

WHEN MONKEYS MEAN BUSINESS

Leadership lessons from primates



SARAH CHEAH
AND ANG SWEE HOON

As this is the Year of the Monkey, we identify some characteristics that are commonly associated with primates and that can be used to improve business acumen and management skills.

Call it a case of monkey see, monkey do.

CHANGE NEEDS CREATIVITY AND PATIENCE

Many monkey species have been observed by primatologists to use tools in the wild to solve problems, such as reaching for fruits at difficult spots. Chimpanzees and orangutans, in particular, not only use them, but habitually manufacture new tools for creative problem-solving. However, their higher cognitive abilities also mean they tend to become easily bored.

What can we learn from monkeys' creativity and susceptibility to boredom?

Given recent economic developments, constant change is the new norm. We can take a leaf from the primates' ability to embrace change positively and their creativity to successfully drive change for business management. After all, the capacity to accept change and be creative is the root of innovation.

But while businesses prepare for and accept change, we should also be mindful that focus, concentration and, above all, patience are necessary for success. Perseverance in completing a task, even when all seems lost, helps groom leadership and responsibility.

UNCERTAINTY DEMANDS AGILITY, RESOURCEFULNESS

Monkeys are nimble and swift movers. Studies by biologist Dorothy Cheney and psychologist Robert Seyfarth using pre-recorded alarm calls have shown that vervets — small, black-faced monkeys — are capable of making different responses depending on the nature of threats.

When they hear a leopard approaching, vervets will dash to the woods by swinging rapidly from tree to tree. At the hint of an eagle's presence, they will head for the bushes. Likewise, they stay away from grass if they detect any sound of snakes.

Businesses can learn from such traits. Agility and resourcefulness are valuable skills in volatile markets. Rewards await those versatile and quick-witted enough to handle uncertainty and capitalise on opportunities.

However, the ability to quickly shift

positions needs to be balanced with careful, strategic thinking. Short-term gains might seem alluring, but are they best in the longer term? It is always important to ask what future opportunities you miss by choosing one path over another.

BALANCE SELF-CONFIDENCE WITH ADVICE FROM OTHERS

In the animal kingdom, uncertainty is normal. Making sense of ambiguous information is critical for survival. Does a gesture signal fear or aggression? Does it mean confidence or uncertainty? Research shows that chimpanzees have the ability to monitor their own uncertainty and are aware of what they do not know and what others may know.

Monkeys can also be confident, bold and even fearless, leaping long distances from treetop to treetop, for example. They are also known to be curious, eager to investigate new objects or environments and improvising tools to do so.

In management, entrepreneurs looking to break conventions need to be bold and fearless. Being curious or inquisitive will also help businesses set new trends or push boundaries.

There is a very fine line between self-confidence and over-confidence. For instance, it is great to believe passionately in your product, but always temper exuberance with the experience and intelligence of others — including customers — by heeding their advice on how to improve your goods.

BUILD TIES TO RALLY A TEAM

Monkeys are social, living in groups with a clearly defined hierarchy. Dominance in the group depends not only on aggression and physical strength but also on building bonds, alliances and loyalties. They spend much time grooming each other to do so.

Likewise, in times of uncertainty and change, being able to communicate a strategy or vision and rally employees around it is critical to team building.

Like monkeys who spend time grooming each other, leaders can build a cohesive team by understanding their subordinates' needs and helping each other through rough times.

In business as well it is important to know how to press the right buttons to win people over — leaders, after all, depend on the backing of their team.

Yet here, too, there are limits. Persuasive and overly charming leaders can become so convinced of their own rhetoric that they downplay or ignore potential downsides, creating problems further down the road.

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IMPRESS BY DELIVERING RESULTS

In Chinese mythology, monkeys are traditionally seen to love being the centre of attention. They can become stubborn and irritable if they do not get their way — all traits that have also

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been observed in monkeys in the wild. In business, having the charisma to impress others can certainly make a leader successful. But stubborn individuals can also destroy teamwork.

That said, stubborn personalities and irritability can be tolerated if the results are game-changers. Take Steve Jobs, for example. The late Apple boss was renowned for being demanding, difficult to work with and short-tempered. Yet his leadership produced some remarkable innovations and near-universal admiration from those he worked with.

The true test of a leader's mettle is whether he or she can deliver results. Otherwise, that leader is just a hollow charmer, with little or nothing in the way of concrete achievements.

● Sarah Cheah and Ang Swee Hoon are associate professors at the National University of Singapore Business School, where they teach management and organisation, and marketing, respectively. This is the first of a series of commentaries by NUS Business School experts on leadership.