The Ape in the Corner Office: Understanding the Workplace Beast in All of Us

Richard Conniff
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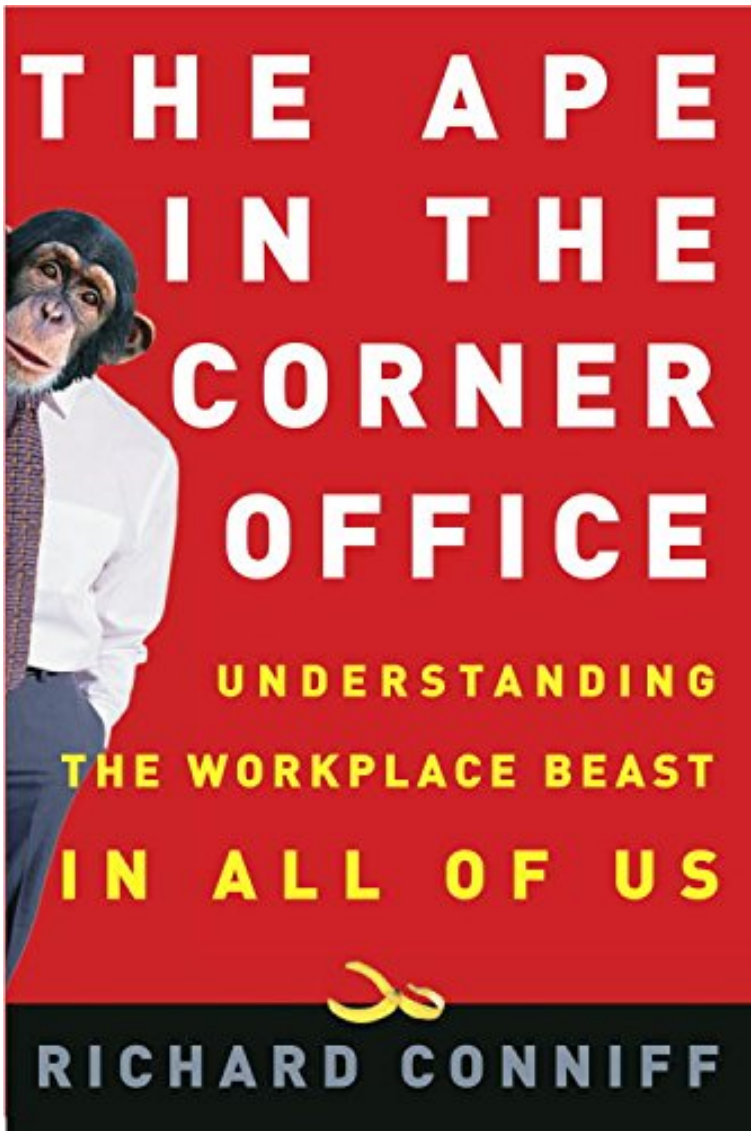

#1048368 in eBooks 2005-09-06 2005-09-06File Name: B000FCKCAQ | File size: 66.Mb

Richard Conniff : The Ape in the Corner Office: Understanding the Workplace Beast in All of Us before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Ape in the Corner Office: Understanding the Workplace Beast in All of Us:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Underlying ApeBy Doctor MossWe like to think of ourselves as ldquo;evolvedrdquo;. We might be willing to grant that we are animals mdash; after all, we have arms, legs mdash; actually we have all the same organs, limbs, etc. as apes (make that ldquo;other apesrdquo;). But we really do want to

