

# IJPLC International Journal of Presencing Leadership & Coaching

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EQUINE-ASSISTED LEARNING TO DEVELOP PRESENCING MASTERY

**Lissa Pohl, MA**

Chief Engagement Officer, The Engagement Quotient

---

**Abstract:** This article introduces Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) as an embodied and effective methodology for cultivating presencing mastery. The aim is to contribute to the growing repertoire of Emerging Presencing Approaches (EPAs) that among other developments, advance the shift from presencing as a way of knowing to presencing as a generative way of being (Gunnlaugson, 2024). The article further explores the critical roles of clean feedback, intersubjective dynamics, and co-iterative relational processes in facilitating the development of presencing mastery. By situating presencing mastery firmly within the body, EAL offers a pathway for leaders to increase their resilience and efficacy in navigating the complex, fragmented, and often disengaged social systems of contemporary organizational life. In this context, presencing mastery emerges not only as a theoretical construct but as a living, embodied practice critical for leadership development in an era marked by escalating complexity and relational fragmentation.

**Keywords:** Presencing Mastery, Equine-Assisted Learning, EAL, Somatic Intelligence, Emerging Presencing Approaches, Dynamic Presencing, Feedback, Integral Theory, Conversational Leadership

---

### I. Integral Theories and Presencing Mastery

Integral and somatic perspectives on leadership development have steadily emerged over the past three decades. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, integral leadership models such as Torbert's Action Inquiry, Kegan and Lahey's Transformational Languages, Scharmer's Theory U, and Wilber's Integral Philosophy began to influence the field. While these models acknowledge the importance of incorporating the body into leadership development, many of these approaches remain fundamentally cognicentric, leading to what Bockler (2024) describes as the design of "intellectually

driven training regimes, prompting us to subjugate our multidimensional nature to extrinsic goals and performance measures—which most likely inhibit the autonomous maturation of our other intelligences and potentially catalyze individual and collective existential burnout."

By defaulting to linear and subjective learning methods—such as assessments, journaling, meditation, and self-reflection—leadership development approaches often emphasize the knowing and doing aspects of leadership while neglecting the embodied being of leadership itself. This omission represents a critical gap. As Winther (2013) asserts, "In order to evolve an authentic leadership, a person's basis for awareness of self, both in a somatic and a symbolic sense, must be experienced and expressed through the body."

Wilber (2000) describes an "integral vision" as one that "attempts to include matter, body, mind, and spirit as they appear in self, culture, and nature." At its essence, integral experience emphasizes interconnectedness—within oneself, with others, and with the broader environment. Ralph Kilmann (2001), a prominent figure in conflict management, argues that achieving such a holistic way of seeing, thinking, and behaving requires a "mental revolution" in self-aware consciousness. Yet, to be truly integral, this paradigm requires more than a shift in cognition—it demands what Pohl (2006) calls a somatic revolution.

Somatics, as Blake (2009) defines it, "refers to the art and science of living in the human body; to the inherent and inescapable unity of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world—the place where sensation [perception], emotion, and cognitive interpretation of events all meet and interact to form one's moment-to-moment experience of life." While some integral models reference embodied learning—whether through language (Kegan & Lahey, 2001) or movement-based practices (Strozzi-Heckler, 2003; Palmer, 2017; Hayashi, 2025)—they do not fully or explicitly leverage the body's innate intelligence to respond to, and develop a more comprehensive awareness of, what is actually occurring when one is presencing.

Thus, grasping the concept of presence—and cultivating presencing mastery—remains elusive when not integrated through the intelligence of the body. Put simply, one cannot learn to access presencing or sense the emerging future solely through intellectual study or theoretical exploration. As embodied beings, we must ask: How does one consciously learn to enter and sustain a state of presencing, and to sense the emerging future as it unfolds?

## II. The Forgotten Intelligence: Re-Membering the Body

In guiding individual leaders and groups through transformational learning processes, practitioners often overlook or take for granted a critical human capacity—our "sense-abilities", or the ability to utilize all five senses to supplement intuition. Yet, it is precisely this holistic somatic

awareness that forms the foundation of how we experience and perceive our environment. Ignoring the body's inherent wisdom is akin to operating a vehicle firing on only three of its four cylinders: it may move forward, but the ride is rough, inefficient, and unnecessarily taxing. In contrast, tuning up the full "engine" of our being—by integrating all faculties of awareness—enables a more efficient, aligned, and generative experience.

When we cultivate balance and integration among our intellectual (IQ), emotional (EQ), physical (PQ), and spiritual (SQ) intelligences, we become more congruent, fully aligned, and capable of inhabiting our source of being. From this congruence, we are better able to "show up" in every sense of the word—embodying transformative leadership and relational authenticity (Pohl, 2006). (See Figure 1.0).

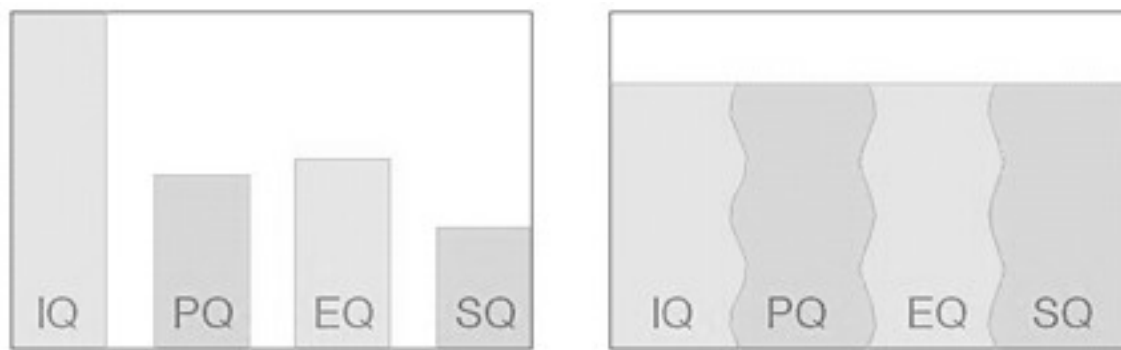


Figure 1.0 Imbalanced Non-integral experience

Balanced Integral experience

Throughout human evolution, the body's primal roles—securing safety, finding food and shelter, and ensuring species survival—have been progressively overshadowed by intellectual, emotional, and spiritual pursuits. In contemporary life, the body is often reduced to a mere vehicle transporting these pursuits, rather than honored as an integral source of intelligence and relational capacity. What possibilities might emerge if the full spectrum of the body's capacities were invited to "sit in the front seat" alongside intellect and emotion—playing an equal role in how we communicate, lead, educate, and create the future?

