http://dx.doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v23.6436

SHARED LEADERSHIP THROUGH EQUINE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

LIDERANÇA COMPARTILHADA POR MEIO DA APRENDIZAGEM EXPERIENCIAL ASSISTIDA POR EQUINOS

Article received on: 1/16/2026
Article accepted on: 4/15/2026

Salih Aksoy*
***Yıldız Technical University (YTU), İstanbul, Türkiye
Orcid: http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5974-0781
salih.aksoy@std.yildiz.edu.tr

Esin Can*
***Yıldız Technical University (YTU), İstanbul, Türkiye
Orcid: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1754-4867
esincan@yildiz.edu.tr

Hüseyin Rıdvan Yurtseven**
****İstanbul Topkapı University, İstanbul, Türkiye
Orcid: http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9804-4711
ridvanyurtseven@topkapi.edu.tr

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract
This study develops a process model explaining how equine-assisted experiential learning (EAEL) fosters shared leadership in organizational teams. While prior research has mainly focused on cognitive and structural antecedents, limited attention has been given to embodied and relational mechanisms. To address this gap, a qualitative interpretive approach was adopted, based on in-depth interviews with 17 participants who completed structured equine-assisted leadership programs. The findings identify three core mechanisms: (1) embodied self-regulation and awareness, (2) the emergence of trust and empathic connection, and (3) collective coordination and shared agency. Building on these mechanisms, the study proposes the Equine-Assisted Shared Leadership (EASL) model, explaining how non-verbal and embodied interactions activate relational dynamics that enable leadership distribution. The results demonstrate that EAEL facilitates shared leadership by enhancing relational awareness and coordinated action among team members. This study contributes to shared leadership theory by introducing an embodied-relational perspective and provides practical implications for the design of leadership development programs.

Keywords: Embodiment. Equine-Assisted Learning. Experiential Learning. Shared Leadership. Trust.

Resumo
Este estudo desenvolve um modelo de processo que explica como a aprendizagem experiencial assistida por equinos (Equine-Assisted Experiential Learning – EAEL) promove a liderança compartilhada em equipes organizacionais. Embora pesquisas anteriores tenham se concentrado principalmente em antecedentes cognitivos e estruturais, pouca atenção tem sido dada aos mecanismos corporificados e relacionais. Para abordar essa lacuna, adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa interpretativa, baseada em entrevistas em profundidade com 17 participantes que concluíram programas estruturados de desenvolvimento de liderança assistida por equinos. Os resultados identificam três mecanismos centrais: (1) autorregulação e consciência corporificada, (2) o surgimento de confiança e conexão empática e (3) coordenação coletiva e agência compartilhada. Com base nesses mecanismos, o estudo propõe o modelo de Liderança Compartilhada Assistida por Equinos (EASL), que explica como interações não verbais e corporificadas ativam dinâmicas relacionais que possibilitam a distribuição da liderança. Os resultados demonstram que a EAEL facilita a liderança compartilhada ao promover consciência relacional e ação coordenada entre os membros da equipe. Este estudo contribui para a teoria da liderança compartilhada ao introduzir uma perspectiva corporificada-relacional e oferece

implicações práticas para o desenho de programas de desenvolvimento de liderança.

Palavras-chave: *Aprendizagem Assistida por Equinos. Aprendizagem Experiencial. Confiança. Corporeidade. Liderança Compartilhada*

1 INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes in contemporary organizational environments require leadership approaches that move beyond individual-centric models toward more distributed and relational forms. Shared leadership has emerged as a critical paradigm emphasizing collective influence and dynamic role distribution within teams. However, existing research has largely focused on cognitive, structural, and behavioral antecedents, overlooking the embodied and relational processes through which shared leadership emerges.

At the same time, experiential learning approaches—particularly equine-assisted experiential learning (EAEL)—have gained increasing attention in leadership development. These approaches emphasize non-verbal interaction, emotional regulation, and real-time feedback. Despite their growing popularity in practice, their theoretical integration into mainstream leadership research remains limited.

This study addresses this gap byasking:

How does equine-assisted experiential learning activate relational and embodied mechanisms that enable the emergence of shared leadership in teams?

We develop a qualitative process model that links embodied interaction, relational activation, and collective leadership emergence.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Shared leadership as a relational process

Leadership has been examined across different periods using a variety of methodological approaches. The primary aim of this body of research has been to identify distinct leadership styles, delineate leadership requirements, and enhance them in order to contribute to organizational performance. A strong leadership model provides a critical source of competitive advantage by supporting employees in achieving goal-oriented motivation (Samoka *et al*., 2023).

In this context, the shared leadership model builds on Gibb's early work on team leadership forms and is derived from the concepts of distributed and focused leadership (GİBB, 1954). At its core, this approach centers on the question of how leadership is shared among team members. Accordingly, leadership is defined as a process of influence that motivates employees toward organizational goals and is distributed and shared among team members.

