

‘A COMPELLING BOOK’

—Dr Jane Goodall

HARDWIRED HUMANS

**Successful Leadership
Using Human Instincts**



Andrew O’Keeffe

Contents

A Note From Dr Jane Goodall

Why We Behave the Way We Do

Instinct 1. Social Belonging

The paradox that comes with the job of leader

Instinct 2. Hierarchy and Status

Avoiding chaos in families, clans and tribes

Instinct 3. Emotions Before Reason

It's not just for fight or flight

Instinct 4. First Impressions to Classify

Why a bank CEO got out of a Mumbai hotel just ahead of the terrorists

Instinct 5. Loss Aversion

Busting the myth that people resist change

Instinct 6. Gossip

Gossip is grooming without the fleas

Instinct 7. Empathy and Mind Reading

It's always good to put a face to a name

Instinct 8. Confidence Before Realism

Why 155 people on flight 1549 survived landing in an icy Hudson River

Instinct 9. Contest and Display

Looking good to get ahead

Organisational Behaviours that Now Make More Sense

Appendix: The 9 Human Instincts Defined

Acknowledgments

Notes

References

Index

A Note From Dr Jane Goodall

When I first set foot on what is now the Gombe National Park on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in Tanzania it was to fulfil my childhood dream—to live with animals and write books about them. That was in 1960. I could not have imagined then that my study of the Gombe chimpanzees, now in its 50th year, would also provide information that would be used by other people writing their own books—such as Andrew's *Hardwired Humans*.

So many people are obsessed with how we are *different* to other animals, but chimpanzees impress us with the *similarities* in their behaviour and our own. They have many of the attributes that used to be considered uniquely human—such as using and making tools, intellectually solving problems, expressing emotions such as anger, sadness, happiness, despair. This should not surprise us since we differ, in structure of DNA, by only just over one percent. Indeed, we are part of and not separated from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Yet we are different in one way—the explosive development of the human intellect. We are thus able to analyse those traits that we share with chimpanzees and other animals and use this knowledge to help us better understand why we behave the way we do. Based on lessons learned from the chimpanzees we can, Andrew suggests, develop strategies for successful interactions with others. An understanding of the complex ways in which chimpanzees maintain social harmony within their community can provide valuable insights for dealing with tensions in a group of humans. And this, along with an understanding of the social skills required by (in their case, male) chimpanzees to become successful alphas, will help humans to become better leaders.

As well as reading about the Gombe chimpanzees, Andrew has spent many hours watching and learning from the wonderful chimpanzee group at the Taronga Zoo in Sydney. It is his fascination for these apes, the knowledge he has gained first hand and from talking to the keepers that make this a compelling book. You will get many insights into your own behaviour and that of your friends and colleagues.

Dr Jane Goodall

Gombe Stream Research Centre, Tanzania

Why We Behave the Way We Do

On one side of Sydney Harbour is the city's business district. If you started work in any of the high-rise buildings, there are some things you would want to know about your new organisation. Like who's the big boss. That wouldn't be too hard to figure out. They're the one occupying the corner office on the top floor.

On the opposite side of the harbour, a short ferry ride from the iconic Opera House, a similar scene unfolds every day at Taronga Zoo, home to one of the world's best captive communities of chimpanzees. If you know what to look for it's easy to spot the leader of this community. We take business leaders to visit the chimps, and leaders always want to know which one is the alpha male. The keeper will point to a chimp some twenty paces away. 'That's him sitting on the rock near the waterfall.' The keeper continues, 'We think he sits on that particular rock because that's the rock the prior alpha male used to sit on.' It's the 'corner office'. In this community, when you've got claim to that rock, baby, you've made it!

Our natural behaviours—behaviours that come as part of being human—have significant implications for leaders. The two great benefits of knowing about instincts is that first, we can better make sense of why we humans behave the way we do at work so that second, we can make more informed leadership choices.

Comparing human behavioural characteristics to those of chimpanzees is revealing because their social structure, behavioural strategies and community politics are so similar to ours. The chimpanzee stories woven into the book come from the chimps at Taronga Zoo and from Dr Jane Goodall's experiences at Gombe Stream Chimpanzee Reserve in Tanzania.

The knowledge, application and value of our basic instincts have largely been ignored in the practice of leadership. Understanding those instincts can provide the missing link to effective people leadership. Most leaders find the toughest part of their job—the one more likely to keep them awake at night—is the 'people' dimension. As one manager said to me, 'The numbers are easy; it's the people stuff that's hard.' This book will help ensure that managing people isn't as hard as it tends to be.

