

4

Can You Become CEO by Standing Next to the Water Cooler?

*“By the time he’s finished
he will have fired everyone around him...
and poor Donald will be sitting there
on his little pedestal all by himself”*

—MARTHA STEWART ON DONALD TRUMP

Chumps or Chimps: Monkeys in the Middle of Management

Does your boss remind you of an ape?

Snorting around, grunting orders, lurching through the office with his knuckles dragging the ground. Beating his chest and growling every five minutes just to prove to all the other primates that he’s Chief Chimp in Charge. Turns out gorilla bosses have more in common with their grub-eating counterparts than we ever thought. And it’s more than just a hairy back.

Neurobiology research reveals there are significant parallels

between the brain activity of workplace bullies and that of chest-thumping gorillas.

The cerebral, “thinking” part of the human brain has evolved into a sophisticated mechanism that operates on multiple dimensions. But science has shown that our big modern brains actually grew over a more primitive limbic brain, an instinct-driven, survivalist-oriented system that closely resembles that of an ape.

So while your boss may display a thin veneer of humanity in front of higher-ups and customers, buried beneath his (or her) fancy car, cushy office, and endless PowerPoint presentations is the mind of a monkey.

And it’s the monkey mind that takes over in times of stress or when there’s no fear of reprisal.

“The need to dominate, intimidate, and oppress has its basis in an innate, instinctual, primitive need,” suggests business owner and psychology writer David Weiner, author of *Power Freaks: Dealing With Them in the Workplace or Anyplace*.

That explains why your manager thinks banging on the glass and grunting at you is appropriate behavior for the workplace. And why, if all the other big silverbacks get transferred to cushy jobs back at the home office in Dayton, your boss charges around the office, throwing branches and rocks at all the underlings in a futile attempt to defend his dominance.

Weiner explains how ape-like behaviors manifest in the workplace. “The primitive brain mechanism drives us into creating hierarchies (promotions, executive perks, bonuses and salary ladders) and defending our territory (corner office, best parking spot, taking credit for the success of a group-

generated project), two behaviors essential for primitive organization and survival,” he writes.

As a species that shares 98.5 percent of its DNA with chimps, it should be no surprise that the modern workplace—with its cubicles and organization trees—is merely a fancied-up version of *Planet of the Apes*.

And since the limbic brain instinctively connects status to survival, ambitious primates often will do anything to maintain control of the tire swing. According to Weiner, “Tension to move up the ranks or defend one’s position exists innately within our instinctual-emotional minds and is activated when we sense an opportunity for advancement or we receive a challenge from someone attempting to displace us.”

As a former Fortune 500 flunky myself, I’ve spent a little time observing the monkey-see, monkey-do dance called corporate America. And I can promise you that in the race to become top banana, the inner chimp often takes over, and all the other monkeys get shoved down the vine.

According to Weiner and other scientists, the neurotransmitter serotonin is usually to blame. “When tested, the people you suspect (CEOs, sports stars, and overly ambitious middle managers) have richer serotonin levels than everyone else. And once your level goes up your outlook is permanently skewed,” Weiner says.

Weiner, also the author of *Conquering your Inner Dummy*, says the link between serotonin and social dominance explains why some primates stay on top while others are doomed to the back of the cage forever.

Testosterone also plays a role. Winning the big game, snagging the big account, or being voted Grand Pooba of the lodge boosts testosterone. But while the winners are jumping

around, beating their chests, and chattering on about how great they are, scientists can track negative changes in the neurons of higher animals after a “social defeat.”

Those on top often believe it’s their God-given right to be there and that the lesser apes only exist to peel their fruit.

Lest you think power-freak behavior is limited to men, remember the famous Queen of Mean, Leona Helmsley, who notoriously belittled employees and whose outrageous power trip ultimately landed her in jail.

Weiner says the results of the limbic power quiz on his web site (BrainTricks.com) indicate women are just as likely to be power freaks as men. So while the president of the PTA may have better hair than Donald Trump, she may be just as capable of gleefully ordering lesser monkeys to fetch her another kumquat.

Next time your boss goes ape, just smile and remember: You don’t have to be Tarzan to live happily amongst the chimps.

Now strap on that monkey suit and get back to work.

Power Lunching 101: A High Stakes Test of Humanity

A red cup placed at the head of your table means no talking; a green cup means polite conversation with your immediate neighbor. Such are the rules of elementary school lunches where discipline is the goal and lunchroom monitors have the power to take away your socializing privileges for the slightest infraction.

Times have changed, and in an era where standardized testing reigns supreme, lunchroom conduct is evaluated on a daily basis. Getting milk to squirt out of your nose may still

elicit a big hee-haw from your friends, but you're also going to get a check mark in your folder, and your class will be put on red cup faster than you can say "social outcast."

I understand the school's need for crowd control. Getting a thousand hungry kids in and out of a lunchroom in less than two hours is a mission that would have challenged Gen. Patton. Most of the educators I know are incredibly committed to the cause. Despite being lorded over by folks who never set foot in a classroom, they continue to do the best they can with what they've got.