Shared leadership is conceptualized as a team-level property that emerges through the distribution of influence across multiple team members (Kozlowski; Klein, 2000), (Morgeson; Hofmann, 1999). In this respect, shared leadership begins with team members' participation in activities that influence the team and other members in terms of direction, motivation, and individual support (YUKL, 1989), and thus reflects a process grounded in the generation of collective influence. This phenomenon is treated as a process and is typically shaped through the negotiation and sharing of responsibilities traditionally assumed by a formal leader.

Within the shared leadership model, not only the effectiveness of the leader but also the distribution of leadership influence within the team comes to the forefront; accordingly, the central issue concerns how this influence is allocated among team members. Whereas in traditional models team members follow a single leader, in shared leadership contexts team members themselves enact leadership influence. In such teams, leadership may shift over time, with different members assuming leadership roles

depending on situational demands; this indicates that leadership is not a fixed role but a dynamic process continuously reproduced through team interaction.

The emphasis on team interaction renders high levels of intra-team communication indispensable. Within this model, communication is treated as a relational phenomenon, and shared leadership generates domains of influence that continuously foster the development of team communication (Bedeian; Hunt, 2006).

2.2 Experiential learning and embodiment in leadership

Leadership has long been debated under the broader domain of leadership studies, particularly with respect to its origins. Contemporary perspectives suggest that leadership is not merely an innate trait but a competency that can be developed over time (Day; Zaccaro, 2004). These competencies can be enhanced through traditional learning programs as well as supported by experiential learning approaches (Kark, 2011), (Day *et al*., 2021).

Experiential learning has increasingly been preferred across various domains in recent years (Salas; Wildman; Piccolo, 2009). Organizations utilize experiential learning methods to develop employees' existing competencies, increase awareness of their capabilities, and reveal their approaches in different situations (Armstrong, 2009). One of the primary reasons for this preference is that behaviors and outcomes emerging in simulated environments tend to resemble those in real-world settings (Armstrong, 2009).

This aligns with the embodied cognition perspective, which posits that cognitive processes are not confined to mental activities alone but are shaped through the interaction between the body and the environment (VARela; Thompson; Rosch, 1991), (Barsalou, 2008).

The extent to which leadership programs and training contribute positively to leader–follower interaction represents an important indicator that organizations need to monitor (vasudevan *et al*., 2025).

Experiential learning methods play a significant role in informing participants about the complexities that may arise in work environments while enhancing their decision-making and leadership skills (salas *et al*., 2009), (wood; beckmann; birney, 2009).

In this regard, recent research emphasizing the role of bodily experience and sensory interaction in learning suggests that experiential learning processes strengthen cognitive outcomes (Skulmowski; XU, 2025).

In this context, traditional leadership learning methods are particularly important at lower levels of cognition. However, they become even more critical at higher levels of leadership-related cognitive development. Experiential learning is argued to provide more concrete contributions by addressing concepts and principles in forms that closely resemble real-life contexts.

From a scientific perspective, experiential learning is analyzed through four main dimensions: Concrete Experience, which emphasizes the importance of active participation in effective learning; Reflective Observation, which involves evaluating inconsistencies between new experiences and existing understanding; Abstract Conceptualization, where new ideas are developed through reflection; and Active Experimentation, in which developed concepts are tested in real-world contexts.

This model provides a theoretical framework explaining why experiential learning is more effective and significant in leadership development compared to traditional methods.

In the context of leadership, experiential learning models focus not on developing the leader per se, but on developing leadership itself (Gemeda; Lee, 2020), (Mulat; Singh, 2023). This is because these approaches foster interaction and enable the emergence of collective alignment. In this regard, such training practices also contribute to the development of shared leadership models.

In this framework, experiential learning is not a new method. Physical practices applied at various levels of education can be evaluated within this scope. The use of experiential learning as an effective method in leadership development reflects its adaptation into the social sciences.

Having briefly addressed the theoretical foundations of shared leadership and experiential learning in leadership development, it is necessary to focus on the role of horses in strengthening this leadership model and learning approach within teams.

2.3 Equine-assisted learning as a relational catalyst

Throughout human history, horses have constituted an integral part of human life since their domestication. Beyond their use in transportation, travel, and labor, horses enable forms of interaction that extend beyond purely instrumental relationships through their capacity for emotional and intuitive communication and social bonding (Kovach, 2011). This has stimulated scholarly interest in human–horse interaction and its broader implications.

Horses' advanced sensory capacities (visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory) underpin their interactions with humans (Mcdonnell, 2003). Leadership, however, is fundamentally a relational phenomenon, and the nature of interaction plays a critical role in its emergence. In this regard, horses' ability to recognize individuals and respond to them (Proops; Mccomb, 2010), (Lampe; Andre, 2012) can be understood as an interactional mechanism that contributes to the development of trust and attachment. This suggests that leadership is not solely rooted in individual traits but emerges through relational dynamics enacted in interaction.

