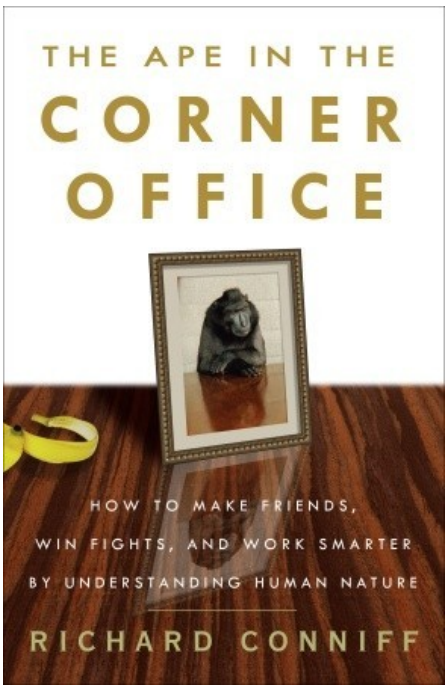

The Ape in the Corner Office: How to Make Friends, Win Fights and Work Smarter by Understanding Human Nature

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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.

You're ambitious and want to get ahead, but what'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. He'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 coalitions—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 it's often smarter to give them away. That doesn't mean it'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 chimpanzee's obsession with rank: "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." Sound familiar? It'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 ape'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 prosper—at least in the short run?

Also available as a Random House AudioBook and an eBook

From the Hardcover edition.

The Ape in the Corner Office: How to Make Friends, Win Fights and Work Smarter by Understanding Human Nature Details

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From Reader Review The Ape in the Corner Office: How to Make Friends, Win Fights and Work Smarter by Understanding Human Nature for online ebook

Liz says

What a crazy look into the corporate world. Is this the sort of thing people learn in business school - how to behave like monsters?! As someone who's taken behavioural ecology, much of this book's content wasn't news to me, and I wished Conniff had stuck exclusively to ape analogies rather than randomly sprinkling in fish and bird anecdotes, which only served to distract from the main gist of the narrative, especially for the audiobook listener. I also felt there was too much time spent on lengthy examples of the behaviours of specific high-profile corporate monsters and individual chimps and baboons, and not enough time spent discussing behavioural/psychological theory. My attention kept wandering and I was itching to turn the audiobook off by the time I reached the epilogue. But then, that's also how animal ecology is taught in classrooms (example after example after example, ad nauseam), so it's no surprise that that's how it was presented here. In summary, it was okay.

Cris says

Write a second book on this subject please! This was so fun and enlightening. Compares our behavior in work settings to dynamics from the animal world.

James Pritchert says

Another book that I read some time ago and recorded on my permanent training record. I don't remember too much about the book which is telling itself.

Yichen says

Very entertaining.

David says

I expected this book to be mostly fluff--but I was wrong. The book is an in-depth examination of our workplace psyches. Many of our behaviors in the workplace are shared by primates. These behaviors are probably not learned, but are inherited instincts. Our love of hierarchies, our ingrained sense of rankings and status, our fights, our building of coalitions, our understanding of risks, nepotism, the so-called "honeymoon phase" in relationships with new acquaintances, and the use of unprovoked hostility; these are all predilections in our workplace jungle that we have inherited from our shared primate ancestors. Evolution

has also made us very skillful at detecting cheaters--as are monkeys!

Status is very important in the workplace--we pay more attention to status than to the substance of what people say. We respond to "key stimuli"--mainly appearances--more than we care to admit. We have deep prejudices against ugly people.

The humor in this book is subtle, but that makes it all the more entertaining. For example, a story is told of a bus company employee who had a receding chin. After getting a chin implant, he rose to become the company president. In general, people are skillful at discerning fakes--except in the bus industry.

Of course, many chimpanzee behaviors cannot be extrapolated to humans. And, some people do not take kindly to comparisons between human behavior and that of primates. But it is clearly argued in this book, that humans are social primates. The book ends with a set of useful recommendations for getting along with others in the workplace. Many of these recommendations boil down to being aware of our animal-like tendencies, and to moderate them.

Jack Oughton says

Evolutionary psychology and animal metaphors meet the modern office.
I enjoyed it more than I thought, and I enjoyed the bits most where Richard focused on the animals, as oppose to the office...

Bob Nichols says

The book is an excellent summary of many key themes in evolutionary psychology. Conniff’s argues that we are driven by our need for rank, status and value, by dominance, submission, and mea culpa rituals; by conformity to group expectations; and by fearing loss of status, value and group membership.

Conniff is making a statement that all of us, and all apes, act in the way he describes. It is a successful survival strategy and it’s one that works particularly well in political and business life (hence, the title of the book). But he overstates his argument. Many minimize these negative self-promotion traits and oppose those who are all about self-promotion. They do not engage in the “me first” dynamic that Conniff describes and they see one’s own good as part of the whole. Group solidarity and individual benefit work hand in hand. Under Darwinian variation, we are not all one and the same. Many lean toward pure self-orientation; many others lean toward other-regarding behavior. Both work as survival strategies. But while Conniff acknowledges our vast suite of social instincts, he always places them within his hierarchical argument and does not have much of a place for those who are not, by nature, that way. He sees friends always as utilities; others see friends just as friends, in the best sense of the word.