The integration of body, mind, emotion, and spirit is gaining traction within leadership development. Richard Strozzi-Heckler, founder of the Strozzi Institute, has pioneered somatic coaching and team-building programs that emphasize leadership as a somatic phenomenon. Drawing on his sixth-degree black belt in aikido, Strozzi-Heckler (2003) argues that the body is indistinguishable from the self, and that "it is essential to include the body if one wants to build the skills of exemplary leadership."

Similarly, aikido master Wendy Palmer's Leadership Embodiment program teaches participants to shift their physiological responses to environmental stressors through aikido-based and mindfulness practices. Her work is rooted in both Eastern wisdom traditions and neurobiological research on how hormones such as testosterone, cortisol, and oxytocin influence bodily responses in varying contexts. Through simple centering techniques and embodied relational practices, leaders develop stronger, more grounded leadership presence.

David Whyte, philosopher, poet, and leadership consultant, underscores the voice as an embodied vehicle of leadership. In *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, Whyte (1994) writes, "The voice literally emerges from the body as a representation of our inner world. It carries our experience from the past, our hopes and fears for the future, and the emotional resonance of the moment." He argues that inhabiting the body through the voice represents "one of the great soul challenges of adult life" (1994). A leader attuned to the embodied resonance of their voice—its strength, its location within the body, its congruence—cultivates greater influence, relational presence, and authenticity. Yet this capacity requires what Whyte sees as psychological curiosity, fortitude, and maturity, qualities essential to leadership effectiveness.

Otto Scharmer, founder of Theory U, asserts that developing our "deep innate capacities to sense and actualize the future" constitutes the single most critical leadership capacity for the 21st century (Scharmer, 2005). His concept of presencing is defined as "sensing and bringing into the present one's highest future potential—the future that depends upon us to bring it into being" (Scharmer, 2005). Theory U integrates emotional intelligence (EQ), intellectual intelligence (IQ), and spiritual intelligence (SQ) through reflective dialogues and group facilitation processes. To address the embodied dimension, Scharmer's Presencing Institute includes Arawana Hayashi's Social Presencing Theater, a movement-based practice that helps participants engage somatically with "current reality and emerging future possibilities" (Hayashi, 2023).

Olen Gunnlaugson, founder of Dynamic Presencing, offers a critical refinement of presencing practice. Gunnlaugson (2023) notes that for some practitioners, physical movement-based approaches may distract from attending to the "nuances of inner movement" that are essential to cultivating presencing as a way of being. He argues that "a more interior approach to embodiment is needed to help ground and stabilize our presencing awareness" (p. 119). Within this frame, Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) becomes a powerful medium—where horses serve as relational partners who reflect and stabilize the practitioner's inner presencing movements in real time.

Hence, while numerous integral and somatic models gesture toward embodied leadership, Equine-Assisted Learning uniquely enables a living, relational, and somatically grounded encounter with presencing, offering a direct pathway into the forgotten intelligence of the body.

### III. The Intersubjective and Co-Iterative Creation of Knowing and Being

At the intersection of "you and me," there is much more occurring than the exchange of ideas or perspectives. Sabetti and Freligh (as cited in Winther, 2001) observe, "In every professional context, there is an important space. The space is never empty but is charged with atmosphere, energy, meaning, possibilities, and disturbances." This insight reflects what has become evident in my own work as a somatic intelligence coach—that co-iterative interventions, which foster the intersubjective nature of relationship, can facilitate access to presencing and the ongoing development of presencing mastery.

Iteration, as Bhattacharya (2019) describes, refers to experimenting by practicing a creative process repeatedly, while co-iteration involves engaging in this experimental process with others. Intersubjectivity, a key concept in social science, is defined as "the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals" (Scheff, 2015) or, as noted in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2025), as "involving or occurring between separate conscious minds." This relational quality is foundational to the unfolding of presencing, yet it remains underexplored in many models of presencing practice.

Cathy Hawk, creator of the somatic coaching method Lights On Leadership, emphasizes that the potential for transformation resides in the space between two people, and that a relational intelligence emerges when this space is consciously attended to. Hawk argues that such relational intelligence, when witnessed and sensed, can lead both individuals and groups toward fundamental shifts in consciousness (Hawk, 2011). It is through systematic access to this relational presencing space—rather than solely relying on subjective reflection, mindfulness practices, or individual movement—that the development of presencing mastery may be most effectively facilitated.

Importantly, consciousness itself is derived from conscientia, meaning "knowing with." This etymology suggests that it is through our relational and intersubjective connections with others and our environment that we come to know ourselves. Philosopher Christian de Quincey (1998) emphasizes that without conscientia, communication would be impossible and evolution would become a chance event—highlighting the fundamental role of relationality in human becoming. In alignment with this view, Scharmer and Pomeroy (2024), in their discussion of fourth-person knowing, introduce the notion of a shared relational knowing that transcends individual subjectivity. They write:

Fourth-person knowing has a particular quality of being neither my knowing nor yours, neither solely outside nor inside me, but rather something beginning to articulate from a

different source that operates beyond these distinctions (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024). Applied artist and transpersonal psychologist Jessica Bockler (2024) supports a similar view in her definition of presencing as "a participatory practice, informed by the multi-dimensional contexts which shape what happens in the space between us." These insights collectively underscore that presencing is not solely an individual act, but an intersubjective process co-created in real time through relationship.

