

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCES FOR MILITARY LEADERS THROUGH EQUINE-BASED LEARNING

Marta NOWAKOWSKA

Wroclaw University of Science and Technology; marta.nowakowska@pwr.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-8251-5811

Purpose: The study explores the potential of equine-based learning training as a novel approach to enhance communication competencies among military leaders based on practical work with future leaders.

Design/methodology/approach: The research was conducted on 79 cadets from military academies in Poland, and an international group that included cadets from few European countries. The research took place between May 2021 and June 2022. The article provides an overview of the methodology which combined self-assessment questionnaires, interviews, participant observation, and analysis of personal diaries. The chosen methods aimed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of equine-based learning as a training process.

Findings: The study's results indicate the significant role played by the innovative training method of equine-based learning in improving communication competence. Effective communication is crucial for leaders in military organizations for several reasons: clear and concise communication is essential for conveying information, instructions, and expectations to a subordinate; effective communication is vital for building and maintaining strong relationships with subordinates and is crucial for resolving conflicts and addressing issues within the military organization.

Research limitations/implications: The research begins a more extensive study oriented towards leadership in organizations. The proposed training method - equine-based learning - demonstrated its usefulness in improving communication competence in a sample of military cadets. It is necessary to conduct similar research with the guidelines in the article on a more extensive research sample and extend the method to other managerial competencies.

Practical implications: The research suggests that there is scope to expand training for future leaders in military organizations. As one of the most critical competencies for military and civilian leaders, communication competencies are often taught traditionally without effectiveness. Enhancing communication competencies through equine-based learning achieves success, as evidenced by the research presented in the article.

Originality/value The publication refers to the method of training with horses. Equine-based learning has been used primarily in veterinary science, agricultural science and psychology. This article publishes the research results using this method to improve social skills.

Keywords: communication competencies, leader training, equine-based learning, military leadership.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Effective communication is a critical skill for military leaders, as it plays a vital role in mission execution, team cohesion, and maintaining morale. The ability to convey information clearly, listen actively, and understand and empathize with others is essential for effective leadership in military contexts. However, traditional communication training methods may not always adequately address the complex and dynamic nature of communication in high-stress environments.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in alternative approaches to leadership training that incorporate experiential learning and non-traditional methods. One such approach is equine-based learning, which involves interactions between humans and horses to develop leadership and communication skills. Horses have a unique ability to provide immediate feedback and mirror human emotions and behaviors, making them ideal partners for leadership development.

Ongoing discussions regarding how best to develop leaders confirm that those who can harness the intellect of the body and brain have a unique advantage in today's complex and ignitable business environment (Cooper, 2000). The horses are excellent examples for guiding the learning process that facilitates these human-horse experiences (Bjönberg, 2015). It also offers the opportunity to develop lasting changes in an individual's awareness and actions regarding their leadership skills and authenticity (Gehrke, Baldwin, Schiltz, 2011). Thus, they differ from traditional leadership training and development programmes.

This article aims to explore the potential of equine-based learning training as a novel approach to enhance communication competences among military leaders. By reviewing existing literature on equine-based learning and its impact on communication skills development, it can gain insights into the effectiveness of this approach in military contexts.

The review will examine studies that have investigated the effects of equine-based learning on communication competences, including active listening, non-verbal communication, empathy, and assertiveness. It will also explore the underlying mechanisms of equine-based learning, such as the development of emotional intelligence and self-awareness, which are crucial for effective communication.

Traditional communication training methods often focus on theoretical knowledge and role-playing exercises, which may not fully capture the complexities of real-world communication challenges. Equine-based learning offers a unique and experiential approach to communication skills development, providing managers with a dynamic and immersive training experience.

Horses have a natural ability to sense and respond to human emotions and behaviors, making them powerful partners in developing communication competences. When interacting with horses, military leaders must learn to communicate effectively using non-verbal cues, body language, and emotional intelligence. Horses provide immediate and honest feedback,

reflecting the leader's communication style and effectiveness. This real-time feedback allows military leaders to gain insights into their communication strengths and areas for improvement.