The level of attentive and focused engagement that a leader establishes with followers constitutes a critical determinant of leadership effectiveness. Empirical findings indicate that variations in individuals' attention levels shape the quality of interaction and the responses elicited (Sankey, *et al*., 2011). This highlights the role of attention and awareness as key mechanisms through which interactional alignment and reciprocity are produced in leadership processes.

Similar to humans, horses respond based on prior experiences (Sankey *et al*., 2010). Interactions grounded in positive reinforcement tend to generate stronger relational bonds, underscoring the importance of trust-based relational structures in leader–follower dynamics. The quality of the relationship established by leaders with their followers plays a critical role in fostering trust and cohesion within teams.

As noted, leadership involves dynamic interactions grounded in trust, empathy, and communication. Interactions with horses exhibit comparable social and relational patterns, thereby providing an analytical lens for understanding leadership processes. In this sense, human–horse interaction offers a context through which relational and process-based perspectives on leadership can be examined. The variability of group behaviors

across contexts further indicates that leadership and followership roles are not fixed but can shift dynamically, consistent with shared leadership frameworks.

Overall, shared leadership supported through interactional contexts involving horses contributes to understanding team dynamics and advancing interaction-centered perspectives on leadership. Within this framework, leadership is conceptualized not as a fixed role but as a process that emerges and is continuously reproduced through interaction. Such interactions reinforce key leadership dimensions such as empathy and trust, thereby enhancing communication and cohesion within teams. In this respect, horses may be considered both as a facilitative medium and as a metaphor in leadership processes.

Building on this general understanding, it becomes necessary to examine more specifically the implications of human–horse interaction for leadership. Such approaches provide a basis for rethinking traditional leadership paradigms. Conventional leadership theories have largely relied on dominance-based assumptions emphasizing control and hierarchical superiority (Henshall; Mcgreevy, 2014). However, these perspectives are limited in their ability to account for complex social interaction processes.

According to dominance theory, horses respond to human interventions in ways analogous to signals within their own social hierarchies (Rickards, 2000). Yet empirical evidence suggests that such behaviors are context-dependent and cannot be generalized as stable social responses (Koster *et al.*, 2009), (Warren-Smith; Mcgreevy, 2008). This finding supports the view that leadership is shaped not by unilateral control mechanisms but through context-dependent and reciprocal interaction processes.

Learning from past interactions and adapting behavior accordingly (Sankey *et al.*, 2010) constitutes a key mechanism in the formation of trust-based relationships. Reward-based approaches foster stronger relational bonds, whereas punishment-based methods often produce undesirable outcomes. Similarly, trust and cohesion remain central to effective leader–follower relationships in team contexts.

Leadership literature emphasizes that leaders are expected to act intentionally and deliberately (Dansereau *et al.*, 2013). However, the salience of behavioral cues in interaction suggests that leadership is often shaped through perceived actions rather than intentions alone. This indicates that leadership is not merely intention-driven but is enacted and constructed through interaction.

Trust and cooperation are central to leadership processes. Evidence showing that positive interactional approaches enhance cooperation (Keeling *et al*., 2016) is equally applicable to leader–follower dynamics. Within shared leadership frameworks, positive relational ties increase the level of participation among team members.

This study examines the applicability of shared leadership and equine-assisted leadership practices within organizational teams. Findings from human–horse interaction research offer novel insights into leadership processes by emphasizing interactional dynamics. These interactions reinforce core leadership elements such as empathy, trust, and cooperation, thereby strengthening relational ties within teams.

As social beings, horses engage in attentive and responsive interactions with humans. Such interactional qualities contribute to the development of trust and effective communication in organizational leadership contexts. Shared leadership emphasizes the distribution of leadership across team members, highlighting that leadership emerges not only from decision-making authority but also from the capacity to establish and sustain relational bonds. This study investigates these relationships with the aim of contributing to the theoretical and empirical understanding of leadership.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design to examine participants' experiences in corporate equine-assisted leadership programs and how these experiences are meaningfully constructed. Given the emotional and intuitive nature of human–horse interaction, as well as the dynamic and relational structure of shared leadership, a qualitative approach is considered more appropriate than purely quantitative methods (Sankey *Et Al*., 2011), (Kozlowski; Klein, 2000).

This approach enables an in-depth analysis of participants' subjective experiences, emotional responses, and perceptions of leadership processes (Henshall; Mcgreevy, 2014), (Mcdonnell, 2003).

3.2 Sample

Participants consist of corporate team members who have completed structured equine-assisted leadership training programs. In total, the study includes 17 participants. They are drawn from organizations operating in different industries in Türkiye and represent diversity in terms of years of experience, organizational positions, and gender. Accordingly, purposive sampling was employed to ensure variation across managerial level, sector, and leadership experience.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on the following themes: perceived emotional and cognitive changes, trust and communication within the team, leadership perceptions, and transformations in shared responsibility. Understanding how experiences gained through equine-assisted activities shape individuals' perceptions of leadership and teamwork requires a detailed examination of these experiences (Mcdonnell, 2003). Therefore, individual interviews were considered an appropriate data collection method. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes, and the coding process was conducted and reported transparently.