Indeed, we often know we have entered a presencing space because we sense in our bodies a shift—an opening, a liminality, a shared spaciousness—indicative of a co-iterative unfolding. However, while such moments may be fleeting or elusive, the deeper question remains: How can we consciously leverage these multi-dimensional relational contexts—not only from an intellectual perspective but also from a somatic one—to systematically cultivate and sustain presencing and foster presencing mastery?

#### IV. The Crucial Role of Feedback in Learning Presencing Mastery

Alongside the co-iterative and intersubjective nature of presencing, somatic feedback plays a crucial role in developing presencing mastery. Feedback, as organizational researchers Rothwell and Kazanas (1998) note, has been regarded as “the single most significant non-instructional solution to human performance problems” (p. 241). Their research highlights that both the clarity and timeliness of feedback are essential to addressing performance issues. From this perspective, feedback becomes a necessary element of learning and development, particularly for leaders navigating complex environments.

In his work *The Discipline of Conscious Conversation: Principles and Practices*, psychologist Louis Cox (2008) emphasizes the importance of paying attention "to the data presented to our senses from our own and others' bodies, our environment, and from nature." Cox argues that noticing and working with somatic information has the potential to influence behavior and improve the quality of our interventions. More than that, he suggests that engaging with this level of data “could be the difference between our survival and our demise as a team, as a larger human system, as well as a planet” (Cox, 2008).

From this standpoint, I contend that the development of presencing mastery depends not only on timely feedback but also on the quality of that feedback. Specifically, feedback needs to be clean and delivered in a psychologically safe way and environment. Clean feedback requires that the person offering it consciously separate observable data—what is actually seen, heard, or sensed—from judgments or assumptions. As Walker (n.d.) explains, clean feedback is based on “objective evidence, [observable data] that all parties concerned saw, heard, smelled, or felt” and is “devoid of

judgment, inference, and projection.”

Delivering clean feedback, however, is difficult for most people. Yet horses, by nature, offer nothing but clean, immediate feedback. They respond directly to how others show up, without interpretation or bias. In this way, horses model an essential skill for presencing mastery—the capacity to offer and respond to feedback that is grounded in the reality of the present moment.

Thus, becoming students of horses as somatic feedback experts allows us to practice receiving feedback in a way that is immediate, embodied, and relational. Through this process, we also engage the intersubjective nature of relationship—experiencing presencing not as a solitary act, but as a shared relational event.

## V. ‘Sense-Able’ Like a Horse: Presencing in Real Time

The field of Equine-Assisted Services (EAS) has been steadily growing over the past 30 years. EAS is a unifying term that refers to multiple services in which professionals incorporate horses and other equines to benefit people (Wood, Alm, Benjamin, Thomas, Anderson, Pohl, Kane 2021). This field is comprised of three distinct service areas: therapy, Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL), and horsemanship. Equine-Assisted Learning is distinct from therapy services that incorporate horses because of how the interaction with the horse is facilitated and debriefed. For example, a therapy session that incorporates horses involves a licensed therapy professional who teams up with an equine specialist to deliver a specific type of therapy, which may include psychotherapy, physical therapy, speech pathology, among others (Wood et al., 2021).

EAL encompasses three non-therapy areas of learning: equine-assisted learning in education, organizations, and personal development. It is a facilitated experiential learning modality in which people engage with horses through ground activities to learn leadership competencies, strategic thinking, team building, and emotional intelligence (Dyk, Cheung, Pohl, Noriega, Lindgreen 2012), through relational problem solving, feedback, and leveraging somatic intelligence and presence. In organizational contexts, EAL enlists a professional or coach with expertise in both working with horses and organizational settings, who utilizes a coaching model to facilitate learning. While similar to other experiential learning programs, EAL has the added element of working with horses, whose varied and unpredictable personalities, attitudes, moods, and natural behaviors create unique and stimulating experiences that leverage the human-horse relationship (Equine Experiential Education Association, 2021).

An EAL session uses ground activities with horses that challenge participants to utilize somatic intelligence competencies—along with their IQ, EQ, and PQ—to influence their equine partners in accomplishing clearly defined goals. This might involve walking with a horse on a lead

rope around cones and having the horse willingly walk next to them without stopping or veering off course. Another activity could include moving a horse that is off the lead rope into a box made from poles in the middle of an arena, without touching the horse or speaking to team members during the activity.

Equine-Assisted Learning effectively marries the notion of conscientia—"knowing with"—with the body's innate ability to decipher and leverage somatic feedback to sense the emerging future and explore effective actions. This form of experiential learning provides an embodied way to cultivate presence and fourth-person knowing—contrasted with models that are primarily based on cognitive shifts. In fact, EAL facilitators often observe that the more an individual works from their head, the less willing the horse is to engage with them. EAL offers a safe environment for participants to experiment, pressing pause on left-brain thinking and engaging in an exploration of "the relational and embodied dimensions of presencing [that] are critical to any path of mastery" (Carrillo, 2024), both inside and outside the arena.

To successfully collaborate with a horse, participants need to develop the ability to receive and process honest, in-the-moment, objective feedback from the horse, suspend linear thinking, co-regulate their emotional responses, become fully present to sensing the relationship between horse and human, and remain curious about where that co-iterative relationship may lead. This is what Torbert and associates (2004) refer to as developing super-vision—a trans-cognitive phenomenon that requires our body and brain to multitask (Torbert, 1972), and "to expand body awareness from an isolated, strictly internal state to the balanced awareness of the body in its immediate environment, now!" (Shambo, 2013).