Equine-assisted learning (EAL) is a facilitated, reflective discussion method based on interpretation of equine behavior in a group experiential setting that has been used to improve confidence, self-assurance, verbal and nonverbal communication, focus, mindfulness, and coping strategies in populations of students, medical students, corporate groups, and career professionals (Rentko et al., 2023).

Equine based learning (which it can be found under different nomenclature as: equine assisted education, horse assisted education, horse assisted learning) is an innovative method of human learning involving horses. It aims to develop the person broadly - self-awareness, leadership, psychological and social skills- and to help him/her change. The essence of this method is to create a space where we can experience ourselves in a relationship with a horse.

Several methods for learning with horses have emerged since the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International first began to uncover the human-equine relationship's potential for healing in the late 1960s (Andersen et al., 2023).

The method described here regards horses as facilitators. Alongside human experts, they conduct experiential exercises in the field and arena. There is no riding involved, and no need for experience with horses.

People can learn through direct participation in the relationship during the workshops using EBL. There are no signposts, tried-and-tested rules and techniques of behaviour. Each step comes from taking responsibility, having courage and making a decision. Learning is multi-level, involves the whole person, and occurs in an actual situation. The horse's behaviour is authentic; thus, it is a real relationship, communication, and leadership. Such an experience is different from human-to-human role-playing.

Equine-based learning also enhances active listening skills, as managers must attune themselves to the horse's non-verbal cues and respond accordingly. By practicing active listening with horses, managers can develop the ability to listen attentively to their employees, understand their needs and concerns, and respond empathetically.

Moreover, equine-based learning promotes the development of emotional intelligence, which is crucial for effective communication. Emotional intelligence involves recognizing and managing one's own emotions and understanding and empathizing with the emotions of others. Horses are highly sensitive to human emotions, and managers must learn to regulate their emotions and communicate in a calm and assertive manner (Sheade, 2020). This emotional awareness and regulation translate into improved communication skills in the workplace, as managers can better understand and respond to the emotions of their employees.

In conclusion, equine-based learning training offers a novel and experiential approach to enhancing communication competences among leaders in military organizations. By leveraging the unique qualities of horses, such as their ability to provide immediate feedback and mirror human emotions and behaviors, equine-based learning provides a dynamic and immersive

training experience. The existing literature suggests that equine-based learning can significantly improve communication skills, including active listening, non-verbal communication, empathy, and assertiveness. Incorporating equine-based learning into military leaders training programs can offer army a valuable tool for developing effective communication competences and fostering a positive and collaborative work environment

2. Literature review

Since the practice of incorporating Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) into therapeutic and educational settings has grown in popularity (Nimer, Lundahl, 2007.), there has been a call to conduct evidence-based research on its effects on child physical and mental health, well-being, and development (Esposito, McCune, Griffin, Maholmes, 2011). Along with a call for clinical trials and examination of treatment effects in various populations, the importance of examining biobehavioral and physiological responses to HAI were emphasized (Esposito et al., 2011).

The application of horses helping humans is well documented in other fields. In psychotherapy horses have been shown to help patients suffering from trauma experience bonding, reduce psychological distress, and improve well-being (Herbette, Guilmot, Heeren, 2011; Yorke, Adams, Coady, 2008). In the medical field horses have been shown to help medical students hone their communication skills prior to working with patients, develop compassion, and practice presence (Carroll, 2017; Walsh, Blakeney, 2013).

Publications in equine-based learning (horse-assisted education, equine-assisted learning) were sporadic until 2020 and mainly concerned veterinary science. During the COVID-19 pandemic, work and human relationships changed to a virtual environment, to which new methods of teaching communicative competence can be attributed (Davis, 2023). Still, 63% of all publications are in veterinary and agricultural sciences, but publications in health sciences (8.8%) and social sciences (13.6%) have emerged.

Psychological research has highlighted the effects of exercise with horses on mental health, especially with people with PTSD syndrome. Also, there is extensive research suggesting that working with EBL helps withdrawn or anxious people reintegrate into society. The most common outcomes from the equine learning program studied for this article, from the case-studies and the thematic analysis includes; behavioural changes, stress relief, mind and body awareness and control, forming a relationship with an intuitive practitioner, guided meditations as a means of creating independent meditation techniques and re-engagement with education, work, friendships and family relationships (Townsend, Hood, 2019).

