



## **Naturally Managing The Human Animal** By Andrew O’Keeffe

Humans have been evolving for about 400,000 years but it’s only been the last 250 years that we moved from being hunters, gatherers and villagers to work in large organisations. We are hardwired for a different environment to which we suddenly find ourselves. An understanding of basic human instinct can assist managers to lead organisations that fit our hardwiring as a species. The outcome is a functioning organisation that just seems to operate “naturally”.

The late Peter Drucker, in an interview reported recently in *Management Today*, said that the concept of management commenced in 1911. So, 100 years is a short time in the 400,000 that our species has been evolving. Your grandparents or great-grandparents were amongst the first managers that human societies have known.

Evolutionary psychologist Nigel Nicholson has summarised the hardwired nature of humans and the implications for managers in his book, *Managing the Human Animal* and in the *Harvard Business Review* (1998).

The key insights from Nicholson about basic human instinct that emerges in organisations are:

**Humans use emotions to screen information in preference to logic**, so people hear bad news first and loudest. So managers should not be surprised that people jump to the worst conclusion when important news breaks. Managers need to provide information and be trusted so that the initial emotional response is positive.

**Humans avoid risky situations** (except when threatened), so people are most creative and do their best work when given security and support. Managers who give their people confidence, and the necessary resources, know that people then produce their best work.

**Humans are hardwired to gossip**, and this ability to gain information about “what’s going on around here” served the species well. For much of our 400,000 years, gossiping helped people survive. Managers need to ensure grapevines stay healthy. A test I have used in change management is that when people go home at night on the evening of a staff communication, they will be asked a question, “How was work today, Darling?” Leaders, by the way they have managed the change, can influence the answer to that question and whether the answer is the one you would like.

**Humans gain their sense of identity in family-sized groups of eight, and tribes of around 150 people.** So designers of organisations should be conscious of this dimension and design their organisation around teams with a common purpose and divisions of up to 150 people.

**Humans seek superiority or security in hierarchical systems**, so recognise that hierarchy is natural and reassuring to people, and also that people will establish status distinctions, such as the size of office, size of chair, and the location of their car space.

**Leadership is the natural structure of human societies.** So people are comfortable, and indeed prefer, working for a leader. The key to productive human groups is the quality of the leader.

So what can managers and human resource professionals do with this information? One of the highest priorities is to focus on the role of the manager in building high-performance work groups.

1. **Take care in the appointment of managers:** the manager of a team has a major impact on the energy and output of the group. The manager should have the capability to handle the complexity of the job, the personal skills to lead people, and the motivation to do so.
2. **Provide support to managers when they are first appointed:** do not expect that individuals who have not managed before suddenly have the skills to do so. Support them with the learning and insight they need to be effective quickly. Avoid leaving the manager to gain this insight by trial and error.
3. **Give managers in your organisation good human resource tools to use:** these include goal-setting and performance systems, reward and recognition systems and career and personal development systems.
4. **Provide regular management development opportunities:** this includes management training programs, which maintains the skill level of managers and constantly reminds managers of the importance of their role.
5. **Measure the effectiveness of managers:** healthy organisations hold managers accountable for their people-management along with their other responsibilities. They identify the managers who should be recognised for their positive impact, and the ones who need extra support to ensure engaged teams. At Hewitt Associates we use a range of diagnostics to help organisations and managers understand their capability and development needs.

The desired end result is an organisation where human beings are energised and who feel a strong sense of identity with their work group and their organisation. Such organisations function well and have effective leaders at every level. Staff enjoy coming to work and apply their energy willingly to the shared purpose of the group. Such organisations model effective human societies of history, now in a modern organisation rather than as a tribe on the plains of Africa.

### **About the Author**

Andrew O’Keeffe is a consultant with Hewitt Associates and author of ***The Boss***. ***The Boss*** is a novel based on true stories about bosses at work. The story tells the impact of leader behaviour on the spirit and output of people. ***The Boss*** is available through the **AIM bookshop**.

**Andrew will also be presenting at one of our upcoming Professional Development Forums – People, Culture and Learning on Wed 9 August.**  
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