insist we are somehow just a completely different kind of thing. After all, we are rational, we have culture, we watch tv, . . .Books like this remind us that we really are animals, that our thoroughly rational self-image is a thin veneer over our animal selves. So much of our behavior mirrors the behaviors not only of apes but other more distant relatives, despite anything we may think about ourselves. We vie for the corner office just like apes vie with their fellow apes for grooming partners, sexual partners, the best food, the best nest location, ... We think our organizational structures, our decision processes, our workplace designs are all in the interests of business and efficiency. Maybe they are, but they are also those same bits of competition and hierarchy that we see in our cousins.Conniff even cites the suggestion that language itself mdash; one of the things we think strongly sets us apart mdash; evolved as a substitute for grooming. Set aside for the moment pictures of language as statements of facts and think instead of ritualistic exchanges of ldquo;How are you?rdquo;, day to day gossip, ldquo;exchanges of pleasantriesrdquo;. Itrsquo;s easy then to see much of our linguistic behavior as establishing and maintaining communal and personal relationships, just as apes do in grooming.There are other books on the topic, and Conniff cites a number of them, notably Frans de Waalrsquo;s classic Chimpanzee Politics. Conniff himself is not a scientist like de Waal, but hersquo;s a rare cross of scientific, management, and journalistic experience. De Waal studies chimps, and for the most part he leaves the comparisons to us to make. Conniff speaks straightforwardly of human, mostly office behavior.Conniff has put in his time in business and office environments. He starts there and works back from our behavior there to find our similarities and shared roots with other animals. In doing so, hersquo;s not only bringing us closer to our animal relatives, but hersquo;s also, again like de Waal, bringing them closer to us mdash; he dispels the myths of the constantly bloodthirsty, violent animal and puts in its place a much more complex picture, containing compassion, cooperation, coordination, and, above all, community-building.Much of the book, especially the first half, addresses hierarchy. Expressions of hierarchical relationships neednrsquo;t be large and explicit. They can be facial expressions, postures, positionings in a room mdash; all of these things we can, if we take the time, observe in ourselves just as we can in apes. Hierarchy after all is what gives so much structure to community. Hierarchy gives us not only competition but stability mdash; when we behave appropriately to our places, expressing dominance or submission, or just peer standing, we make it possible to carry on without friction.In addition to hierarchy (subordination and dominance), Conniff discusses atlruism, intimidation, imitation, and deception, all in the context of commonalities with our animal relatives.In reading the book, I found myself wanting not to engage in some of the behaviors Conniff describes, not to be driven by these biologically-rooted drives. But actually I think the healthier attitude is to embrace them, enjoying that biologically-driven part of us. After all, thatrsquo;s what got us where we are today (both for the good and the bad). Sometimes hierarchy in particular is offensive or extreme, and it needs to be resisted. But try to do without it altogether. Wersquo;ll never not be animals.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The main benefit of reading this book is you gain a description of the world of people that matches reality but with enough subsBy Michael GautierThe book is the most effective tool I found to allow yourself to step outside of yourself and view the whole human species and yourself in a completely nonfiction way. What are people and why do they do the things they do? Who are you and why do you do the things you do? Who am I and why do I do the things I do? Three questions that are similar but different as you go from everyone to yourself.The book is short but has high information density. That means it should be a quick read but will probably take longer to get through if you are not familiar with the ideas presented. The content of the book challenges many assumptions about how we exist and act in the world. I am not describing a work of philosophy but of hard-nosed, empirical research that the rational mind will generally fail to refute.I do not think the author intended to write a book that clarifies the world as it is, but I see that as an outcome of the work. The main benefit of reading this book is you gain a description of the world of people that matches reality but with enough substance and interpretation to make that description useful. You have to try and suspend your judgments when reading this book to get the most use out of it.I found the book powerful and credible. I give it 5 stars for 100% useful content throughout, accessible writing style, and for no apparent signs of bias. The writer does offer opinions and personal stories in some parts, but they are mostly of the humorous kind or blatant sarcasm. With that said, book does not try to qualify the behaviors described as either good or bad but more or less natural. The main theme is that there are plausible reasons for why people behave in certain ways that can be understood by examining biological ancestry. The case is made in an "intriguing" and "compelling" way in which you have to decide what to make of it. Despite its independent tone, there is a treasure of advice to be uncovered from this unassuming work.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Do you finish books because you're "supposed to"? This one you'll WANT to read!By Secret SantaRichard Conniff is an extraordinary writer. If you're a Malcolm Gladwell fan, as I am, and you participate, on any level, in the corporate world, then prepare to be delighted you treated yourself to this book. With dry wit and a density of research material (studies, anecdotes perfectly suited to the point), Conniff does to the working world what he did to the rarified social circles of the very rich: he examines his subject from the point of view of a naturalist's blind and then reports the behavior of these strangest of all animals, the human being.Why is being a jerk a workable strategy for a company boss, and under what circumstances does that strategy break down? Why is it a bad idea to appear overly enthusiastic (waving at passers-by, etc.) in your new office? What makes one kind of corporate culture (Google, Pixar, etc.) work and another (Enron) toxic and implosive? All this can be understood by