In 2017, books were published on using horses in various therapies and as a tool for experimental education. It featured descriptions of exercises, analyses of influences and ways of analysing work with horses (Hallberg, 2017; Burgon, 2014). A lot of space was also devoted to the description and characteristics of the teacher/facilitator, who is responsible for the success or failure of the whole training process (Stock, Kolb, 2021).

Of particular note is an article that describes equine-based learning as a programme which involves innovative, underutilised, and motivating techniques and strategies that provide a dynamic process of building and developing leadership skills through horse-human interactions. The article offers a systematic literature review of the EBL method as innovative in teaching leadership competencies (Bilginoğlu, 2021).

Several studies have explored the impact of equine-based learning on communication competences in various settings, including leadership development programs and team-building exercises. These studies consistently demonstrate positive outcomes in communication skills development among participants.

The study conducted by Kummer and colleagues (Bilginoğlu, 2021) examined the effects of equine-assisted leadership training on communication competences among managers in a corporate setting. The participants engaged in activities such as leading horses through obstacle courses and non-verbal communication exercises. The findings revealed significant improvements in active listening, non-verbal communication, empathy, and assertiveness among the participants. The experiential nature of the training allowed managers to practice and refine their communication skills in a dynamic and engaging environment.

Another study by Perkins and colleagues (2018) explored the impact of equine-based learning on communication competences in a team-building context. The participants engaged in collaborative activities with horses, such as guiding them through a series of tasks. The findings showed that the participants developed stronger communication skills, including effective teamwork, clear and concise communication, and adaptability. The interactive nature of the activities with horses allowed participants to experience the immediate impact of their communication choices and adjust their approach accordingly.

In contrast, when it comes to methods of using horses in a military context, research primarily refers to military veterans who have experienced trauma. The most recent literature review on this topic can be found in Marchand (2023). There is limited research on the military and military training methods, so it remains to be seen whether equine-based learning can be used in officer training, using communication competence as an example.

3. Methodology

Methodology employed in conducting the research, which aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of equine-based learning as method to enhance communication competencies among military leaders. The study utilized a combination of self-assessment questionnaires, pre and post-course, as well as interviews with participants and analysis of their personal diaries.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. The use of self-assessment questionnaires allowed for quantitative data collection, enabling the measurement of participants' perceptions and changes in various aspects before and after the course. These questionnaires were carefully designed to capture relevant information related to the training process and its impact on the participants, based on previous literature review.

In addition to the questionnaires, qualitative data was gathered through interviews with the participants. These interviews provided an opportunity to delve deeper into their experiences, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the effects of equine-based learning. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were covered consistently across all participants.

To further enrich the qualitative data, participants were also encouraged to maintain personal diaries throughout the training process. These diaries served as a reflective tool, enabling participants to document their thoughts, emotions, and observations during their interactions with the horses. The analysis of these diaries provided valuable insights into the participants' subjective experiences and the transformative nature of equine-based learning.

Participants were subjected to participant observation during all assignments throughout the course. This method was intended to verify the correctness of the tasks set and their evaluation.

The research was conducted over a period of 10 weeks, during which participants engaged in a series of equine-based learning sessions. The training process involved various activities, such as observation, building trust, following, verbal and non-verbal communication exercises. The participants' progress was monitored throughout the course, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of the training's effectiveness.

The research was conducted among 2nd and 3rd year cadets from military academies in Poland, Portugal, Austria, Latvia and Romania.

The cadets were given a self-assessment form on communication competence to complete before the course started. In addition, they were assessed by experts (3) on verbal communication, public speaking, and non-verbal communication. The self-assessment form consisted of 10 closed questions with answers on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 lack of communication skills and competencies at the verbal and non-verbal level; 5 communication skills and competencies at a level requiring no further training). The exact form of assessment was used

at the end of the course. In addition, the cadets kept a diary describing the tasks, feelings, fears, and successes after each session. The respondents described their emotions and those of the people they observed. This diary formed part of the final competence assessment. Participant observation was carried out by the teachers and the other workshop participants during the tasks.