The interview questions used in this study were adapted from two previously published, peer-reviewed studies with established validity and reliability (Almeras; Bresciani, 2024), (Gunder *et al*., 2017). These questions were submitted to and approved by the relevant research ethics committee. Interviews with participants were conducted online; participants were informed in advance, and audio recordings were made with their consent. The recordings were then transcribed and prepared for analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

The findings demonstrate that integrating shared leadership with equine-assisted experiential learning generates multi-level effects on team dynamics and leadership processes within organizational contexts.

Consistent with the Gioia methodology, the findings are structured across first-order concepts (informant-centric terms), second-order themes (researcher-centric interpretations), and aggregate dimensions (theoretical abstractions), enabling a systematic progression from empirical data to theory building.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Aggregate dimension 1: embodied awareness as a triggering mechanism

4.1.1 Second-order theme: embodied self-regulation and awareness

Participants' accounts revealed that initial encounters were characterized by fear, uncertainty, and physiological tension. These responses were largely associated with unfamiliarity and perceived risk in the interaction context.

Rather than relying on cognitive strategies, participants reported becoming aware of their bodily and emotional states, followed by a gradual sense of adaptation and relaxation. This suggests that embodied awareness operates as a triggering mechanism that disrupts automatic behavioral patterns and activates self-regulation processes.

Participants emphasized that consistency and clarity in their actions facilitated more effective interaction outcomes, highlighting the importance of decisiveness in both human and non-human interaction contexts (Strozzi, 2004). The awareness emerging from this process contributes positively to leadership development (Torbert, 2004).

Participants also reported that perceived physical risk elicited immediate bodily reactions and reflexive movements. This finding indicates that the alignment between internal states and external behaviors plays a critical role in shaping interactional effectiveness.

Moreover, the non-verbal nature of interaction was emphasized. The ability of horses to perceive and respond to human emotional states reinforces the importance of emotional awareness and communication skills (Braun, 2024).

This highlights that non-verbal interaction can create heightened awareness of behavioral impact, thereby supporting leadership development (Sivagurunathan, 2025), (Wilber, 2000).

Participants further noted that regulating bodily responses and reactions is not only relevant within the training context but also transferable to daily and professional life, enhancing communication effectiveness (Mccormick; Mccormick, 1997).

4.2 Aggregate dimension 2: relational attunement and trust formation

4.2.1 Second-order theme: emergent relational attunement and empathic connection

Participants' responses indicate that trust and empathy emerged as central relational dynamics during the program. Trust and empathy were described as critical elements not only in everyday life but also in professional interactions. Participants highlighted that interpersonal relationships involve vulnerability, and emotional responses gain meaning when they are recognized and regulated (Wojtkowska *et al*., 2019).

Participants reported that the experiential nature of the program enhanced their ability to understand others' perspectives, thereby strengthening empathic communication (Church, 2007). This suggests that trust and empathy are not static individual traits but emerge through interactional processes.

During task execution, participants observed the emergence of emotional synchronization and mutual understanding among both team members and the horse. Feelings such as fear, excitement, and trust became collectively recognized and openly expressed. This indicates that trust formation occurs through affective alignment and shared emotional experience rather than deliberate strategy.

Participants also described situations in which they assumed leadership roles beyond formal organizational hierarchies, sometimes leading individuals in higher positions. This experience reinforced the understanding that leadership can be enacted by any individual depending on the context (Frederick; Hatz, 2012).

Furthermore, participants experienced collective problem-solving without relying on a single individual, which strengthened team cohesion and psychological safety. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of trust and collaboration in shared leadership development (Hauge *et al*., 2013).

The non-judgmental and immediate nature of feedback in the interaction context was also emphasized (Rashid, 2005). Participants noted that team roles were interdependent and that collective alignment was essential for achieving shared goals.

4.3 Aggregate dimension 3: distributed coordination and collective agency

4.3.1 Second-order theme: team collaboration and shared leadership

Participants emphasized that leadership roles within the team were fluid and context-dependent. First-order accounts indicate that leadership was not formally assigned but dynamically shifted based on situational demands.

Participants reported that they engaged in collective problem-solving processes rather than relying on a single leader. This experience allowed them to develop a shared sense of responsibility and strengthened team cohesion. This suggests that leadership is enacted through decentralized coordination rather than individual control.

During the program, participants described instances in which they assumed leadership roles regardless of their formal organizational position, including leading individuals in higher hierarchical roles. This experience reinforced the understanding that leadership can emerge from any individual depending on situational needs (Frederick; Hatz, 2012).

