of their movement. You'll start to see how the horses in leadership positions drive the

others, with a firm eye, a flattening of ears, or a toss of the head, to move forward.

Being urged to the 'front lines' of the herd by the leader develops confidence and courage in these horses. They become the eyes of the herd, the first to encounter danger and new experiences. In this way, nature designs leadership to be cultivated throughout the herd in preparation for succession, encouraging less confident horses to become more self-assured, so that when the lead horse passes on or retires, the next leader has been mentored to be confident.

Do you lead from behind, creating leaders? Or you do lead in the front, creating followers? This is a question I ask myself every day. And it's a question for many contexts – family, coaching, relationships, professionally with clients, inside most endeavors. What does leading from behind look like in the human context? I confess I'm still learning, but here are some of the qualities I've gleaned by watching those who inspire me that way (human and horse):

Curiosity – they are 'learners' instead of 'knowers'. Instead of having all the right answers, they are curious about what they can learn. They also provoke others to come up with solutions rather than offer solutions themselves. They are also curious about the people around them—who are they? What inspires them? What is happening in their world? They ask really good questions.

Listening – they spend a lot less time talking and a lot more time listening. This is related to the 'knower' vs. 'learner' concept above. Our culture seems to reward knowing it all. But real mastery comes from the openness of wanting to learn more. To learn, one has to listen.

Confidence – you can only see what you are. If you are critical with yourself, you'll be critical of others. If you see your strengths and gifts, you'll see it in others. Like the quote at the beginning of this article implies, you can only see beauty when you are beautiful. Leaders who lead from behind know their own gifts and strengths, which naturally allows them to see those attributes in others.

Humility – they are open to being wrong, having more to learn, and respectful of others. Confidence and humility are not polarities—they are complimentary.

Trust – these folks trust themselves, they trust others (and therefore only surround themselves with those they can trust), and trust something larger (the universe, the divine, grace, the infinite, God...whatever you want to call it).

They are not the most interesting person in the room – Our friend, colleague and author Rich Litvin says, 'If you are the most interesting person in the room, you are in the wrong room.' Great leaders surround themselves with amazing people, and create conditions for learning from and being inspired by those around them.

Kind, calm and clear – they have a grounded firmness about them that is a blend of these three elements. I'm differentiating between niceness and kindness here too. Kindness can tell hard truths, set boundaries, and make difficult decisions that clearly cut away what no longer belongs. There is a graciousness about their manner.

To lead people, walk behind them ...

As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence.

The next best, the people honor and praise.

The next, the people fear; and

The next, the people hate..

When the best leader's work is done the people say, "We did it ourselves"!

- Lao Tzu

Their feet move the least – when observing a herd, you'll notice the leader is the one who moves the least, conserving energy for the really important stuff. New leaders or managers will often micromanage, rescue, or run alongside their team in an attempt to lead them properly. All this does is exhaust the leader and undermine their team.

Delight – being positioned behind frees these people up to see the big picture, and how everyone is contributing. This brings a natural state of

appreciation for what is being accomplished. From here, shout outs are easy. They celebrate the wins often.

Modeling – it's not what they say, it's how they 'be'.

And there's so much more. But this is a start. Are there people in your life who lead from behind? Who are they and how have they influenced you? How can you lead from behind in your world? Where might you get in the way of something awesome by putting yourself out front (or worse, on the sidelines or not even in the game). You have more power and greatness than you might realize, all it takes is just a little shift in position to see it.

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