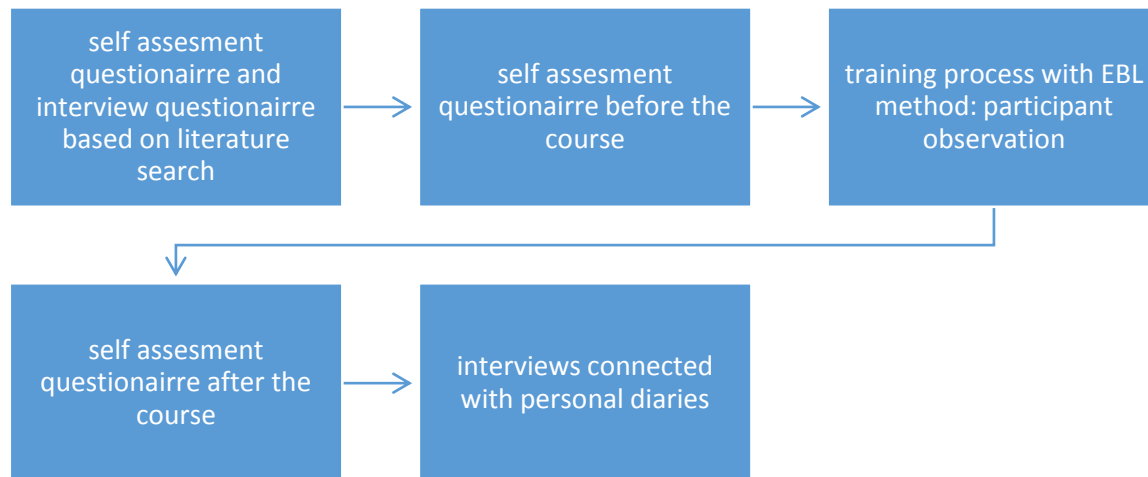


Figure 1. Methodology process.

The workshop consisted of 6 meetings. One meeting lasted between 6 and 8 hours, during which the participants performed the tasks and observed the other participants. Task 5 was done multiple times with different people in the leader position.

Prior to conducting the interviews, an ethnographic approach was taken to begin the research, since few days were spent in the field observing the training before conducting interviews (Van Maanen, 2011). Field notes were kept during that time, which ultimately influenced the development of subsequent interview questions. The purpose of the qualitative study was to answer the question, “What factors of experiential learning in the context of equine-assisted learning contribute to communication competences development?” Semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately an hour were conducted using an interview protocol to understand the experience of engagement with horses in an organizational learning exercise and how participation in this exercise benefit individuals on a personal and organizational level. From the 72 interviews, 609 pages of transcribed text were analyzed and 963 codable moments were identified using a coding software program (Kuckartz, Radiker, 2019). These codable moments initially fell into 68 codes. Through constant comparative method, the number of codes was reduced as similarities in the data were identified and thematic categories emerged, which allowed us to generalize our findings (Glaser, Strauss, 2017). During the research conducted, results were achieved on the following levels: knowing oneself, communicating at a basic level, building trust, recognising one's role in a team, and being able to communicate non-verbally in an international environment.

4. Results

A qualitative study was conducted with 72 cadets from military universities in European Union (Poland, Portugal, Latvia, Romania, Austria).