Participants also reported that facing mental and physical challenges collectively, rather than delegating responsibility to a single individual, contributed to a stronger sense of team solidarity and psychological safety. This finding highlights that collective problem-solving enhances both coordination and relational trust within teams.

The non-judgmental and immediate nature of feedback within the interaction context was emphasized as a critical factor (Rashid, 2005). Participants noted that responses were direct and unfiltered, similar to real-time reactions observed in equine interaction, which increased awareness of individual contributions to team outcomes.

Another key insight emphasized by participants was that roles within the team were not independent but interdependent. They observed that effective progress required collective alignment rather than hierarchical direction. This indicates that leadership emerges through coordinated interdependence rather than positional authority.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that equine-assisted leadership experiences enabled them to observe that shared responsibility and coordinated team energy generated stronger outcomes than individual effort.

The real-time and neutral feedback provided in these interactions created a unique environment for experimenting with leadership behaviors, allowing participants to directly observe the effects of improved communication and coordination.

An important insight emerging from the data is that leadership does not always require directing from the front but can also involve stepping back, observing, and supporting the team (Geddes, 2010). This reinforces the view that leadership is distributed across multiple actors and continuously reconfigured through interaction.

Participants also emphasized the importance of emotional energy, coordination, and trust in achieving collective outcomes (Mills, 2005). These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the role of trust, collaboration, and collective alignment in the development of shared leadership (Hauge *et al*., 2013).

Taken together, these findings point to the emergence of collective agency, characterized by mutual adjustment, shared intentionality, and synchronized action across team members.

4.4 Integrative data structure and core process model insight

The findings reveal a sequential yet recursive process through which shared leadership emerges within equine-assisted contexts. Building on the three aggregate dimensions identified in this study, the results point to a multi-level mechanism linking individual experience to collective outcomes.

At the micro level, participants' embodied awareness and self-regulation shape interaction quality by aligning internal states with external behaviors (Strozzi, 2004), (Torbert, 2004). This alignment enhances sensitivity to relational cues and enables the emergence of trust and empathic connection through consistent and congruent signaling (Wojtkowska *et al*., 2019), (Church, 2007).

As relational trust develops, coordination among team members becomes increasingly fluid and decentralized. Participants' experiences demonstrate that collective problem-solving, shared responsibility, and mutual adjustment enable effective team

functioning (Frederick; Hatz, 2012), (Hauge *et al*., 2013). This process is reinforced by real-time, non-judgmental feedback, which enhances awareness of individual contributions and supports adaptive interaction patterns (Rashid, 2005).

At the macro level, these interactional dynamics give rise to distributed coordination and shared leadership. Leadership is experienced not as a fixed role but as a fluid and context-dependent process that shifts among team members based on situational demands (Geddes, 2010), (Mills, 2005).

Taken together, the findings indicate that shared leadership emerges through a multi-level mechanism in which embodied self-regulation shapes interaction quality, interaction quality fosters relational trust, relational trust enables team coordination, and coordination leads to leadership distribution. Importantly, this process is not strictly linear; disruptions in interaction can reactivate embodied awareness, creating recursive feedback loops that sustain continuous adaptation.

This study demonstrates that shared leadership should be conceptualized not as the outcome of a designed structural arrangement, but as a dynamic process emerging through embodied awareness and relational interaction.

4.5 Practitioner insights

To complement the participant-based findings, insights from an experienced equine-assisted leadership practitioner were incorporated to provide an applied perspective on the underlying mechanisms. The practitioner's observations strongly align with the study's core theoretical framework.

First, the practitioner emphasized the role of immediate, non-verbal feedback and mirroring processes in human–horse interaction, reinforcing the importance of embodied awareness as a triggering mechanism. Participants' internal states were described as directly reflected in the horse's responses, supporting the notion that leadership begins with bodily self-regulation.

Second, the practitioner highlighted that trust and relational alignment emerge through interaction rather than deliberate intention. The development of emotional synchronization and empathic connection was observed as a natural outcome of

consistent and congruent behavior, confirming the relational mechanisms identified in the findings.

Third, the practitioner's insights into team-based exercises revealed that coordinated action and shared focus are necessary for successful outcomes. The observation that "the horse does not follow unless the group is aligned" illustrates how collective coordination and shared responsibility underpin effective leadership processes.