Torbert and associates (2004) observed that "few of us go on to the profound field of adult learning wherein we seek to directly engage the fourth territory of experience—our attention itself, our super-vision." Simply put, most people are only aware of what they are focusing on or thinking about in a given moment, rather than holding a global awareness, or unified consciousness, similar to that of a horse.

Horsemanship coach Chris Irwin speaks directly to this capacity for developing super-vision and becoming present with horses. "When you are with a horse, consistency is how she measures integrity, so the horse must be your primary focus all the time [somatically reading the environment]. She needs your constant reassurance that everything is in control, and everything from your position [physical alignment] to your bearing [moving forward], breathing [emotional regulation], and even the subtlest gestures must reflect this... If we want horses to focus their attention on us, we must learn to focus ours on them. That's easy enough to do in spurts. The real trick is to learn to maintain it for as long as we need to" (Irwin, 2005). (See Figure 2.)



Torbert suggests that one reason super-vision is so rarely utilized is because very few people can sustain this quality of attention and presence for extended periods, as it requires individuals to leverage perceptual muscles that are rarely used in everyday life.

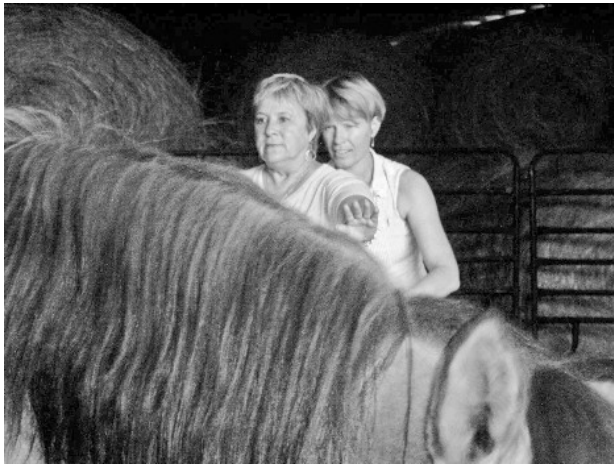


Figure 2.0 Developing and practicing Super-vision with a horse.

Equine-Assisted Learning, in the context of leadership development, provides a powerful learning environment where participants can explore their leadership effectiveness or address individual and organizational challenges through the lens of a non-verbal, somatic, prey-animal partner. The feedback horses offer is both timely and clean, as they respond authentically and honestly to how a person is showing up—without judgment, story, or projection.

Because horses are social herd animals and prey animals, their survival depends on members of their herd being authentic, using clear, transparent, non-verbal communication, and responding immediately to potential threats. It is no different for participants in an EAL session. Often, the feedback horses offer startles participants into a new somatic awareness, revealing habitual, egoic behaviors. EAL offers a direct somatic experience "that connects us directly to reality and the depths of our immediate presence in a way that is non-separate, inclusive, and co-constitutive of who we actually are" (Gunnlaugson, 2024, p. 218).

Moreover, just as up to 93% of human communication is non-verbal (Mehrabian, 2009), horses highlight how much of our interaction occurs beyond words. Participants in EAL sessions are required to develop proficiency in body language, moving beyond habitual reliance on verbal communication to read and respond to real-time feedback from the horse. This is similar to what Bockler (2024) describes as "active receptivity"—"a key relational skill, involving the continuous calibration of small, immediate adjustments in perception and action arising from moment-to-moment awareness in the relational space, like a playful movement improvisation arising between dancers." In this relational space, horses let us know—clearly and without judgment—when they are

willing to "dance" with us, offering a profound practice of presencing in real time.

## VI. The Buddha Nature of Horses

Anyone can access deeper sources of embodied presence through felt-sense exercises by connecting to the ground of their being (Bockler, 2024). As Schuyler (2013) explains:

In Buddhism, the ground refers to the foundation of being, our buddha nature, an aspect of ourselves that is already perfect and always present. It is the seed within all sentient beings that connects them with one another and with life, and makes enlightenment a possibility. When people are in touch with gravity and the ground of their being, it can be seen in the way they walk, the way they look in your eyes.

Horses naturally and instinctively seek this grounded quality of being in their herd members and are highly sensitized to how body movements and posture convey leadership and safety. If they do not sense this grounding when a human approaches or attempts to accomplish a task, the horse will often become uncomfortable and may move away or shut down and refuse to engage.

For instance, when a person is nervous and operating from their head—or is emotionally incongruent (nervous but pretending to be calm)—the horse instinctively avoids the non-coherent and incongruent energy, signaling a lack of relational connection. Yet, the moment that person successfully grounds themselves by breathing, centering through their feet, and connecting with themselves and the horse, is the same moment the horse stops fidgeting, lowers its head, softens its eyes and mouth, and relaxes. This immediate feedback from the horse is co-iterative and serves as confirmation to the human that they are influencing the horse's behavior through their own capacity to become centered and present.

If an individual is unable to ground themselves and embody congruence, the horse will naturally seek out other beings—human or horse—who can provide that sense of safety and grounding. This dynamic is not unlike organizational life, where people often leave leaders or organizations that fail to embody grounded presence, connection, and safety. Leaders who lack coherence, relational attunement, and embodied congruence create environments where others feel unsafe or disconnected—just as a horse does in the presence of an ungrounded human.

Perhaps, because horses have four feet to our two, they are twice as grounded as humans. Their Buddha nature arises from their deeply grounded, non-predatory, instinctual present-moment awareness.

