5 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP & HIERARCHY WITH HORSES

I am confronted almost daily with misconceptions about horses… I hear it from people, read it in books, find it on the internet, …

In this PDF I want to talk about the **5 biggest misconceptions** regarding leadership and pecking order, which, in my opinion, have a **negative influence** the training of horses.

By clearing these misconceptions you'll have a better understanding of the horse and you'll start **training in a different way**.

MISCONCEPTION 1: *BE YOUR HORSE'S LEADER!*

Here people assume that in a group of (wild) horses there's always one leading mare that leads the group and all the other horses always follow her directly in what she decides or does.

However, research shows (including by professor Krüger) that **every member of the group** can take the lead. There's not just one leading mare that decides everything all the time. The group basically makes these decisions TOGETHER. **If the majority** chooses to follow a certain horse then this is what will happen, if the majority decides not to, this won't happen.

Also a stallion can take the lead. In the movie Cloud (a documentary about wild mustangs) you can see how the stallion decides at a certain point to leave where he walks ahead and his mares follow him.

What is being observed is that certain mares are being followed more in their decisions than other mares, and these mares can be called "leading mares". These are often the oldest mares in the group, after all, they do have the most experience and apparently they radiate more leadership in the way they handle: calm, confident, friendly-assertive. And, because they radiate

leadership they are more easily (and more) followed by the other animals in their decisions.

What does this mean for the human-horse relation?

Leadership isn't set and it is therefore not easy to be **THE leader** of your horse. Your horse doesn't see you as his ultimate leader, whom he will follow everywhere, whatever happens, without thinking, as in a reflex. **Every time** the horse will **reconsider** if he will or will not follow your leadership in a certain situation.

You're basically a herd of two, which means that the "majority" doesn't count. It's **EITHER you who's the leader in a situation OR it's your horse.**

This means you can practice yourself in being so confident and showing as good as possible **leadership**. But, that doesn't make you THE ultimate leader, however, it does make sure that your horse will easily follow you every time in situations where he can use leadership (e.g. when, he has to pass a scary object on the street).

You'll therefore never hear me say: "you have to be your horse's leader". I always talk in terms of: "It's important that you show good leadership", so your horse likes to follow your leadership in a situation where you notice he doubts and needs leadership. You do this by acting as the "leading mares": calm, confident, friendly-assertive.

BUT: this also means that there are situations where you can **easily leave the leading to your horse,** where you follow the horse and not the other way around. Just like in a real group. During Liberty Training (but also in the other 3 parts of the Horsefulness Training System) we can alternate between taking the lead and leaving the leading to the horse.

It's not because every now and then you give your horse the lead, you can't take the lead back again.

MISCONCEPTION 2: *DO YOU WANT TO BE YOUR HORSE'S LEADER, BE HIGHER IN RANK!*

This comes from the idea that there's a hierarchy amongst horses and that those highest in rank (the alpha mare) also is the leader of the group. But this is not completely true.

While in certain situations there's a hierarchy (more about this in misconception 3), the **animal that takes the lead at a certain moment Isn't always the horse with the highest rank!** We've seen that EVERY horse can take the lead, no matter if he's higher or lower in rank most of the time.

Therefore, pecking order **has nothing to do** with leadership!

What does this mean for the human-horse relationship?

This means that when someone is higher in rank than a horse, for example by taking the horse's spot, that person **isn't by definition also able to show good leadership.** However, this is what is being said: "show your horse that you can make him move, you will become his leader".

No, if you take your horse's spot, you put yourself higher in rank, but this has nothing to do with leading.

Showing leadership is about tranquillity, self-confidence, taking decisions in connection with where you're going together and what you're going to do together. If your horse follows you, you have the lead *at that moment*.

Again: leadership has NOTHING to do with taking a spot or making a horse move. If you want a strong connection with your horse you have to be able to distinguish between leadership and hierarchy issues and knowing what is more important for a certain horse at a certain moment.