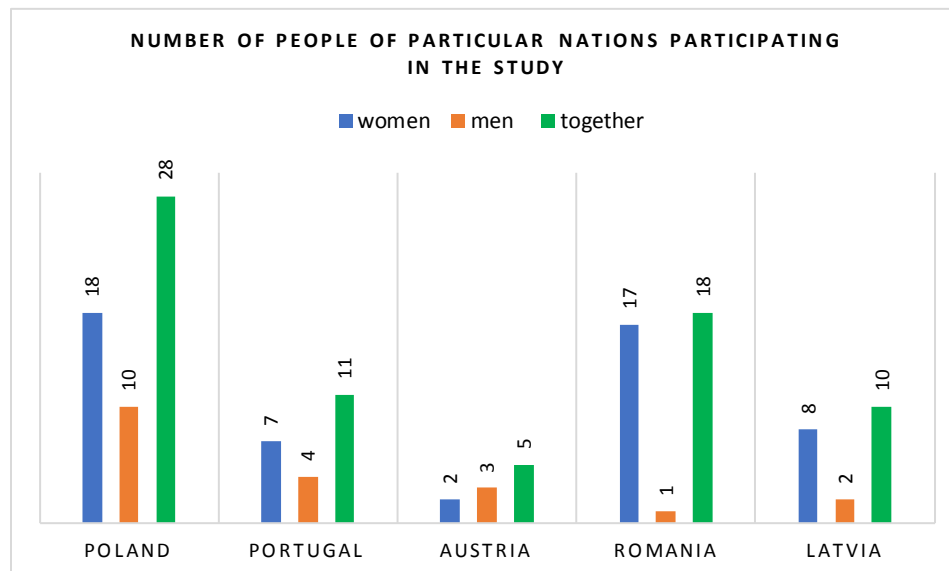


Figure 2. Number of people of particular nations participating in the study.

After each task, the participant was to write their observations and reflections in a diary. What they realised, what strengths and weaknesses they have concerning communication skills.

Table 1.

Learning activities and comments from diaries

No.	Learning task	Activities	Representative quotes (diary)
1	Observation of herd behaviour	The course participants were given a herd of horses to observe while they were at large in a fenced paddock. They had the task of monitoring the hierarchy in the herd, how priority was set, and how the animals communicated with each other	<i>Teacher say, 'Think about a time when you were having to deal with new people and the feedback you were getting from them, and how did you respond? How did you act? Is that similar to how you acted with the horses?'</i> She was 100% right.
2	Establishing contact	One by one, the participants entered a 20m diameter round pen. The most distrustful horses are selected for this task. The participant is tasked with approaching the horse, causing it not to run away and, with the man gone, to come the horse of its own accord.	<i>I found the task at this class stressful, by the number of people watching me, as I don't feel comfortable in the centre of attention. Because it was my second meeting so closely with a horse, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it, but I didn't feel anxious about the horse but about my communication abilities. At the same time, I noticed that thanks to the classes and the contact with the animals, I forgot about my private problems. The classes allowed me to clear my head and focus on the task and what was happening to the recipient of my message.</i>

Cont. table 1.

3	Following (non-verbal communication)	The participants individually entered a round pen with a diameter of 20m. There were three gates set up in the centre. He had the task of making the animal follow him through the set 3 gates with his posture and tone of voice. The participant was not allowed to use a halter or, in any other way, forcibly cause it to follow. In two places, the horse was to stand and observe the participant back.	<i>The exercise showed that horses and people can have completely different personalities and be uncomfortable in each other's company, which is why not everyone did the exercise. I must approach each person/horse with a different attitude, tone, and posture. Hardening into one attitude causes more problems than I thought.</i>
4	Working in pairs (verbal communication)	One person gets a horse on a halter, and the other, with their eyes covered, puts their hand on the horse's shoulder. In front of them, they have an obstacle course of gates to cross. The leader explains the path before them so the blind person and the horse pass the obstacle course without harming them.	<i>I felt much more comfortable leading the horse rather than walking beside it. After all the classes, I have gained a lot of confidence in the horses, no longer fear them, and feel more comfortable doing the tasks we have to do in the classes. It is the same when working with people. I have learnt what and how to show the other person to go with me. How do we explain to him what will be in front of us? The confidence-building tasks above all drew my attention to building confidence in myself and trusting my abilities. And that if I trust myself, others will trust me.</i>
5	Giving instructions (verbal communication)	An obstacle course in a fenced area includes gates, a slalom and a bridge. One person designated as leader stands in the middle. The other three people stay with the horse. All persons are blindfolded. One person leads the horse, and the others put their hand on either side of its shoulder blades. The leader's task is to lead the team through the obstacle course.	<i>The exercise made me realise I needed more self-confidence, making it hard to do the obstacle course task. The horse I was doing the task with sensed my stress as I could feel the horse slowing down a step to match my step. As a leader, I already know that I need to embrace the whole group, not just speak to the person who seems to be most active (the person leading the horse), but convey information in a way that everyone understands me (the people walking on either side of the horse).</i>

The overall level of change in the communicative competence of military leaders was examined, as well as its dependence on nation, gender and experience.