## VII. Congruence and Being Real – Join Up With A Horse

Successful collaboration and presencing with horses relies on the reciprocal and intersubjective nature of relationship, from both an internal and transcendent place of connection. Horses provide participants direct, in-the-moment feedback about organizational system pressure, communication breakdowns, and inauthentic intentions, in the instant in these organizational challenges show up. On the flipside, when a person can consistently access and maintain their present-moment awareness, it produces congruence between thought, feeling, and action. When they develop the ability to communicate a clear vision and intention, practice patience, and build trust and connection, the horse responds by “joining up” (Roberts, 2002). Join up is the moment when the horse decides to put their trust in the leader and willingly follows them anywhere they go without a halter or rope attached. (See Figure 3.0) This is analogous to when someone is seen and experienced as an authentic leader—someone who has integrity, who strives to earn the trust of their stakeholders, and who focuses on creating meaningful relationships with their team by using their inner compass to guide their actions (Gavin, 2019).

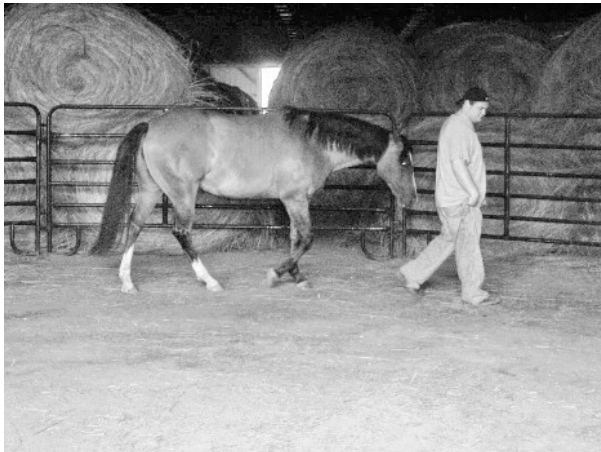


Figure 3.0 Join up with a horse.

Join up happens when trust between horse and human drops down to the underlying nature of reality, when the falling away of ego happens and the horse can sense that their human leader has become congruent, relationally accessible, and ‘real’ in the most natural sense. When skillfully facilitated, an equine-assisted learning program can attune us to “the fullness of what-is and our experience of reality as it is” (Gunnlaugson, 2024, p. 217). When a participant can somatically experience what it feels like in their body to lead a horse, they can then call upon this felt sense of knowing-with to somatically lead others toward the emerging future outside the horse arena.

When presencing becomes embodied, a participant may experience the flow state, as described by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow “creates within us

*International Journal of Presencing Leadership & Coaching* | June 2025 | Vol. 2, No. 1

the psychological qualities associated with being carried: a feeling of effortlessness and safety, and the inner knowledge that life has the power to carry us, if we allow it” (Flatischler, 1992, as cited in Burns, 2013). Developing presencing mastery requires people to “collectively operate in the flow mode, where magic happens in the mystery of co-creation” (Burns, 2013).

Describing the phenomenon of presencing is difficult. Scharmer describes the texture of the presencing experience as being in a liminal, altered state, or a state of grace (2005). It is equally challenging to describe the somatic experience of join up with a horse. When an EAL participant describes that moment of oneness with the horse, they are often dumbfounded and speechless. When they find the words, they describe it as magic, in the flow, connected, spiritual, and effortless. However, using words like “magic” and “mystery” is misleading, because the “flow” or join up experience of EAL is neither magic nor mysterious. It is a very real and tangible experience that can be consistently actualized when a person or group consciously leverages their ability to somatically engage others in relational problem-solving—observing, listening, and sharing with mind, heart, and will wide open; and going to the place of individual and collective stillness, opening to the source of creativity and presence, and linking to the future that wants to emerge (Scharmer, 2005).

## VIII. The Conversational Nature of Leadership and our Predatory Action Logic

Everything we do with horses is conversational. Every move we make, every breath we take (to borrow a well-known lyric), they are watching us. If we stop to listen with our eyes and senses, we will notice that they are always inviting us into conversation—asking questions in the way they look at us, and responding to our non-verbal answers. Questions like: Are you OK? Are we safe? Where are we going, and why are we going there? What do you want me to do right now? If we cannot answer these fundamental questions in the moment, it becomes difficult to create movement and momentum toward a common goal, connect relationally, or sense the emerging future together.

The most fundamental, and most invisible, conversations in which humans engage are linked to our instinctual predatory action logic. Everything about us communicates our predatory nature, from having eyes on the front of our heads—predisposing us to being myopically focused on goal setting (catching our prey)—to how our body language asserts control and dominion over others. The consequence of our unconscious dependence on words as our primary tool of communication, combined with our tendency to see horses as livestock rather than sentient beings who can teach us, precludes us from engaging in meaningful, embodied conversations that would support the development of presencing awareness with those we work with and lead.

Perhaps presencing mastery is inextricably linked to the process of fostering new conversations, both internally and externally. David Whyte contends that leadership effectiveness is

fundamentally linked to the conversations we have with ourselves, within our organizations, and in society (Whyte, 2022). Whyte suggests that “the first step toward a new conversation is to stop the conversation we are having now, usually one that we have inherited, from the organization or from a previous epoch in our lives... [and] to hold that exchange in a different and more fundamental way: to drink from a different well,” finding “a different way to tread” (Whyte, 2022).

Equine-Assisted Learning challenges and disrupts, on an embodied level, what we believe we know to be true about the predatory conversations we are having, because to successfully establish a collaborative relationship with a horse requires learning a new language—the language of Equus—and entering a completely foreign *modus operandi*: the prey paradigm. This empathic and somatic language encourages individuals and groups to “open their minds,” to “suspend their voice of judgment,” to “see with fresh eyes” (Scharmer, 2005), and to make visible the fundamental predator/prey conversation.

Making this conversation ‘visible’ in a somatic way, allows us to become aware of how our unconscious, instinctual predatory nature shows up in our leadership style. (See Figure 4.0). It allows a leader to experience the difference between ‘power over’, which results in compliance (Figure 4.0), and ‘power with’, which engenders collaboration through the adoption of the embodied concept of leading from behind (Figure 5.0).