MISCONCEPTION 3: *YOUR HORSE IS DOMINANT!*

Among a lot of trainers and horse owners there is a strong belief in the "dominance-theory" and when a problem with the horse occurs it's quickly claimed **that the horse is "dominant".**

When a horse is obtrusive. It "is dominant". When it bites, it "is dominant". Even if the horse doesn't follow an instruction given by a human, it "is

dominant" while often it's that the horse **doesn't understand or reacts emotionally** out of fear, frustration, anger, …

No horse IS dominant. However, it's possible that the horse is SHOWING DOMINANT BEHAVIOUR. Maybe you think: that's the same thing, isn't it? No, it isn't…

Dominant behaviour has to do with **motivation**. Horse A could be enormously motivated to take the spot of grass of horse B because he's hungry. Horse B gives up his spot. However, an hour later it could be that horse B is thirsty and drives horse A away from the water trough.

Who of these two IS dominant?

Neither, **it depends on the situation**.

Depending on the situation a horse will be showing more, less, or no dominant BEHAVIOUR, but the horse IS not dominant tout court.

When will horses show dominant behaviour towards each other?

- when it's about food
- when it's about drinking
- when it's about an in demand spot, like a spot in the shade, a tree to rub against, or to able to pass to go somewhere
- when a horse wants to protect his mate
- when a mare wants to protect her foal
- when a stallion wants to protect his group of mares

As you can see, horses only really show dominant behaviour **when they need something** (food, water, shade, spot), or if they want **to protect another** (foal, mate, group of mares).

And horses will **assess** the extent to which behaving dominant will produce something and what is smarter at that moment: behaving more dominant than the other, or behaving submissively.

They will assess the "risk": is it dangerous to act higher in rank than the other horse or not (e.g. rival stallions: 1 stallion can decide not to attack the other because of the risk of serious wounds. The other stallion does look very strong and very impressive).

Hierarchy is therefore also **contextual**: in one situation horse A will act higher in rank than horse B and in another situation it's the other way around.

Dominant behaviour is shown when a horse wants something, keep something, protect something and where he has decided that the chance of success is realistic.

How is this translated to the human-horse relationship?

If your horse wants something from you: something tasty you have in your pockets, or space, it is very possible your horse will show subtle to clear dominant BEHAVIOUR. He will place his ears back and threatens to bite when you don't take the carrot out of our pocket quick enough. Or your horse wants to go past you through the stable door and tries to drive you out of the way.

These are situations where your horse will use the same dominant body language he would also use with other horses in similar situations. This proves to me that horses are indeed able to act higher or lower in rank compared to humans *on a certain moment, in a certain situation*. Here it is also **contextual** and therefore **depending on the situation and the motivation of the moment**.

This doesn't mean we should not place boundaries to dominant behaviour. For our own safety it's very important we deal with dominant behaviour without treating the horse disrespectful. We have to deal with this in a way that the horse understands, that matches his nature!

That means in the first place we need to consider why the horse is showing this behaviour. In a lot of cases it's very normal that a horse is behaving like this (a carrot is of course very tasty!!) and it is up to the trainer to set his boundaries.

If you don't set boundaries, this dominant behaviour could get worse. For example, you quickly give his food if the horse puts his ears back and is coming towards you with a threatening look in his eyes. This dominant behaviour will worsen because the horse experiences a positive outcome: he gets his food.

It's of great importance that you learn **the difference between dominant behaviour and defensive behaviour**, because these two are often mixed up.

A horse that is scared will show defensive behaviour, which sometimes **looks** like dominant behaviour. This behaviour is then mishandled, which can be very difficult for a horse. It could worsen dominant of defensive behaviour which is already present.

Just think about horses that push against you because they need space: if a horse doesn't have any faith in his trainer and that trainer will come too close, the horse will try to keep a distance. When the trainer doesn't give the horse that space, the horse could decide to jump forward, towards the trainer trying to get away that way.

This isn't dominant behaviour, this is defensive behaviour. And this way there are of course a lot of situations where horses that are basically scared or suspicious become defensive because they don't see any other solution.

MISCONCEPTION 4: *DON'T MOVE YOUR FEET, BECAUSE YOU ACT LOWER IN RANK!*

People are often told not to use their feet a lot when training their horse. This would make the horse think he can let you move which means he's higher in rank than you.

But **a horse knows perfectly well when you move because you want to** and when **you move because he drives you (subtly).**

When a horse enters you personal space and you don't want this, it's indeed important you don't shrink backward, but that you calmly and confident define you space. *On that moment (indeed: on that moment)* you are acting higher in rank because you stay put and you send your horse out of your space instead of going away yourself.

But, when you ask your horse for instance to leave on a circle (in liberty or on a lunge) and you move yourself in a way so the horse understands you better this is, of course, allowed!