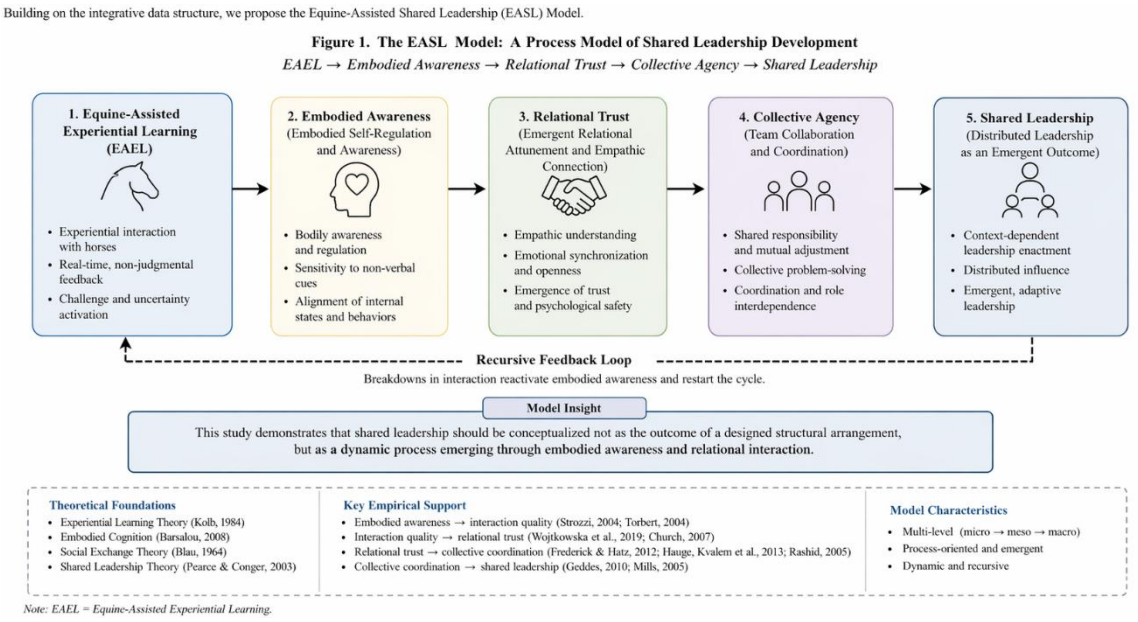
Finally, the practitioner noted that leadership roles are not predetermined but emerge dynamically based on situational demands. Instances where individuals without formal authority assumed leadership roles provide strong support for the study's conceptualization of shared leadership as an emergent phenomenon.

Overall, these practitioner insights reinforce the proposed EASL model by demonstrating that embodied awareness, relational trust, and collective coordination operate as interconnected mechanisms in the emergence of shared leadership.

5 PROPOSED MODEL

Figure 1

Building on the integrative data structure, we propose the Equine-Assisted Shared Leadership (EASL) Model.



Note: EAEL = Equine-Assisted Experiential Learning.

6 DISCUSSION

This study set out to explain how equine-assisted experiential learning (EAEL) enables the emergence of shared leadership through embodied and relational mechanisms. By integrating insights from shared leadership, experiential learning, and embodiment literatures, the findings advance a process-based understanding of how leadership is enacted in practice.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

6.1.1 Extending shared leadership through an embodied perspective

Prior research on shared leadership has predominantly emphasized cognitive alignment, role distribution, and structural configurations. The findings of this study extend this literature by demonstrating that shared leadership is not solely a cognitive or structural phenomenon, but also an embodied process grounded in real-time sensory and affective experiences.

Specifically, the identification of embodied self-regulation as a foundational mechanism suggests that leadership emergence begins with individuals' ability to regulate internal states such as fear, tension, and uncertainty in response to external stimuli. This is consistent with participants' accounts of initial discomfort and subsequent adaptation during equine interaction.

These findings challenge dominant perspectives that position leadership as primarily intention-driven or cognitively mediated, and instead highlight the role of bodily awareness in shaping leadership interactions (STROZZİ, 2004), (TORBERT, 2004).

6.1.2 Unpacking relational mechanisms in leadership emergence

While shared leadership theory acknowledges the importance of interaction, it has offered limited explanation of how relational dynamics are activated in practice. This

study contributes by identifying trust and empathy not as static constructs, but as emergent outcomes of embodied interaction.

The findings show that non-verbal and immediate feedback—particularly evident in equine-assisted contexts—creates conditions for rapid relational attunement. Participants reported increased sensitivity to others' emotional states and improved empathic communication, which aligns with prior research (Church, 2007), (Wojtkowska *et al*., 2019).

Furthermore, the mirroring responses observed in equine interaction highlight how internal states are externally reflected, reinforcing the importance of authenticity and congruence in leadership processes (Grandin; Johnson, 2005), (Mccraty, 2006).

In this sense, the study shifts the focus from abstract relational constructs to micro-level interactional processes through which trust is constructed.

6.1.3 Bridging experiential learning and organizational theory

Experiential learning has often been treated as a pedagogical tool rather than a source of theoretical insight in organizational research. This study bridges this gap by demonstrating how EAEL can be conceptualized as a mechanism that activates leadership-relevant processes.

The findings extend experiential learning theory beyond cognitive reflection cycles by incorporating embodied and affective dimensions. Participants' experiences indicate that learning occurs not only through reflection-on-action but also through real-time bodily engagement and relational feedback (Sivagurunathan, 2024).

