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Breaking the management mold

PROGRAM FOCUSES ON WOMEN'S STRENGTHS AND HELPING THEM SUCCEED

By Michelle Guido, Mercury News

The exercise seemed simple enough. Lead a horse into the ring, make him walk, then trot, then walk again, and finally, bring him to a halt. No problem, thought the 12 executive women who stood ringside. After all, some had grown their own businesses into multimillion-dollar corporations. If they could conceive and bring new products to market at breakneck speed, how hard could this be?

The executives didn't realize they were in for an equine version of Myers-Briggs, the personality test to assess leadership styles. How they interacted with the horse, they later found out, spoke volumes about how

they manage others.

The activity was a pivotal part of a Redwood City executive leadership program for women that has rewritten the old business-school models. It acknowledges that men and women lead differently and focuses on women's strengths—their capacity to coach and their ability to communicate and build relationships.

It's the life's work of Rayona Sharpnack of Redwood City, founder of the Institute for Women's Leadership. Sharpnack believes that increasing the number and quality of female leaders improves a company's ability to innovate and improve performance. Her clients come from big corporations, startups, non-profits and the public sector. She has trained thousands of women in the United States, Canada and Australia.

"When you hear all these guys—finally—espousing the virtues of relationship building in business," Sharpnack said, "this is not latebreaking news for us."

Last week, the National Association for Female Executives, while releasing its "Top 30 Companies for Executive Women" annual report, said that lack of targeted train-



ELSC PARTICIPANTS DISCUSS THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE AS EXECUTIVE LEADERS.

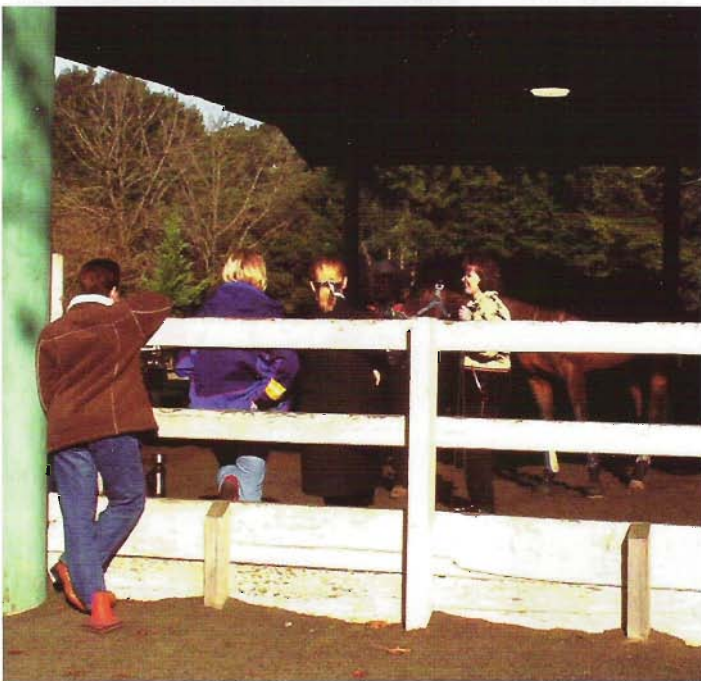
ing—not lack of ambition—blocks women's advancement to the highest ranks of corporate America. The companies lauded in the report—including Hewlett-Packard of Palo Alto, the only Silicon Valley company on the list—are all credited with having exemplary programs to prepare women for top positions.

"Only eight women chief executives are running Fortune 500 companies because most companies primarily groom men for the top jobs," said NAFE President Betty Spence. "We need to have CEOs that are holding managers accountable when it comes to promoting women and saying, 'I'm sorry, this list you gave me has all men on it, and I want to see some women on it.'"

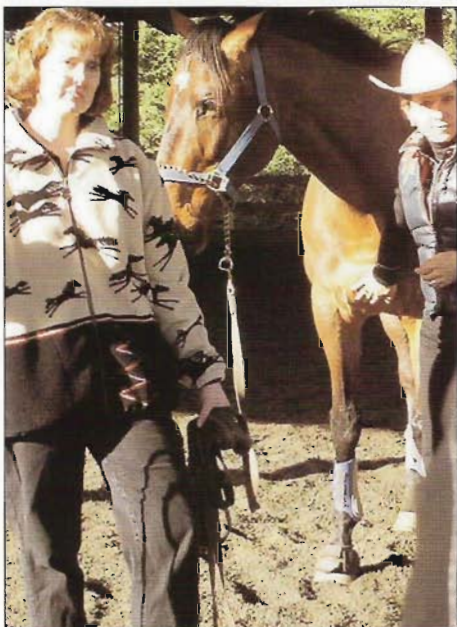
Courses aimed at men

Most executive leadership courses for women are born from old training manuals and philosophies developed by and aimed at men. And though women's leadership curricula have been around for decades, many have simply changed the pronouns from "he" to "she."

In her newest workshop launched last week, Sharpnack worked with 12 women, all of whom either run companies or are within two steps of CEO. Her mission is to



KRISTA CLAUDE TAKES A LEADERSHIP LESSON FROM CRAIG (THE HORSE).



ARIANA STROZZI-HECKLER, EQUINE EDUCATOR, PUTS HER HORSE-SENSE TO WORK WITH KRISTA CLAUDE.

allow women to lead without being forced to take on more aggressive management traits often associated with men.

Many female executives say that in order to be perceived as an effective leader, they must act like men.

"The authoritative, command and control, 'Do what I say because I'm the boss,' doesn't really fly anymore," Sharpnack said. "We're helping women tap into the kinds of capabilities and competencies leaders in the 21st century need-being aware of how your presence impacts the people you come into contact with, having strong communication skills and being supportive of each other in our goals."

Sharpnack's training is expensive, \$9,750

for a six-month program. But it includes a four-day intensive workshop, as well as weekly check-ins and one-on-one coaching with one of Sharpnack's associates.

The horse exercise last week at stables in Portola Valley was more than a first-day ice-breaker. Horses intuitively respond to a person's leadership style and their reactions can provide honest and clear feedback about strengths and weaknesses, according to Sharpnack.

When it was time to work with the horse last week, some of the female executives were skeptical.

But not for long.

Krista Claude, vice president of technology services for a legal services firm in Egan, Minn., walked into the ring with Craig, the horse, leading him by a long lunge line. He walked, in fits and starts, but never quite followed Claude's lead.

Metaphoric analysis? She's not assertive enough. Claude agreed. "There really is an assertive person inside me, and that can be an asset," she said. "I just have to let her out."

Susan Trainer, owner of Trainer Communications, a public relations firm in Danville, got ready for her turn. She'd been around horses all her life and had even performed in a rodeo. This would be a piece of cake.

Leading a horse

With a cluck and a wave of a whip, Craig began to trot. And trot. Trainer couldn't get him to slow down-until Craig finally bypassed walking altogether and came to a halt.

What was Craig saying about Trainer's leadership style?

That she works at top speed, has trouble

delegating, and if she expects her company to grow, she'll have to learn that she can't do everything, Sharpnack said. A fair assessment?

"I have six kids, and my mother, who has stage four cancer, lives with me. I'm taking my company from 15 to 30 employees this year, and I only work with emerging technology start-ups," Trainer said.

"I got through college in 2 1/2 years and got my master's degree in one year. And I drive that red Viper over there. Do you think I might have a problem slowing down?"

If you're interested

The Institute for Women's Leadership offers a variety of training programs for women. For more information, call 650-556-8800 or go to www.womensleadership.com.



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