

Monkey business

10 ways to Survive and thrive in the corporate jungle

by Sarah Hood - Canadian Business – August 2004)

Until recently, Charles was going through a rough patch. After years at the top, he found himself being challenged by a younger player. His colleagues weren't being very supportive, and just about the only person who hadn't see this coming was Charles himself.

But what did he expect? The rules of hierarchical group behaviour are strongly defined, and that applies whether you spend your time engineering hostile takeovers or hanging around in a tire swing like Charles, the dominant male gorilla at the Toronto Zoo. "We are all primates, and no matter how much we try to pretend we're so sophisticated, we're so not," says Suzanne MacDonald, a York University psychology professor and a behaviouralist at the Toronto Zoo. "Especially in times of stress, that's the perfect time for the inner monkey to come out."

Inevitably, everyone who functions in a group with a well-defined dominance structure (which means pretty much anybody in the working world) faces the occasional rough patch due to a competitive colleague, a misunderstanding, a workplace bully or a genuine false step. Sometimes it's a passing thing, but occasionally the pack turns against the individual. He or she is cut off from important information and resources, socially ostracized, edged away from the sources of power and generally squeezed into a corner.

So how do you manoeuvre back into favour when the rest of the world is against you? A roster of experts in human and animal hierarchical behaviour offers some suggestions about what to do when you've got your back to the office wall.

1. Reforge alliances

When social animals lose the support of their peers, their lives become very difficult. "The way to survive is to develop allies, so you work with others who are probably lower down in the hierarchy," says MacDonald. "You come to their aid, and they come to your aid, and gradually what happens is you both move up."

It's the same with people. "You've got to compel co-workers to support you," says Bellingham, Wash.-based consultant Gary Namie, author of *The Bully at Work*. "Win them back, probably by reminding them that they have fallen under the same treatment. Do it one-on-one, off-site. It's all about how to engender social obligation, reciprocity."

2. Analyze the situation

Rebuilding relations with peers is tricky. Luckily, as humans, we have more tools than the other primates, like strategic thinking. Ted C. Buffington is a Dallas-based expert in conflict management and performance improvement who advises clients to ask four critical questions: what's so? what's possible? what's missing? and what's next? We need to start with "a literal, verifiable understanding of the current situation, not an opinion, perception or inference," he says. To illustrate our tendency toward interpretation, he shows clients a smiling man and asks, "What's so?" Most answer that the man is happy, whereas all we really know for sure is that the corners of his mouth are turned up.

3. Defuse your hot buttons

"Our hot buttons drive us to some of these situations," says executive coach Palma Robinson of Oakville, Ont.-based Palma Robinson Associates. For example, the hot button for the person who really values his or her autonomy and independence might be the micromanager. Other hot buttons could be someone unreliable, unappreciative, very blunt or very impatient. "Suddenly, I find myself

reacting and avoiding this person," says Robinson. "My first steps are to stop trying to change that person, sort out my own reactions and examine how I'm contributing here."

4. Get limber

"There are always options, and there are always more than two options," notes Susan Dunn of San Antonio, who, because of her work in the area of emotional intelligence, bills herself as the EQ Coach. "When we get into a bad situation, the default mode is to get rigid. What you need is the ability to generate alternative options and solutions." If you see obstacles instead of possibilities ("I can't take time off"; "He'll never see reason"), it may be an area to work on.

5. Get help

In some cases, the individual who's in trouble lacks the objectivity to chart a course of action. At this point, advises Dunn, "it would be really to your benefit to work with a coach to help work this sort of thing out." She recommends sources such as the International Coach Federation and the virtual community of Coachville.

Such an approach could pay off. "It validates you," says Namie. That is especially true when you're receiving bad treatment that isn't covered by any kind of legislation (such as laws against harassment or discrimination). "Those are the worst kinds of traps: when you're caught and it's not an illegality," Namie says.

6. Change what you're doing

"It's important when you get your back to the wall that you do something different than you have been doing, because what you've been doing is what got you there," emphasizes Dunn, who offers an example that she frequently hears clients say: "I don't want to make trouble." She adds, "By this they probably mean they've been keeping a low profile." But ironically, "whatever they've been doing is what's got them into trouble."

This is the time to resist the urge to dash, eyes lowered, from elevator to office and instead make a point of looking people in the eye, smiling and greeting them by name. "You can do something like walk into a group and interject a comment when you wouldn't normally do that," suggests Dunn. "Make more of a presence: don't let yourself be ignored."

7. Mind your language

Positive language can build hope and even redefine a bad situation. If you refrain from using words such as "fault," "blame," "shame" and "failure," others will be less likely to perceive the situation in those terms. "Even a conflict situation is only conflict if that's what you name it," says Buffington. "The one thing that's in your control is your conversation. I believe that everything occurs in conversation. I also believe that you're only one conversation away from getting the things you want."

What you say is as important as the way you say it. "Language, the way we script our words, is powerful," says Robinson. "The way we ask a question is in part going to determine whether we get an evasive answer. Questions that might be intimidating are: why did this happen, who was there, and why does this happen every time you're involved."

Robinson suggests using neutral language, avoiding personal pronouns and asking for "what" and "how," instead of "who" and "why," as in, what happened yesterday? how can we improve this situation? or what causes this to happen every Monday?"

8. Turn misunderstanding into communication

"The rule in communication is to assume you've been misunderstood," says Dunn. It's crucial for speakers to check what listeners think they've said and for listeners to repeat back what they think they've heard.

Buffington describes an executive he worked with who would give detailed instructions to his subordinates. When they turned in a finished report according to his instructions, he would reject it with the words, "That's not what I wanted!" Then Buffington recorded a set of his verbal instructions and played them back. "This guy looked at me as if I had altered the tape," he recalls. "Every item he's getting more and more agitated, and finally he says, 'Hearing that on tape, I have no memory of making those requests.'"

The secret, Buffington explains, is that people who speak figuratively tend to interpret literally, and vice versa. "The breakthrough for this guy was that I would give him particular cues as to when he had to stop and ask, 'What did you hear me say?'"

9. Employ the Rule of Two

Generally, the first place to begin to resolve personality conflicts is one-on-one, at your own level. However, in the case of a truly toxic situation involving a manager, you must go at least two management levels above the source of the problem to find impartial help. Says Namie, "If it's an abuse of power, when you're one down, you have to go at least two above."

10. Move on

MacDonald explains that in groups of animals with a clearly defined dominance hierarchy, like gorillas, mandrills and elephants, an individual occasionally falls to the foot of the social ladder, not through any fault of its own, but just by the luck of the draw. "It's very hard to be at the bottom of the pecking order. In real life, if that happens, the individual leaves and finds another group," she says. "So the easiest thing to do is leave and find another job, because that would actually be what would happen in nature."

The workplace echoes the wild kingdom, apparently. A 2003 survey by Namie's Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute reports that of 1,000 volunteer respondents who say they were the target of bullying at work, 33% quit their jobs, another 17% transferred to a different position under the same employer, while a further 37% were fired or involuntarily terminated.

The good news? "Often when animals go to another group, they're fine," says MacDonald. "They will not be a scapegoat."

Unless you're Charles at the zoo--whose problems cleared up when his young challenger, his son, was removed from the group--you have four choices. Robinson sums it up: "We can stay and continue to feel bad. We can leave and feel bad that we left under those circumstances. We can stay and feel better--realign our expectations--or we can leave and feel better that we decided to take care of ourselves." In other words, the worst course of action is likely to be no action at all.