Figure 4.0 Unconscious predatory body language directed at the horse’s head by a leader when dealing with increasingly challenging tasks with a horse. Resulting in an agitated, frustrated reaction from the horse.

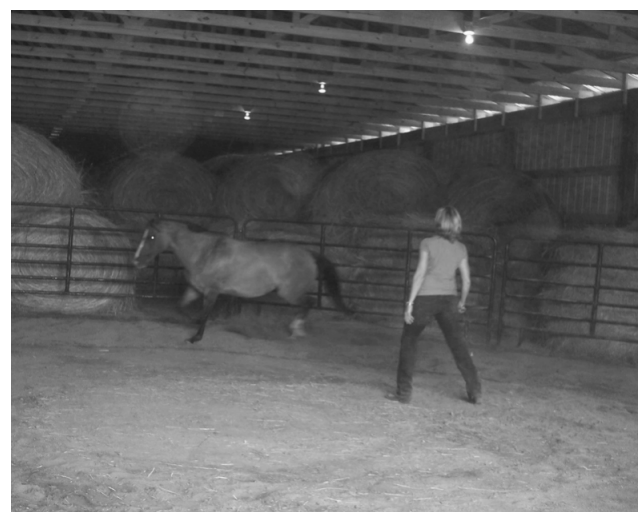


Figure 5.0 Conscious non-predatory body language directed at the horse’s hind quarters takes pressure off the head of the horse. Resulting in a willing forward movement from the horse.

As an EAL facilitator, I have witnessed these seemingly invisible and intangible conversations become very visible and tangible, due in large part to the horses asking us to become aware of our predatory body language and to let down our defenses, become vulnerable, and allow ourselves to be seen.

Equine-Assisted Learning is an embodied leadership experience that places people in a wordless, inter-species conversation, offering the opportunity to ‘tread’ unfamiliar trails that compel us to pause and confront our habitual, instinctual, and predatory ways of connecting, communicating, and collaborating with others. If the presencing process seeks to move people from ego- to eco-awareness (Scharmer, 2018), then what better way to do so than to place oneself in an egoless ecosystem—and learn to be one of the herd.

## IX. The Effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Learning to Develop Presencing Mastery

Most leaders come into an EAL experience with varying degrees of skepticism and cynicism. “How could a horse teach me anything about leadership?” is a familiar question heard by most organizational EAL coaches. Most people doubt that they will learn anything about themselves or gain insights or solutions to the challenges they face. However, by the end of a day working with horses, there are observable shifts and increased awareness about the distinctions between doing leadership and being a leader.

There are five reasons why working with horses encourages individuals to redirect and suspend their “voice of cynicism” (Scharmer, 2005) and move down the U towards presencing. First, the activities that participants engage in with horses hold metaphorical similarities to the challenges they are facing at work, either as a team or as an organization, which increases the transfer of learning to real-world contexts. Second, the non-conforming experiential nature of an EAL experience provides enough distance, space, and emotional safety for participants to observe how and when their default leadership behaviors show up—without the fear of confronting them face-to-face around a conference table in the urgency of an organizational challenge. Third, skillful debriefing of an activity with horses allows participants time to reflect on the assumptions, habits, beliefs, stories, and values that unconsciously shape behaviors and, in turn, produce results at work. Fourth, the honest feedback horses provide allows people to somatically, emotionally, and intellectually notice when their unconscious fear is operating, and to “let go” and come to ground, where they can sense the emerging future from a place of relational presencing. Fifth, once people know how to presense with horses, this embodied knowing can be “re-membered” when a similar situation arises in an organizational context.

Additionally, horses assist us in developing presencing mastery because, in part, they place us

in a state of reverie. “To be in reverie is to inhabit multiple layers of our consciousness all at once, to be fully aware of every bodily internal feeling while hazily hearing and seeing every ambient sound and sight [much like a horse’s natural state of attention]: to be present in this time now while inhabiting the timeless, employing the mind to re-interpret the future and even re-imagine the past” (Whyte, 2025). As Bockler points out, “The witnessing and nurturing presence of others can be enormously helpful here, as can be immersion in natural spaces radiating with vitality and abundance” (Bockler, 2021). Horses, when in a relaxed state, can offer people this nurturing presence, and can “support the transition of participants from an ordinary to a liminal (threshold) state... hold them in this liminal state, and then aid their safe return” (Bockler, 2021).

The learning insights gained from EAL continue to deepen over time because being in proximity to horses creates both a hormonal (release of the ‘bonding’ hormone oxytocin) and neurological response that is rewarding to our brains and makes us want to seek and recreate the experience again (Shambo, 2013). “All mammals have this innate circuitry which is not about rewards but the excitement of searching them out” (Panksepp, as cited in Shambo, 2013). This type of learning creates a snowball effect, becoming increasingly rewarding as one develops, practices, and fine-tunes their somatic intelligence, perceptual, and presencing awareness.

## X. Conclusion

Equine-assisted learning is an Emerging Presencing Approach (EPA) that supports leaders and coaches to ground, deepen, mature, and embody their presencing perception within the overall presencing process, and to develop “our presencing as an embodied organ of perception” (Gunnlaugson, 2024, p. 217). The highly somatic, clean, in-the-moment feedback that is foundational to EAL creates non-conforming and intersubjective experiences where people can enter a new perceptual and somatic paradigm, guiding them through a kind of metamorphosis to the next stage of development—one that allows us to check the ego and “open the aperture of awareness, so that we may perceive more of the world at large” (Bockler, 2024). Equine-assisted learning allows people to practice the process of presencing in ways that foster presencing mastery. Leaders and coaching practitioners can gain deeper insights into their own naturalness and the ground of their being, where they can sense “the true from the false, the real from the unreal, the important from the unimportant” (Meher Baba, 2000).