Thus, EAEL is positioned not merely as a training method, but as a process through which leadership capabilities are enacted and developed in situ.

6.1.4 A process model of shared leadership emergence

By integrating the three aggregate dimensions—embodied awareness, relational trust, and collective agency—this study proposes a process model explaining how shared leadership emerges dynamically.

The proposed EASL model contributes to the literature by:

- Positioning leadership as an emergent outcome rather than a predefined structure
- Identifying sequential and reinforcing mechanisms linking individual regulation to collective outcomes
- Demonstrating how micro-level interactions scale into team-level leadership phenomena

These findings collectively support a view of leadership as a dynamic, embodied-relational process rather than a static organizational arrangement.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings offer important implications for leadership development and organizational practice.

First, leadership development programs should move beyond cognitively oriented training methods and incorporate embodied, experience-based approaches. The results suggest that interventions designed to enhance self-awareness and emotional regulation can have significant downstream effects on team dynamics.

Second, organizations should recognize the importance of relational processes in fostering shared leadership. Training programs that emphasize trust-building, empathy, and non-verbal communication can enhance team coordination and collective performance.

Third, the use of experiential methods such as EAEL provides high-feedback environments where participants can observe the impact of their behaviors in real time, thereby facilitating deeper and more sustained learning.

6.3 Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations.

First, the relatively small sample size (N=17) and context-specific design may limit generalizability. Future research could test the proposed model across different organizational and cultural contexts.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to retrospective bias. Future research could incorporate observational or physiological measures to strengthen validity.

Third, while this study proposes a process model, it does not test causal relationships. Future studies could employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine the temporal dynamics of the identified mechanisms.

Additionally, future research may explore how embodied and relational mechanisms operate in other experiential learning contexts beyond equine-assisted programs.

7 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that shared leadership emerges not as a predefined structural arrangement, but as a dynamic process shaped by embodied awareness, relational interaction, and collective coordination. By integrating insights from experiential learning and leadership theory, the study introduces the EASL model as a process-based explanation of how leadership develops in practice.

The findings highlight the importance of non-verbal interaction, emotional regulation, and real-time feedback in enabling leadership emergence. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of research that reconceptualizes leadership as an embodied-relational accomplishment rather than a static role.

CONTRIBUTORS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Ms. Ulduz K.Azad Kurt and Ms. Özlem Yılmaz for designing the equine-assisted leadership program, coaching the teams, and providing valuable practical contributions to this study.

REFERENCES

ALMERAS, H. S.; BRESCIANI, S. Experiential learning with horses for leadership and communication skills development: toward a model. **International Journal of Learning and Change**, 2024.

BARSALOU, L. W. Grounded cognition. **Annual Review of Psychology**, v. 59, p. 617–645, 2008.

BEDEIAN, A. G.; HUNT, J. G. Academic amnesia and vestigial assumptions of our forefathers. **The Leadership Quarterly**, v. 17, n. 2, p. 190–205, 2006. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.02.001.

CHURCH, D. **The genie in your genes**: energetic medicine and the new biology of intention. Santa Rosa: Elite Books, 2007.

DANSEREAU, F.; SEITZ, S. R.; CHIU, C. Y.; SHAUGHNESSY, B.; YAMMARINO, F. J. What makes leadership, leadership? **The Leadership Quarterly**, v. 24, n. 6, p. 798–821, 2013. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.10.001.

FREDERICK, K.; HATZ, J. Understanding the impact of equine-assisted learning on levels of hope in at-risk adolescents, 2012. Available from: Website: https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3ab11ce2-ec6d-41d7-ac5d-eff6591c31be/content (accessed: 12 June 2019

GEDDES, J. **Self-efficacy and equine-assisted therapy**: a single subject study. 2010. Doctoral thesis (Pacific University). Available from: https://commons.pacificu.edu/works/publication-dissertation/db2d0a4f-ce30-41e0-a859-5a9f36dbc030 (accessed: 12 June 2019).

GIBB, C. A. Leadership. In: LINDZEY, G. (ed.). **Handbook of social psychology**. v. 2. Addison-Wesley, 1954. p. 877–917.

GUNTER, J.; BERARDINELLI, P.; BLAKENEY, B.; CRONENWETT, L.; GURVIS, J. Working with horses to develop shared leadership skills. **Organizational Dynamics**, v. 46, n. 1, p. 57–63, 2017.

GRAHAM, J. **Outdoor leadership**: technique, common sense and self-confidence. Seattle: The Mountaineer Books, 2007.

GRANDIN, T.; JOHNSON, C. **Animals in translation**. New York: Scribner, 2005.

HALLBERG, L. (ed.). **Walking the way of the horse**. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2008.

HALLBERG, L. **The clinical practice of equine-assisted therapy**. New York: Routledge, 2018.