The real issue isn't teachers or individual school systems. They're just operating within the parameters they've been given; the bigger question is—what do we really want our kids to learn? The three *R*'s is an easy answer. Teach them to read, tell them to write, assign lots of math problems, and test them at every step along the way to make sure they're getting it. Hold teachers accountable based on the results, and eventually our kids will rule the world.

But how many CEOs, world leaders, or acclaimed humanitarians achieved success because of their high SAT scores? The people who do really well in life are the ones who know how to connect with others. The engineers who make partner are the ones who work well with clients; the scientists who get to run the departments are the ones with good management skills; and the hairdressers who make the big bucks are those who listen and provide witty repartee along with well-placed highlights to cover your gray. Excellent technical skills can carry you to the middle, but influencing others is what takes you to the top.

Dr. Rebecca Parker, the noted Unitarian Universalist and

president of Star King School for the Ministry, suggests that a true education “allows the time and space for the student’s mind to unfold.”

I don’t know about you, but I didn’t figure out what I was good at until my mid thirties. Hour after hour spent writing, “I will not talk at lunch,” on the blackboard appears to have done me no good whatsoever, but conversing with my friends and exposure to new ideas ignited my mind in a way that rigid discipline and rote memorization never could.

Good teachers don’t try to mold—they help with the unfolding. And interpersonal skills are a huge part of the equation. My children have been blessed with several truly gifted teachers who taught the subject matter required and helped the students develop their social skills at the same time. They didn’t leave any child behind because they created classroom communities that worked together to move everybody ahead. That relaxed, back-and-forth communication can’t happen when kids have their heads bent over a high-stakes bubble test.

Shoving endless academic knowledge and skills down our kids’ throats may bump up their spots on the bell curve, but they’re not going to be any happier or more successful unless they learn how to manage their personal lives.

An inability to do fractions can’t suck the life out of you the way bad relationships and lack of social support can. And the Corporate Corridor of Cubicles is littered with the bodies of junior executives who failed Power Lunching 101.

So put down your pencils, look up from your books, and yack away. You’re on green cup, kids, and this *will* be on the test.

Are Friends Vital to Your Paycheck?

Want to skyrocket to the top of the corporate food chain? Forget trying to bribe your boss with a cheese log. If you really want to get promoted, you need a best friend.

Late night e-mails, dazzling Power Points, and volunteering to create a three-inch binder documenting the work of your cross-functional, multi-department synergistic project team may seem like the fast track to the corner office, but new research reveals that having a best friend at work can boost your career even faster than kissing up to the boss.

An extensive workplace study from Gallup reveals that people who have a best friend at work are significantly more likely to get more done in less time, have fun on the job, innovate and share ideas, and have a safe workplace with fewer accidents.

Kind of confirms why you may have been happier waiting tables with your college buddies than you are knocking back the big bucks alone in your corporate cube.

But merely having *a* friend at work isn't enough. Those generic "Good morning," mindless chit-chat office mates—the ones we call "friends" but who are actually mere acquaintances we'll never see again after we leave our job—have no effect on our productivity whatsoever.

But if you're lucky enough to have a "best friend" at work, you're seven times more likely to be engaged in your job. Unfortunately, out of the 8 million people surveyed by Gallup, only thirty percent of employees report having a close, supportive confidant at work.

Best-selling author Tom Rath uses the research to make a compelling case for friendship in his latest book, *Vital Friends: The People You Can't Afford to Live Without*. He says, "When

you think about your best job, it always goes back to the relationships, the local work group, or the local manager.”

In fact, the Gallup research indicates that “close friendships at work can increase your satisfaction with your organization by fifty percent” and “double your chances of having a favorable perception of your pay.”

Good grief. If all it takes is a few friends to make you happy with your comp plan, you’d think every boss in America would be sending their staff out for margaritas every Friday afternoon. However, Rath, the head of Gallup’s Workplace Research and Leadership Consulting arm, says, “Most companies don’t do much to help people build relationships.” Managers are afraid that “if the employees get together, they’ll be talking about me.”

If you’re a jerk boss, we probably are trashing you at the Christmas party you made us pay for ourselves.

Rath reports, “Close workplace friendships are consistently one of the best predictors of an organization’s profitability,” but when companies discourage employee fraternization, people become “belly-ache buddies based on their mutual hatred of their employer.”

As someone who once spent hours with her co-workers plotting our plan to publicly expose our evil, alcoholic, sexually harassing boss, I can promise you, mutual moaning isn’t nearly as much fun as doing worthwhile work with your pals. I’ve preached about the value of friendship for years, but after a decade in the seminar biz, I have yet to see a company pay for a “how to be a better friend” workshop. As Rath insightfully points out, “The energy between two people is what creates great marriages, families, teams, and organizations. Yet when we think consciously about

improving our lives, we put almost all of our efforts into self-development.”

Bogus rah-rah programs to improve company loyalty fail time and time again; however, loyalty between employees has been at the root of every vibrant, successful organization since the dawn of time.

You can learn more about the study and take the friendship quiz at VitalFriends.com

But in the meantime, skip that time management seminar and start chatting it up with your pals at the water cooler and idling away your hours gossiping in the company cafeteria. And if your boss happens to catch you, you can honestly say, “Hey, I’m working here.”