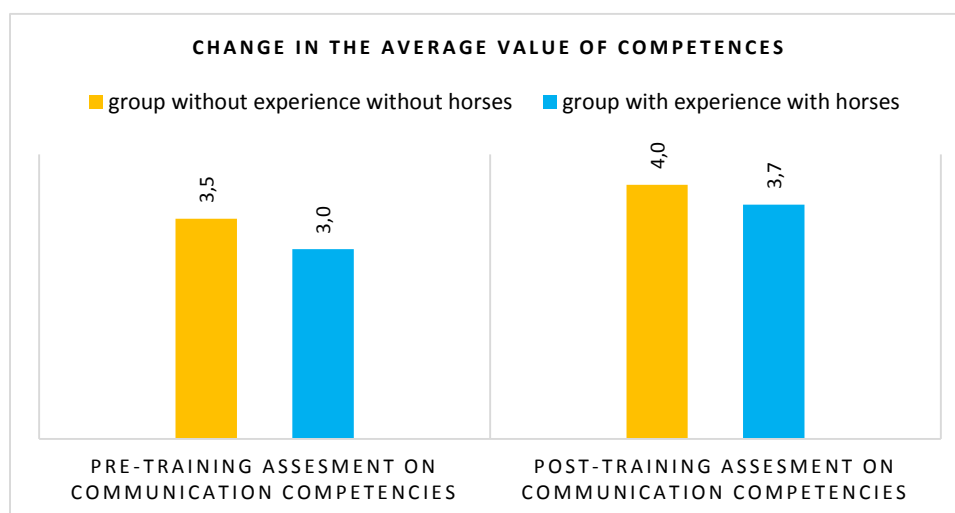


Figure 3. Change in the average value of competences.

As for the group of people (larger) who had no previous experience with horses, progress can be seen in verbal and non-verbal communication. The graph shows the results of cadets from the four countries, as the Portuguese had all experience with horses. Austria's result shows no change in competence due to the small number of participants (5). The largest groups were from Poland (28) and Romania (18); we can see the impact of verbal and non-verbal communication competencies.

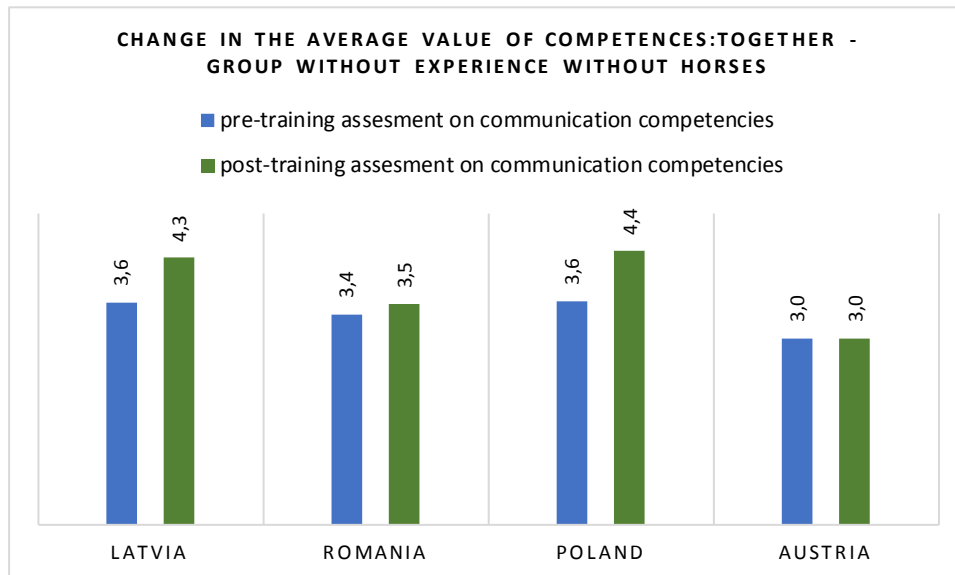


Figure 4. Change in the average value of competences: together – group without experience with horses.

Regarding the cadets from the two countries that include horse riding in their programme, namely Poland and Portugal, we can see a significant improvement in competence among the men from Poland. At the same time, it remained at one level among the Portuguese.

