



Designing people strategies based on human instincts

Changes at the Top

When the top leader changes, whether in organisations or chimp communities, the political fallout is predictable. Knowing our natural tendencies helps leaders make good choices.

Over the last few months three significant Australian institutions have changed their top leader. In these vastly different organisations, we see what unfolds when a top leader changes. BHP, Australia's third largest corporation, has a new chief executive with the media predicting that he is deciding the "shape of his new leadership team". The national rugby team has a new head coach, accompanied by media speculation that there will be a "clean-out" of the coaching staff associated with the previous boss. And the alpha chimpanzee at Taronga Zoo in Sydney recently passed away which will result in a new top leader.

Participants who have attended our zoo program in Sydney will remember Lubutu fondly and will be saddened by his death. Lubutu's leadership style was powerful but not intimidating, so he led the group well and with a leader like Lubutu the group enjoyed social harmony. When visiting the chimps, our participants always wanted to know which chimp is Lubutu. Invariably, he would be sitting on a specific rock next to a small waterfall. Why did he sit on that particular rock? "Because that was the rock," the keeper would tell us, "where the prior alpha sat." It was the throne or the corner office.

What can we expect in the group's dynamics as the Taronga chimps go through a leadership change? The first dynamic we can predict is that there will be shifts in power. The leader who rises to the top will bring their allies with them, so the new leader and their closest confidants all progress up the hierarchy. This also means that individuals strongly associated with Lubutu will, unless one of them is the successor, drop in dominance and ranking. The old guard can suddenly find themselves on the "outer".

Second, we can expect that the new leader will "throw their weight around". They'll seek to assert their dominance, letting everyone know that the new leader is here and "it's me". In showing dominance, the new leader will have an idiosyncratic display. Lubutu's display was to launch himself at a metal door, all fours smashing into the steel panel creating a loud bang. Figan, one of Jane Goodall's Gombe chimps, himself a good leader, used to wake up before everyone else and startle the community from their nests. In their state of alarm, he groomed everyone to reassure them of his presence.

Third, the rise of a new leader doesn't necessarily mean the end of posturing for the top job. If an ambitious rival fails to take the top job, that frustrated individual will likely harbour their resentment, test allegiances of others, and bide their time for their next chance. The best chance for a settled community is for the new leader to be clearly dominant – not a tyrant, just appropriately powerful.

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How does a chimp aspirant win the top job? They display, making themselves look impressive in order to intimidate a rival. The purpose of their posturing is to cause any rival to submit. Unlike human organisations where internal rivalry for the top job usually results in rivals – good quality people – resigning in frustration and embarrassment, chimps aren't as daft. In their leadership contests they have no desire to wound or lose a useful resource – one that will be called upon sometime soon to help protect their borders from threatening neighbours. Chimp contests are usually bluff and not bloody.

What can we predict in the behaviour of the rest of the chimp community in relation to the new leader? Chimps are politically astute so they'll play it smart. They'll likely put up a show of goodwill towards the new leader, even if the new leader isn't the one they would have preferred. The community members will observe the new leader in their role, working out the new leader's likes and dislikes so they don't unwittingly annoy the new boss and cause resentment. They won't avoid the new leader as that might be interpreted as opposition. All will offer to groom the new leader to demonstrate allegiance, even if they are not a fan. Failure to groom a leader would be a deliberately destabilising act. If there are any political games to be played, most of the organisation – sorry, the community – will let the games go on at the top.

Given the political significance of the change of top leader, what should happen at BHP or in our organisation when the top leader changes? The best approach is for a top leader to take their time to assess the capability of the existing team they inherit. They should contain their impulse to doubt people who were close to the prior leader and allow those individuals to show their worth. And a new leader should avoid bringing with them allies from their prior role. Bringing a new team creates a "them and us" culture in the organisation. The main focus of the leader should be to allow the people in the organisation to focus on their jobs and avoid the distraction that flows from political upheaval at the top.

