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Leadership from the horse's mouth

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HERE it is from the horse's mouth. Leadership can be learned in working with horses.

The University of Stellenbosch's executive education arm is offering courses in equine-assisted learning in Johannesburg and Cape Town next month.

Clinical psychologist Yolanda Sing would present the two-day course, hosted by University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) Executive Development Ltd, marketing chief Willemien Law said yesterday.

Sing had training in equine-assisted learning in the US,

where horses have long been used for therapy and leadership training. She obtained a master's degree in business administration at the USB,

"Participants will soon learn that when working with horses enforcing power is not an option, and that a title means very little," said Law. "Leadership only comes to the fore through achieving authority, the demonstration of ability and the attainment of confidence."

The courses were aimed at mid-level managers with leadership potential. Sing said there were real lessons to be learned from interacting with horses.

The course is in line with a trend in executive education

towards more imaginative ways of conveying leadership lessons, such as the use of Shakespeare's writing and sessions with orchestral conductors.

"While the potential for this type of thing to be gimmicky is probably high, good lessons could also be learned," said Nick Segal, extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science.

"On the face of it, it sounds wacky ... but when you put people into difficult situations and design a process that allows you to observe their reactions you can make bricks out of straw, you can get something intelligent," Segal said.

The value of this sort of course came from the person conducting it, said Ian Thomas, a business graduate who for 15 years used lessons he learned as a game ranger observing lions at close quarters to draw management and leadership analogies.

Sing said: "Horses can easily cut through the layers. They reflect back to you your body language, and you need to display you are the alpha (character) in the herd."

"I take lessons from how herd animals interact back into the workplace. People are often more receptive to feedback from a horse than from another person because there is no hidden agenda," said Sing.