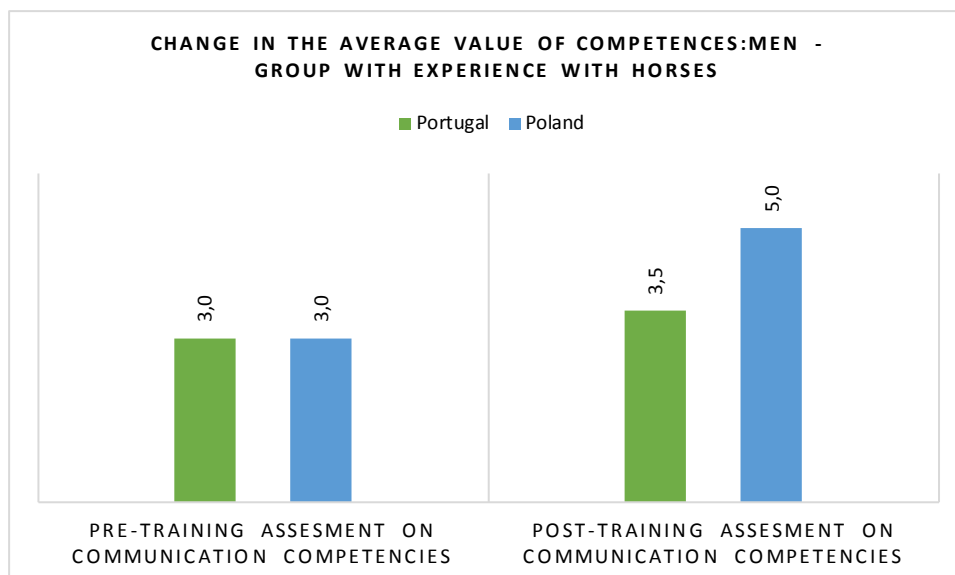


Figure 5. Change in the average value of competences: together – group with experience with horses.

The results are different among women. As far as Polish women are concerned, they show an increase in competence, as do Portuguese women. Only Litvianian women has no change in their competencies.

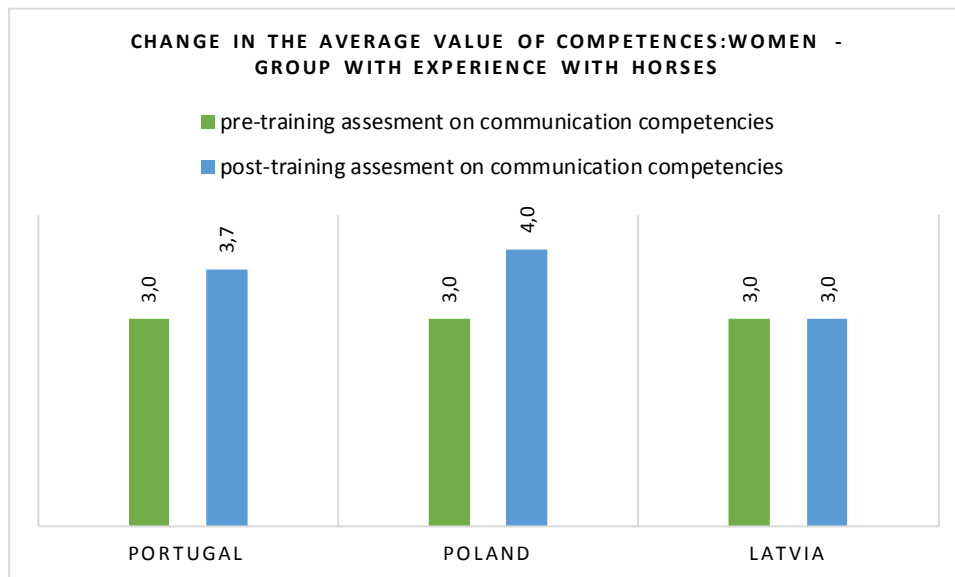


Figure 6. Change in the average value of competences: women – group with experience with horses (due to the nations).

The research results prove that exercises with horses aimed at improving communication competence improve in military leaders, regardless of gender, nationality or previous experience with horses.

5. Discussion

By understanding the impact of equine-based learning on communication skills development, military organizations can make informed decisions about incorporating this approach into their leadership training programs. Ultimately, the goal is to equip military leaders with the necessary communication competences to effectively lead their teams and accomplish their missions.