examining corporate culture through the eyes of a veteran naturalist.I'd offer to loan you my copy of "Corner Office" and my other favorite of Conniff's books ("Natural History of the Rich"), but I'm afraid I'm going to keep mine close at hand. I'm going to be reading them again very soon.From one monkey to another, you're gonna love this guy's work. You'll be so elevated by the writing you'll swing from the tree limbs, and then break one off, and then hit the ground with it so that all the other monkeys can see that you can break a really big branch (does any of this simian behavior strike you as somehow familiar?). Why Richard Conniff isn't yet a household name is, to me, a mystery which, given time, I'm sure he will explore in another hilariously insightful book, this time about the nature of celebrity.

Tired of swimming with the sharks? Fed up with that big ape down the hall? Real animals can teach us better ways to thrive in the workplace jungle.Yoursquo;re ambitious and want to get ahead, but whatrsquo;s the best way to do it? Become the biggest, baddest predator? The proverbial 800-pound gorilla? Or does nature teach you to be more subtle and sophisticated?Richard Conniff, the acclaimed author of The Natural History of the Rich, has survived savage beasts in the workplace jungle, where he hooted and preened in the corner office as a publishing executive. Hersquo;s also spent time studying how animals operate in the real jungles of the Amazon and the African bush. What he shows in The Ape in the Corner Office is that nature built you to be nice. Doing favors, grooming coworkers with kind words, building coalitionsmdash;these tools for getting ahead come straight from the jungle. The stereotypical Darwinian hard-charger supposedly thinks only about accumulating resources. But highly effective apes know itrsquo;s often smarter to give them away. That doesnrsquo;t mean itrsquo;s a peaceable kingdom out there, however. Conniff shows that you can become more effective by understanding how other species negotiate the tricky balance between conflict and cooperation. Conniff quotes one biologist on a chimpanzeersquo;s obsession with rank: ldquo;His attempts to maintain and achieve alpha status are cunning, persistent, energetic, and time-consuming. They affect whom he travels with, whom he grooms, where he glances, how often he scratches, where he goes, what times he gets up in the morning.rdquo; Sound familiar? Itrsquo;s the same behavior you can find written up in any issue of BusinessWeek or The Wall Street Journal.The Ape in the Corner Office connects with the day-to-day of the workplace because it helps explain what people are really concerned about: How come he got the wing chair with the gold trim? How can I survive as that big apersquo;s subordinate without becoming a spineless yes-man? Why does being a lone wolf mean being a loser? And, yes, why is it that jerks seem to prospermdash;at least in the short run?Also available as a Random House AudioBook and an eBookFrom the Hardcover edition.

ldquo;A splendid writermdash;fresh, clear, uncondescending, and with never a false step.rdquo; mdash;New York Times Book nbsp;nbsp;ldquo;The Ape in the Corner Office is an entertaining safari through the commercial jungle, observing the habits of business apes as they swing from branch office to branch office.rdquo; mdash;Desmond Morris, author of The Naked Apenbsp;ldquo;Chockablock with fascinating tales from the juxtaposition of natural history and work. If yoursquo;re thoughtful about what you do (and you care about how we got here), this is a page-turner.rdquo; mdash;Seth Godin, author of All Marketers Are Liarsnbsp;ldquo;Richard Conniff puts the business suit back on Desmond Morrisrsquo;s The Naked Ape. This book moves beyond the simplistic embrace of aggression by sociobiologists of the past and the management clicheacute;s of today. Conniff effortlessly draws upon updated insights from ethology, economics, psychology, and the arts to apply factual insights to current headlines and everyday business life. The law of the jungle turns out to be a complex code of competition and cooperationnbsp;that Conniff applies to entrepreneurial triumphs, governance collapses, the sharing spirit ofnbsp;inspired work teams, and the sabotage of conspiring colleagues. While this lively research-anchored book rewards the reader with engaging insights into the lives of celebrities, our co-workers, and our neighbors, it never feels like gossipy voyeurism, just vital clairvoyance.rdquo; mdash;Professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, associate dean, Yale School of Managementnbsp;nbsp;From the Hardcover edition.About the AuthorRichard Conniffrsquo;s work takes him from the executive suite to a casual swim with piranhas in the , from tea in the memberrsquo;s dining room at the House of Lords to the driverrsquo;s seat in a demolition derby. He won the 1997 National Magazine Award for his writing in Smithsonian and the 1998 Wildscreen Prize for Best Natural History Television Script for the BBC show Between Pacific Tides. His previous books include The Natural History of the Rich: A Field Guide and he has also written for Atlantic Monthly, The New York Times Magazine, Time, and National Geographic.Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Chapter 1: YES, IT IS A GODDAMN JUNGLE OUT THERE Why Acting Like an Animal Comes So EasyAnimals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. mdash;Yann Martel, Life of Pi Sounds like an average day at the office, doesnrsquo;t it? Compulsion, necessity, the unforgiving social hierarchy, parasites . . . Oh, and the high supply of fear. That one I could feel butterfly-fluttering in my abdomen and ant-dancing out on the fringes of my peripheral nervous system. I was standing in front of the top North American distributors for a leading European manufacturer. We had assembled at a resort in the Grand Tetons, in an area still populated by grizzly bears and gray wolves, to which I expected shortly to be thrown. Irsquo;d been asked to give a talk about how businesspeople act like animals. I was