For this emerging presencing approach to be fully adopted by leaders and presencing practitioners, further exploration and research into the roles of clean feedback, relational intersubjectivity, and the conversational nature of leadership in facilitating presencing and developing presencing mastery is needed. If we are committed to cultivating presencing mastery, perhaps the natural next step is to seek out an apprenticeship with a known master—the horse.



## VIII. References

- Blake, A., (2017). Developing Somatic Intelligence: Leadership and the Neurobiology of Embodied Learning. Embright.org. Retrieved 6-7-17, from <http://embright.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Developing-Somatic-Intelligence-NLJ10x.pdf>
- Bhattacharya, S. (2019, April 17). The Power of Co-Iteration: Innovation happens when experts and non-experts experiment together. *Medium* Retrieved 3-13-25 from <https://medium.com/polynize/the-power-of-co-iteration-793720554a42>
- Bockler, J., (2024). Nurturing relational forms of presencing mastery. *International Journal of Presencing, Leadership and Coaching* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 7-23. <https://doi.org/10.69470/a2xyrv69>
- Boyatzis, R., Jack, A., Cesaro, R., Khawaja, M., Passarelli, A. (2010). *Coaching with Compassion: An fMRI study of coaching to the positive or negative emotional attractor*. Presented at the Academy of Management Annual Conference, Montreal, August, 2010
- Burn, S., (2013). The anatomy of leadership. In Lois Ruskai Melina, Gloria Burgess, Lena Falkman, Antonio Marturano (Eds). *The embodiment of leadership*: (pp. 65-83). International Leadership Association series Building Leadership Bridges. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass,
- Campbell, R., Jacobs, M., (2024). Developing presencing mastery: Drawing from the works of Theory U, Dynamic Presencing, mindfulness practice and systems being. *International Journal of Presencing, Leadership and Coaching* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 96-110 <https://doi.org/10.69470/50hbeh03>
- Carrillo, B. (2024). Presencing mastery as a relational and iterative way of knowing and being. *International Journal of Presencing, Leadership and Coaching*. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 72-81 <https://doi.org/10.69470/vfzwy553>
- Cox, L. (2008). The discipline of conscious conversation: Principles and practices. [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com). Retrieved May 25, 2017, from <http://files.meetup.com/91120/The%20Discipline%20of%20Conscious%20Conversation.pdf>
- Cox, L. (2014). Presencing our absencing: A collective reflective practice using Scharmer's Theory U. in Olen Gunnlaugson *Perspectives on Theory U: Insights from the field*. Universite Laval, Canada
- de Quincy, C. (1998). *Intersubjectivity: exploring consciousness from the second-person perspective*. Unpublished manuscript: Institute of Noetic Sciences
- Dyk, P., Cheung, R., Pohl, L., Noriega, C., Lindgreen, J., (2012). *The Effectiveness of Equine Guided Leadership Education to develop emotional intelligence in expert nurses: A pilot research study*. Unpublished study, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY. [https://www.academia.edu/16578558/The\\_Effectiveness\\_of\\_Equine\\_Guided\\_Leadership\\_Education\\_to\\_Develop\\_Emotional\\_Intelligence\\_in\\_Expert\\_Nurses\\_A\\_Pilot\\_Research\\_Study](https://www.academia.edu/16578558/The_Effectiveness_of_Equine_Guided_Leadership_Education_to_Develop_Emotional_Intelligence_in_Expert_Nurses_A_Pilot_Research_Study)
- EHL Graduate School, (2024). Unlocking organizational potential with human-centered leadership. EHL Hospitality Business School. Retrieved 3-10-25 from <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/human-centered-leadership-organizations#:~:text=Human-centered%20leadership%20is%20an,-first%20culture%20long-term>
- Equine Experiential Education Association (2021). *Foundations of equine experiential education facilitation: Course manual*. Reno Nevada: E3A
- Gavin, M. (2019). Authentic leadership; What it is: And why it's important. Harvard Business School Online, Retrieved 3-10-24 from <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/authentic-leadership>
- Gunnlaugson, O. (2023). Advancing the Field of Presencing: Five Principles to guide the development of Emergent Approaches. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*. Vol 3. Issue 2. Pp. 105-128. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47061/jasc.v3i2.5222>
- Gunnlaugson, O. (2024). An emerging path of presencing mastery: Introducing a framework for exploring the depth-dimensions of presencing in a coaching context. *International Journal of Presencing, Leadership and Coaching*. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 72-81. <https://doi.org/10.69470/tta2ga85>
- Gunnlaugson, O. (2024). Reclaiming the Ontotelic depths of our presencing nature: An onto-perceptual approach to presencing mastery in Dynamic Presencing coaching. *International Journal of Presencing, Leadership and Coaching*. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 72-81. <https://doi.org/10.69470/4nch8d32>
- Hawk, C. (2011). *Get Clarity: The lights-on guide to manifesting success in life and work*. Edmonds, WA: Brilliance Press