Therefore there's a big difference between

- Moving because you want to communicate with your horse through body language (position, posture, and movement) and because you want to **ask** your horse something or because you want to **help** your horse
- And **moving because your horse is driving you.**

And your horse knows this too!

They are better than us when it comes to feeling intentions and reading body language.

But even in the case your horse is driving you, there are situations where you can decide to move. Just think about

- A horse that **requests space** because you have entered (unknowingly) his personal or intimate space too quickly.
- A horse with **fear/reserve for humans** and you want to help him overcome that
- A horse you're **playing** with (if you know how to stop the driving and are experienced with horses)

To claim that you have to move your feet as little as possible because otherwise you're lower in rank and the horse will then become "dominant" is therefore put very **bluntly**.

Be careful when someone tells you to do this, but doesn't nuance. Chances are this person reasons from the dominance theory. Training from the dominance theory means most of the time a lot of pressure is used and for a lot of horses this isn't necessary and even damaging.

<u>What does this mean in practice?</u>

You need to let go of the idea you should move your feet as little as possible. It's just important **deal consciously** with being driven or not. **When do I go along with it** and do I let myself be driven? And **when do I not go along with it**, how subtle it might be?

This can be learned best by first doing *liberty training* with your horse. You then learn to recognise these different situations in a playful way so that in the end you can deal with this very consciously, and also apply this during groundwork.

MISCONCEPTION 5: *HORSES HAVE TO KOW "WHO IS BOSS" OTHERWHISE THEY ARE DIFFICULT DURING TRAINING!*

This comes from the **myth** that the alpha mare is very dominant, that she also is the only lead mare, and therefore the other horses follow her everywhere all the time. Earlier you have read that this isn't true at all, leading can be done by every horse, and also hierarchy is contextual.

In the meantime research has shown that **the best way to train a horse is when the horse is feeling comfortable with his trainer.** This means he **trusts** him/her, they **have a friendship**.

Horses who are shown "who is boss" through a "strict" hand = use of a lot of pressure and forms of violence to keep the horse under control, but without taking time to build friendship and trust :

- Won't want to cooperate at all and will go against the pressure. What you get is resistance. These horses are then often called obstinate, dominant, and unmanageable.
- Or they obey as a robot, where they do the exercises but won't show a lot of expression and become very introvert (sometimes, when they get a new owner who does things differently this can still be visible for years after in some situations).
- Or they do cooperate, but there always remains a form of stress and tension so that the exercise isn't finished as good. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't, sometimes with more tension, sometimes with less tension. It all is relatively instable.
- Or these horses do cooperate but every now and then they can suddenly go crazy or shut down (not doing anything at all anymore)

Horses with whom a lot of time is spent to build a connection (I do this through Liberty Training and the 8 connection exercises) are **more relaxed**, **more open, easily soothed** when stress is experienced, **learn new things quicker,** keep a **lower heart rate, sweat less, show less to no flight behaviour,** and **generally cooperate better with their human** during training.

This is something I've been telling for years because I've noticed this in practice, and through this the connection exercises have developed.

Fortunately this is now also shown in **scientific research** (P. McGreevy & A.Mc Lean)!

What does this mean in practice?

That **in the first place it is important to build a connection**. You have to take your time for this and also when you continue training your horse, no matter if it is groundwork or riding, you have **to continue spending time for this**. Because it is as with every friendship: it can be strong, but you have to maintain it, otherwise you grow apart.

Conclusion

Every horse can take the lead in a group

You can never be THE leader of your horse. You can try to show good leadership every day.

You can give your horse the lead every now and then.

Leadership has nothing to do with pecking order or dominant/submissive behaviour. Pecking order is contextual.

It doesn't mean that when you put boundaries to dominant behaviour, your horse will follow your lead.

Dominant behaviour is not the same as defensive behaviour and that's why it needs a completely different approach.

Moving your feet doesn't mean you are lower in rank!

In some situations you can let your horse drive you very consciously (you do have to know in which situations this is possible and in which this is unsafe).

BE YOUR HORSE'S FRIEND, NOT THE BOSS!

P.S. If you're looking for a way that shows you exactly how to communicate with horses in liberty and lets you create the wonderful and heart-felt relationship with your horse you've been dreaming of…

Then, take a look at the Horsefulness Liberty Program