vaguely nervous. The top baboon for the North American division, a big, bluff fellow, sat in the front row, arms folded, with his wife (blond, witty, appealing) to one side and his head of sales (short, round, ebullient) on the other. At dinner the night before I had gotten to know many of these people by first name. I recalled a quote about how businesspeople ldquo;donrsquo;t like being compared to bare-ass monkeys.rdquo; I took a deep breath. Everybody in the room had heard the statistic that humans are roughly 99 percent genetically identical to chimpanzees. By some estimates, the difference between our two species may be a matter of fewer than fifty genes, out of perhaps twenty-five thousand shared in common. But hardly anyone in the business world seems to have considered what that might mean in our working lives. More often than not, managers endeavor to minimize the human, much less the animal, element and make companies hum like machines. In their own lives, individual workers also tend to treat human nature mainly as something to be overcome, by getting the hair waxed from their torsos or added to their scalps, by dressing for success, by giving at least the appearance of handling stress. (Was that the serene brow of Botox I detected on a woman in the first row? It was really too early in my talk for her to be numb with boredom.) I asked my audience to think for a moment about how their everyday workplace behavior might be shaped by forces that are less susceptible to changemdash;by the drives and predispositions bequeathed to us by our long evolution first as animals and later as tribal humans. By fear. By anger. By the primordial yearning for social allies and for status. Think of yourself, I suggested, as part of a primate hierarchy unconsciously following thirty-million-year-old rules for establishing dominance and submission, for waging combat and maintaining peace. Think about how the alpha, whether chimpanzee or chief executive officer, typically asserts authority with the identical language of posture, stride, lift of chin, directness of gaze, the sharp glower to quell an unruly subordinate. The head guy in the first row started to light up at this, especially when I got to the stuff about using political maneuvering among chimpanzees as a better way to understand boardroom confrontations. He surged out of his seat when the talk was done and launched into what he called the natural history of the boardroom. In the upper echelons at company headquarters, he said, the conference tables are circular rather than rectangular, ostensibly for a round-table atmosphere of equality. ldquo;Well, bollocks,rdquo; he said. In fact, there is a distinct hierarchy, and everybody knows where everybody else stands, or sits, in it; the circular form merely makes the combat a little more open. In a week or two, he said, hersquo;d be heading overseas for a meeting of a committee where the chairman had lately vacated his seat. ldquo;No one will say anything. But everyone will be looking at that seat and wondering whorsquo;s going to take it, whether anyone will have the audacity to sit there.rdquo; ldquo;You should sit there,rdquo; the head of sales ventured. ldquo;No, Irsquo;d be like the baboon trying to rise three steps above his rankmdash;Irsquo;d get knocked down.rdquo; He was a realist, yet keen for the combativeness that would inevitably surface. ldquo;I love it,rdquo; he said. ldquo;Sometimes when therersquo;s a kill about to happen, therersquo;s a moment of hesitation when people arenrsquo;t sure if itrsquo;s going to happen.rdquo; By now my eyes were beginning to widen. ldquo;And then they get the scent, and they know itrsquo;s going to be okay, and they know whorsquo;s going to take the lead, and whorsquo;s going to come in for the kill.rdquo; ldquo;Itrsquo;s like the Serengeti,rdquo; the sales guy agreed. ldquo;The round table just makes it easier for everybody to see the kill.rdquo; ldquo;Jesus,rdquo; I said. ldquo;Donrsquo;t worry,rdquo; the head guyrsquo;s wife interjected, taking him gently by the elbow. ldquo;Irsquo;m really in control here.rdquo; And everybody laughed. THIS COMPANY IS A ZOO Maybe I shouldnrsquo;t have been surprised that some businesspeople are in fact entirely prepared to liken themselves to bare-ass monkeys. They just want to be dominant, predatory bare-ass monkeys. Animal analogies have always ranked among the favorite clicheacute;s of the business world, where eight-hundred-pound gorillas run with the big dogs, swim with the sharks, occasionally find themselves up to their asses in alligators, and, if they are not crazy like a fox, can end up caught like a deer in the headlights. When Richard Kinder quit Enron to form his own gas company in 1996, he disguised his dismay with Kenneth Layrsquo;s leadership under a standard animalism: ldquo;If you arenrsquo;t the lead dog, the scenery never changes.rdquo; H. Ross Perot also resorted to animal analogies when he was tormenting the hapless, imperial General Motors CEO Roger Smith: ldquo;Revitalizing General Motors is like teaching an elephant to tap-dance. You find the sensitive spots and start poking.rdquo; (Or did he say ldquo;lap dancerdquo;? In any case, Lou Gerstner at IBM knew a good line when he saw it, and stole it for the title of his book, Who Says Elephants Canrsquo;t Dance?) Even the eminently clever satirist Scott Adams ended up likening almost everybody in the working world of his antihero Dilbert to a weasel. The truth beneath the clicheacute;s is that the lives of animals are not nearly so simple as we used to think. Nor are the lives of working people so complex as we like to believe. Moreover, the two have a lot in common, and not just in the obvious ways. For instance, aggressive business types often employ animal analogies because they mistake them for The Art of War by other means. The idea of animal troops ruled by ldquo;demonic malesrdquo; dishing out ldquo;nature, red in tooth and clawrdquo; appeals to a certain view of business life: It really is a goddamn jungle out there. And donrsquo;t get me wrong. This is a very entertaining view, and one I intend to indulge fully over the course of this book. Like my North American division chief, we all love a good brawl, if only from a safe distance. But itrsquo;s also a narrow, misleading point of view. Herersquo;s the sort of surprising thing we can learn from a more careful look at the animal world: Even chimps spend only about 5 percent of their day in aggressive encounters. By contrast, they devote as much as 20 percent of the working day to grooming family, friends, and even subordinates. When they fight with