- Hayashi, A., (2025) *The art of making a true move*. retrieved January 1, 2025 from <https://arawanahayashi.com/>
- Irwin, C. (2005). *Dancing with your dark horse: how horse sense helps us find balance, strength and wisdom*. New York, NY: Marlowe & Company.
- Jaworski, J. (2012). *Source: The inner path of knowledge creation*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers
- Kegan, R., Lahey, L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kilmann, R. H. (2001). *Quantum Organizations : A new paradigm for achieving organizational success and personal meaning*. Palo Alto, CA : Davies Black Publishing.
- Lindsay, S., (2013). The anatomy of leadership. In Lois Ruskai Melina, Gloria Burgess, Lena Falkman, Antonio Marturano (Eds). *The embodiment of leadership*: (pp. 5-22). International Leadership Association series Building Leadership Bridges
- Marone, M. (2024). The vicious cycle that prevents your people from adapting to change and how Human-Centered Leadership Can Help. *Harvard Business Publishing*. Retrieved 3-10-24 from <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/how-human-centered-leadership-helps-people-adapt-to-change/>
- Meher Baba, (2000). *Discourses*. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Press, Inc.
- Mehrabian, A. (2009). *Silent messages: A wealth of information about nonverbal communication (body language)*. Los Angeles, CA: Self-published.
- Palmer, W. 2017. The Centre for Embodied Wisdom, Retrieved June 10, 2017, from <https://www.centreforembodiedwisdom.com/masterclass-wendy-palmer/>
- Pohl, L. (2006). *Embodying leadership: An integrated methodology* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Union Institute and University.
- Roberts, M. (2001). *Horse sense for people: Using gentle wisdom of the join-up technique to enrich our relationships at home and at work*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Rothwell, W., Kazanas (1998). *Mastering the instructional design process*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Scharmer, O. (2005). *Theory U: Leading from the emerging future: Presencing profound innovation and change in business, society, and the self*. (unpublished excerpt from forthcoming book). Boston, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, copyright 2005 Otto Scharmer.
- Scharmer, O. (2007). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. Cambridge, MA: The Society of Organizational Learning, Inc.
- Scharmer, O. (2018). *The essentials of Theory U: Core principles and applications*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Scharmer, O., Pomeroy, E. (2024). Fourth Person: The Knowing Field. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*. Vol. 4, Issue 1, pp. 19-48. <https://doi.org/10.47061/jasc.v4i1.7909>
- Scheff, Thomas J. (2015-11-15). *Goffman Unbound!: A New Paradigm for Social Science*. New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-315-63435-7.
- Schuyler, K. (2013). From the ground up: Revisioning sources and methods of leadership development. In Lois Ruskai Melina, Gloria Burgess, Lena Falkman, Antonio Marturano (Eds). *The embodiment of leadership*: (pp. 239-257). International Leadership Association series Building Leadership Bridges. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA
- Senge, P., Scharmer, O., Jawarski, J., Flowers, B. (2004). *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, organizations, and society*. New York, NY: DoubleDay.
- Shambo, L. (2013). *The listening heart: The limbic path beyond office therapy*. Chehalis, WA. Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL)
- Strozzi-Heckler, R. (2003). *Being human at work: bringing somatic intelligence into your professional life*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Torbert, W. (1972). *Learning from experience: towards consciousness*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Torbert, W., & Associates (2004). *Action Inquiry: the secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). Iteration. In *Vocabulary.com Dictionary*. Retrieved March 08, 2025, from <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/iteration>
- Walker, C. (n.d). What is clean feedback? retrived 10-3-25 from <https://cleanlearning.co.uk/about/faq/what-is-clean-feedback>

- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Intersubjective. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/intersubjective>
- Wilber, K. (2000). *A theory of everything: an integral vision for business, politics, science*, (1st ed.). Boston: Shambhala.
- Winther, H., (2013) Professionals are their bodies: The language of body as sounding board in leadership and professional communication. In Lois Ruskai Melina, Gloria Burgess, Lena Falkman, Antonio Marturano (Eds). *The embodiment of leadership*: (pp. 217-237). International Leadership Association series Building Leadership Bridges. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Whyte, D. (1994). *The heart aroused: Poetry and the preservation of the soul in corporate America*. New York, NY, DoubleDay.
- Whyte, D., (2022). *The seven elements of conversational leadership: Seven steps for deepening any conversation*. © David Whyte (2022). All rights reserved. Printed with permission from the author. [www.invitas.net](http://www.invitas.net).
- Whyte, D., (2025). *Consolations II: The solace, nourishment, and underlying meaning of everyday words*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press.
- Wood, W., Alm, K., Benjamin, J., Thomas, L., Anderson, D., Pohl, L., Kane, M. (2021). Optimal Terminology for Services in the United States that incorporate horses to benefit humans: A consensus document. *The Journal of Alternative and Complimentary Medicine*. Vol. 27, No.1, pp. 88-95. <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/acm.2020.04150415>
- Young, S. (2007). *Micro messaging: Why great leadership is beyond words*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill



LISSA POHL, MA, is Chief Engagement Officer of The Engagement Quotient, a coaching consultancy located in Lexington, KY. Her work embraces several innovative learning modalities including Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL), Lights On Leadership™ Coaching, and The Leadership Circle 360 Profile to provide leaders with the heightened perceptual awareness, feedback, and somatic intelligence they need to fully engage, inspire and lead their organizations. Lissa holds a master's degree in Psychology with a focus on Transformational Leadership Development from the Union Institute and University. She is an E3A certified Corporate Equine-Assisted Learning Practitioner and for 10 years was a Master Trainer for the Equine Experiential Education Association (E3A), an international non-profit organization that certifies people to facilitate Equine-Assisted Learning.

While in the Department of Community & Leadership Development at the University of Kentucky (2008-2021) she conducted pioneering research into *The Effectiveness of Equine Guided Leadership Education to Increase Emotional Intelligence in Expert Nurses* (2012). She has worked extensively in the Middle East facilitating leadership development with horses and has presented on these topics at leadership conferences worldwide. Lissa is a co-author of the 2019 Amazon best-selling book *Transforming Your Life*, (vol.2), and co-authored *Optimal Terminology for Services In the United States that Incorporate Equines to Benefit Humans: A Consensus Document* (2021).

Her future includes exploring “spiritual emergence” as an essential component of leadership development while continuing to facilitate embodied learning, expanded perceptual awareness and presencing mastery. Ultimately she sees this as a sensible way to attend to the challenges of an increasingly chaotic and disengaged world.

Contact: [lissa@EnQcoaching.com](mailto:lissa@EnQcoaching.com)