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Effectiveness Research of the Leadership Trainings of a leading Austrian home-center chain based on Natural Horsemanship – A best practice sample of Responsible Leadership

Often employees advance to a leading position without possessing the necessary expertise to manage people. Through a consistent executive development in the context of a balanced CSR program, companies show their responsibility awareness and offer their managers possibilities to develop their leadership skills. Apart from professional competence, emotional intelligence, and social competence, which are regarded as essential for leadership (see Mehnert, 2008, 12–14), capable executive managers should also speak a clear and unambiguous body language. (see Pongratz, 2002, 255–274).

A recent method to foster the soft skills of executive managers is coaching with horses. On the basis of Natural Horsemanship (natural handling of horses by learning their body language) managers are trained to achieve the leading position over a horse through attentiveness, trust, and respect (see Roberts, 2000, 139). Since various analogies can be found between the social system of a herd of horses and human social structures (see Krüger, 2010, 8), a direct assignability of the findings to the everyday working life can be assumed.

The executive managers of a leading Austrian home-center chain have already been doing such horse based leadership trainings for years. The aim of this research is to examine the effectiveness of these trainings concerning improvement of their executives' soft skills. The theoretical foundations from organizational theory perspective will be particularly provided by Weber's sociology of domination, his bureaucratic model (1922) and the derivative legitimacy of authority through

nonverbal communication by Pongratz (2002). The communication theory prospect is based, among others, on the theories of Schulz von Thun (2011). Concerning animal supported education, among others, the theories of Vernooij & Schneider (2008) will be applied.

On that theoretical basis in research question 1 it will be examined, whether executive managers, who have to do with dogs or horses in their everyday/private life, have already a higher level of social competence and emotional intelligence as those who have nothing to do with dogs or horses. Research questions 2-5 will discuss to what extent the social competence, emotional intelligence, empathy, and the leadership skills of executive managers who attended the Natural Horsemanship based leadership training can be improved, compared to those who have not participated (waiting group). In research question 6 it will finally be investigated, how the Natural Horsemanship leadership trainings affect the nonverbal communication of the trained executive managers and thus their legitimacy for leadership.

Through the quantitative and qualitative evaluation by devices such as the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue), the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Leadership Behavior Inventory (LBI), horse based leadership trainings will be examined scientifically on their effectiveness, for the first time using psychological questionnaires. The empirical evaluation is accomplished pre- and posttest with investigation-, waiting- and transfer-group (subordinates of managers in investigation-group). Results were determined via variance- and regression analysis. In addition video analyses of training units and qualitative survey interviews one year after the trainings took place. The effectiveness of the Natural Horsemanship based leadership trainings will be analyzed in dependence on Mayring's model of triangulation (2001).

Overall an improvement in body language in terms of behavior and body movement could have been observed, which according to Pongratz (2002) indicates an increase in legitimacy of authority. Furthermore the survey interviews of the executive managers' subordinates have shown a significant improvement concerning „inspirational motivation“ as well as a matching tendency towards transformational leadership. Under consideration of a potential ceiling effect, there have been determined also improvements regarding emotional intelligence and social competence.

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