Interestingly, Conniff makes a strong argument about the individual’s need for the group* yet he also tries to explain the origin of these instincts under kin selection (we favor our kind to promote the genes of our relatives). Is this a spurious connection? Is it possible that we are drawn primarily to be part of our group (through the social instinct and tribal components of Darwin’s theory) because it promotes survival and that close kin, at least early in our history, happened to be our salient group? Understanding our tribal and social

nature this way might, as opposed to kin selection theory, explain why our social instincts are so readily transferred to non-kin (social welfare work; adoption) and why in many instances we prefer non-kin to kin in our personal and professional relationships.

* We form in-groups, he states, “because the need to belong is a universal trait of social animals like us. As a species, human beings are characterized by ‘obligatory interdependence,’ says social psychologist Marilynn B. Brewer, and group living represents ‘our fundamental survival strategy.'”

Kip says

A very candid insight into the nuances that dominate our behaviors and expressions, this book focuses on how close our behaviors and expressions are to our primate ancestors. There are some very uncanny and fascinating examples of the conscious and unconscious intentions behind split-second reactions and it is very simple to relate anecdotes from the book to real life occurrences. However, since the author bases his conclusions heavily on data compiled in animal research, the direction of the book forks off into many different directions with no one common thread. There is also a good deal of evolutionism in it...if you're into that theory of origin.

Cody Sexton says

Power is central in human relationships, and it's only in the context of groups and relationships that we become fully human, sorry Ayn Rand. But the characteristic error of our time is that people think we are rational beings, not animals, that we are in control of our post ideological world. But in fact we are just monkeys who one day put on a hat. We experience so much stress and anxiety at work because much like animals in a zoo the workplace is an unnatural environment.
The approach/inhibit theory of power states that we approach or challenge when we are able and retreat when we are at a disadvantage, falling back into the hierarchy until next time. It's a safe place to hide and having a strong social game allows people the opportunity to live long enough to pass on their genes. So we live in artificial environments ruled by strict rules of hierarchy. To mitigate that we need to be strategically altruistic.
The authors one main argument is that nature built us to be nice, in other words show proper deference towards those with power. No society is egalitarian. You can never escape the pecking order all you can do is try to limit the number of pecks. We re-create the highly codified hierarchies of the playground wherever we go for the rest of our lives. The hierarchy exists to ensure domestic tranquility. If you think your not a part of a hierarchy it's merely invisible. Hierarchies work the same reason bureaucracies work, it's the easiest way to manage groups of people, they pretty much organize themselves in this way. But hierarchies exist or are tolerated because it keeps those with less resources safe.
We are unselfish animals in the sense that we do good for others but usually only for selfish reasons, in other words we are unselfish for selfish reasons.
Almost all of our aggression now gets channeled into symbolic forms. Meetings are ceremonies to reinforce the hierarchy, to remind people who's boss, and to praise or chastise anyone who isn't. Small talk is way to check and see that the social order is still in tact. The answer to the question, "How are you today?" isn't supposed to be answered honestly, what your boss is looking for is your tone of voice in giving your response.

We groom each other with our words now. Grooming behavior itself evolved into language and gossip is a form of grooming, it's also a strategy for coalition building among subordinates and its used to level the power imbalance and one of the main functions of gossip in any workplace is to communicate the unspoken rules. According to the anthropologist Robin Dunbar, its the only reason we evolved speech in the first place. Smart managers encourage gossip, weak managers obstruct it.
Office politics itself is in fact just primate politics. Political maneuvering follows the same rules of the jungle. It's surprising how little of our own behavior has advanced beyond that of our fellow apes.

Alberto Lopez says

Insightful!
Warning: It may offend those who believe in creationism

Doctor Moss says

We like to think of ourselves as “evolved”. We might be willing to grant that we are animals — after all, we have arms, legs — actually we have all the same organs, limbs, etc. as apes (make that “other apes”). 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 — one of the things we think strongly sets us apart — 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 “How are you?”, day to day gossip, “exchanges of pleasantries”. It’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 Waal’s classic Chimpanzee Politics. Conniff himself is not a scientist like de Waal, but he’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, he’s not only bringing us closer to our animal relatives, but he’s also, again like de Waal, bringing them closer to us — 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 needn't be large and explicit. They can be facial expressions, postures, positionings in a room — 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 — 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, that'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. We'll never not be animals.

Joel Cigan says

This was a pretty good book but it seemed somewhat dated reading it presently. I fell upon the book's name long ago probably from a perusal of Men's Health magazine.

It falls in line with my science background and sort of compares humans to primates with footnotes dispersed throughout the prose that discuss various zoological phenomenon.

I wasn't too interested in most of these quibbles to be honest but picked up quite a bit of information on how the workplace can be a cut-throat environment with only the biggest gorilla getting the BACON. Hmm...Or was it fruit and bamboo shoots?

LOL

Clarissa says

The author relates entertaining anecdotes, but I just don't care that much about corporate culture. The Species Seekers was one of the best nonfiction books I have read in the last ten years, and this just wasn't as great.

Leader Summaries says

Desde Leader Summaries recomendamos la lectura del libro La oficina de los simios, de Richard Conniff. Las personas interesadas en las siguientes temáticas lo encontrarán práctico y útil: recursos humanos, mejorar el clima laboral.
En el siguiente enlace tienes el resumen del libro La oficina de los simios, Una metáfora sobre nuestro comportamiento dentro de las organizaciones y cómo mejorarlo: La oficina de los simios

Paula says

This book far exceeded my expectations. Well-researched and argued, The Ape in the Corner Office explains office practices and politics that otherwise go unquestioned. Very informative and interesting.