rivals in the troop, they often go well out of their way, after the dust settles, to kiss and make up. And why should working people care how chimpanzees resolve their conflicts? Because our social behaviors and theirs evolved from the same ancestors and still follow many of the same rules. In one case described later in this book, a better understanding of the nature of reconciliation saved a company $75 million in litigation and insurance costs. Even in our everyday working lives, human bosses, like alpha chimps, sometimes drive their underlings beyond any reasonable limits. They might do better in life (and in business) if they understood just how far even a dumb ape will go to achieve harmony in the aftermath of conflict.BITE THAT METAPHOR Businesspeople regularly trot out animal analogies that make no sense. Despite their reputation as cold-eyed realists, they apparently have trouble separating fact from ridiculous fiction. You can do better: Ostriches donrsquo;t bury their heads in the sand. In fact, ostriches merely lower their heads to the ground to avoid detection while keeping an eye out for danger. Some biologists suggest that they are trying to disguise the 400-pound bulk of their torsos as a termite mound. But in the African savanna where they live, actually burying onersquo;s head in the sand would be a good way to get bitten on the ass by a lion. (What biologists call ldquo;nonadaptive behavior.rdquo;) Lemmings donrsquo;t leap off cliffs to commit mass suicide. When a population boom causes overcrowding, these Arctic rodents do the sensible thing and migrate en masse in search of a new home. A few of them may occasionally get crowded off a ledge as they swarm into unfamiliar territory. But itrsquo;s an accident. Really. The myth of mass suicide got enshrined in modern urban lore by Disney filmmakers in the 1950s, who had the dumb idea that forcing captive lemmings off a cliff would make for dramatic film footage. Real ...