While there is existing research on equine-based learning in various contexts, there is a need for further exploration of its application in military leadership training. This article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the potential of equine-based learning as a valuable tool for enhancing communication competences among military leaders.

Research on a group of cadets had the advantage that research in the army could be called 'laboratory' research. There was no room for personal resentment or refusal to perform tasks here. A handicap in terms of communicative competence was that working in an international environment, the cadets had to speak a language that was not native to any - English.

At the same time, speaking a foreign language facilitated the issue of non-verbal communication, as even among themselves, the cadets often used facial expressions or gestures to achieve the goal of being understood.

As for a linguistic perspective, especially with communicative competence, the question arises about how much the study group members found it difficult to express their opinions in a foreign language. That is, how much of the research results are reliable during the tasks and the final interview. The same exercises should be conducted in the local language, and results should be compared.

Looking from the perspective of the research group, one has to question whether the research sample was sufficient to draw such far-reaching conclusions. In addition, it should be emphasised that the cadets from Poland and Portugal mostly had previous experience with equestrianism, and this may distort the outcome of the study, as they behave more freely around horses and use different communication techniques than humans. For this reason, it is advisable to adapt the tasks to the other groups in terms of experience. It should be noted that those who had previous experience with horses (rode horses) raised their level of competence less than those with no prior contact with horses.

It should also be asked how representative the results of the Austrian and Latvian cadets are. The Austrians partly had a top-down negative attitude towards the exercises given, considering them "meaningless" and "useless". The question is whether this is a national or cultural trait or whether such representatives happened to be in the group.

The cadets taking part in the training were assigned to it by order, which made it impossible to work only with those interested in the subject. Hence, comments such as "it doesn't do anything" or "working with a dumb animal is very different from commanding people" may appear in diaries and during the interview.

To achieve the total result of the research on equine-based learning to improve communication competence, we must focus on a more extensive research group and limit ourselves to one nation. Research should also be done separately among people with equine experience and those without. The specific organisational culture of an institution such as the military also influences the results. The extent of communication competence among soldiers differs from that required by civilian organisations. It would be necessary to carry out training to improve communication competence among employees of institutions with different organisational cultures to draw generalising conclusions.

While equine-based learning is a promising approach to enhancing communication competences among military leaders, further research is needed to explore its long-term effects and its applicability to different organizational contexts, as civilian world.

However, traditional communication training methods may not always adequately address the complex and dynamic nature of communication in the workplace.

6. Conclusion

In recent years, there has been growing interest in alternative approaches to leadership training that incorporate experiential learning and non-traditional methods. One such approach is equine-based learning, which involves interactions between humans and horses to develop leadership and communication skills. Horses have a unique ability to provide immediate feedback and mirror human emotions and behaviors, making them ideal partners for leadership development.

While equine-based learning has been primarily explored in military leadership training, its potential for enhancing communication competences in civilian organizations is promising. By leveraging the unique qualities of horses, such as their ability to provide immediate and honest feedback, equine-based learning can offer managers a dynamic and immersive training experience that enhances their communication skills.

Equine-based learning also promotes self-awareness, as managers must reflect on their communication style and its impact on the horse's response. This self-reflection allows managers to identify their strengths and areas for improvement, leading to personal growth and enhanced communication competences. By gaining insights into their communication patterns and receiving immediate feedback from the horse, managers can make adjustments and refine their communication skills.

Incorporating equine-based learning into manager training programs can offer several benefits for organizations. Firstly, it provides a unique and engaging learning experience that breaks away from traditional classroom settings. The hands-on nature of equine-based learning allows managers to apply their communication skills in a real-world context, making the training more practical and impactful.

Secondly, equine-based learning fosters a sense of teamwork and collaboration. Managers often participate in group activities and exercises with horses, requiring effective communication and coordination among team members. These activities promote a sense of unity and shared purpose, enhancing team dynamics and communication within the organization.

Furthermore, equine-based learning can help managers develop a more empathetic and understanding approach to communication. By interacting with horses, managers learn to read non-verbal cues and respond appropriately, which translates into improved empathy and understanding of their employees' non-verbal communication.

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