HAUGE, H.; KVALEM, I. L.; BERGET, B.; ENDERS-SLEGERS, M. J.; BRAASTAD, B. O. Equine-assisted activities... **International Journal of Adolescence and Youth**, v. 19, n. 1, p. 1–21, 2013.

HENSHALL, C.; MCGREEVY, P. D. Working with horses to develop shared leadership skills. **Leadership in Health Services**, v. 27, n. 4, p. 304–316, 2014. DOI: 10.1108/LHS-12-2013-0042.

HUNT, M. **True unity**: willing communication between horse and human. Tuscarola: Give It a Go Enterprises, 1987.

KEELING, L. J. *et al*. Injury incidence, reactivity and ease of handling of horses kept in groups: A matched case control study in four Nordic countries. **Applied Animal Behaviour Science**, 185, 59–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2016.09.002, 2016.

KOVACH, K. Horse-Human Bond Strengthens American Indian History. **The Washington Diplomat**. Retrieved October 12, 2012 from http://www.washdiplomat.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8137:horse-human-bond-strengthens-american-indianhistory&catid=1480&Itemid=428, 2011.

KOZLOWSKI, S. W. J.; KLEIN, K. J. A multilevel approach to team leadership. **The Leadership Quarterly**, v. 11, n. 3, p. 441–476, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(00)00039-1, 2000.

KOZLOWSKI, S. W. J.; KLEIN, K. J. **Multilevel theory, research, and methods in organizations**. Jossey-Bass, 2000.

LAMPE, J.; ANDRE, J. Cross-modal recognition of human individuals in domestic horses (Equus caballus). **Animal Cognition**, 15, 623–630. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-012-0482-x, 2012.

MCCRATY, R. A new meaning to horse sense. **Newsletter of the Institute for HeartMath**, 2006.

MCCORMICK, A.; MCCORMICK, M. **Horse sense and the human heart**: What horses can each us about trust, bonding, creativity and spirituality. Deerfield, FL: Health Communications., 1997.

MCDONNELL, S. M. The role of horses in human development and leadership training. **Journal of Experiential Education**, 26(2), 129-142. https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590302600205, 2003.

MCDONNELL, S. M. **The equid ethogram**. Eclipse Press, 2003.

MILLS, D.; NANKERVIS, K. **Equine behavior**: principles and practice. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

MORGESON, F. P.; HOFMANN, D. A. The structure and function of collective constructs: Implications for multilevel research and theory development. **Academy of Management Review**, 24(2), 249–265. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.1893931, 1999.

PROOPS, L.; MCCOMB, K. Attributing attention: The use of human-given cues by domestic horses (Equus caballus). **Animal Cognition**, 13, 197–205. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-009-0292-9, 2010.

RASHID, M. **Horsemanship through life**. Boulder: Johnson Books, 2005.

RICKARDS, T. Trust-based leadership: Creative lessons from intelligent horsemanship. **Creativity and Innovation Management**, 9(4), 259–266. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8691.00167, 2000.

SANKEY, C. *et al*. Do horses have a concept of person? **PLoS ONE**, 6(8), e18331. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0018331, 2011.

SANKEY, C. *et al*. Positive interactions lead to lasting positive memories in horses, Equus caballus. **Animal Behaviour**, 79, 869–875. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2009.12.038, 2010.

SIVAGURUNATHAN, R. *et al*. A study on development of educational leadership program using equine assisted experiential learning. **Eurasian Journal of Educational Research**, 112, 1-14., 2024.

SIVAGURUNATHAN, R. *et al*. Equine-assisted learning and leadership transformation: an exploratory qualitative study of workplace behavior. **Frontiers in Veterinary Science**, 12, 1700029, 2025.

SKULMOWSKI, A.; XU, K. M. Embodied cognition... **Nature Human Behaviour**, 2025.

STROZZI, A. **Horse sense for the leader within**. Bloomington: Author House, 2004.

TORBERT, W. R. **Action Inquiry**: the secret of timely and transforming leadership. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004.

VARELA, F. J.; THOMPSON, E.; ROSCH, E. **The embodied mind**. MIT Press, 1991.

WARREN-SMITH, A. K.; MCGREEVY, P. D. Preliminary investigations into the ethological relevance of round-pen (round-yard) training of horses. **Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science**, 11(3), 285–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888700802160418, 2008.

WARREN-SMITH, A. K. *et al*. Further investigations into the ethological relevance of round-yard training of horses. In **Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the International Society for Equitation Science**, Sydney, Australia, 12-14 July, 2009 (p. 35). International Society for Equitation, 2009.

WILBER, K. **A theory of everything**. Boston: Shambhala, 2000.

WOJTKOWSKA, M.; KACZMAREK, M.; GAZDOWSKA, Z. The Influence of Horse Assisted Education on the Perception of Self-Efficacy in People Holding Leadership Positions. **Journal of Education, Health and Sport**, 9(6), 456–469. Retrieved from https://apcz.umk.pl/JEHS/article/view/7063, 2019.