Behaviours that frustrate organisational performance are uncannily similar from one organisation to another. Irrespective of their organisation, their industry or country, most leaders say that in our organisation:

- There's a lot of silo behaviour and internal competition.
- Change is difficult to manage and often resisted or derailed.
- The informal gossip grapevine is incredibly effective and is generally faster and regarded as more reliable than the formal channels.
- Our performance appraisal system doesn't deliver what it should and Human Resources is redesigning the system just one more time!
- Managers find it hard to give negative feedback and often procrastinate on managing poor performers.

Given that these experiences and many more are common to most organisations then they are not explainable at the organisational level. They can only be explained by a common factor—we all employ humans! Likewise, the solutions to these common issues will not be found at the organisational level. They can only be solved if we understand the human condition that both explains the behaviours and provides the solutions.

There's a suite of behaviours that come with being born human. Irrespective of whether our belief systems are more aligned to evolution or creation, the point is that when we're born human there's a package of behaviours that come with being human and that out of the whole period of human history we have only recently popped up in offices and factories.

From an evolutionary view, *Homo sapiens* emerged on the plains of Africa around 200,000 years ago and it's only 250 years ago with the Industrial Revolution that (in Western cultures) we left our hunting, gathering and village societies to work in offices and factories. A mere 250 years is no time at all for our ingrained behavioural instincts to change. Little surprise, therefore, that the behaviour that ensured our survival on the savannah plains of Africa over the millennia is alive and well in the corridors, meeting rooms and offices of today's organisations!

And early *Homo sapiens* were shaped by their pre-human ancestors. The evolutionary theory is that pre-humans emerged around 5 million years ago in the form of *Australopithecines* who had a similar skull structure to humans and walked upright on two legs. The 23 metres of hominoid footprints preserved in volcanic ash at Laetoli in Tanzania date from around 3.7 million years ago. *Homo habilis* appeared around 2 million–1.5 million years ago and then *Homo erectus* emerged around 1.5 million years ago, walking upright, with a large brain and engaged in tool making. Evidence of the use of fire first appears at this time. The oldest fossil of modern humans has been found at Herto in Ethiopia that dates back to around 160,000 years ago. From separate studies of genetic code scientists date *Homo sapiens* from around 200,000 years ago which fits the fossil evidence.

Generations of early hominoids have been a key force in shaping what it means to be human. Even the transition to agricultural communities occurred only around 10,000 years ago. Then suddenly our grandparents' grandparents were the first to find themselves in offices and factories.

While our habitat might have changed 250 years ago—the equivalent of a nanosecond on the evolutionary clock—our hardwired behaviour, the way we process information and the way the brain works, has not.

The definition of instincts, courtesy of Robert Winston, is, 'That part of our behaviour that is not learned.' For the list and explanation of the nine human instincts we rely on the research of a number of people. The key source and inspiration for the instincts comes from Professor Nigel Nicholson from London Business School, who first inspired me to see and apply instincts to solve practical leadership challenges, along with Professor Robert Winston of Imperial College London and Professor Robin Dunbar from the University of Oxford amongst others.

People who have learned about instincts find that workplace behaviour suddenly makes a lot more sense, they are more in control of their environment, better able to influence things and to be more effective. Leaders who have acquired the insight into

human instincts say that the knowledge has transformed their ability to lead. They report that confusion about why people think and behave as they do has been significantly reduced. And as a consequence they are able to make better leadership choices so that managing people is easier, less stressful, more satisfying and more successful.

By understanding and reconnecting with the nine instinctive behaviours, you will realise that this valuable knowledge was already tucked inside your subconscious, exactly where you would expect to find instinctive behaviour. By making this knowledge explicit you will be better able to predict what will work and what won't, and to avoid the perennial derailers of leadership and life in organisations.

Instinct 1. Social Belonging

This instinct helps explain why:

- people talk about a great team being *just like* a family
- teams have a natural size
- 80% of people who resign do so because of their manager
- conflict in our team drives us crazy
- silo behaviour emerges as organisations grow beyond a moderate size.

Jane Goodall watched Flint die. Dr Goodall first began studying the chimpanzees at Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania in 1960. One of her early observations was that chimps, like us, have strong bonds between family members and those bonds endure for life. Flint's reaction to his mother's death shows how strong this bond can be. His mother Flo died when Flint was eight and a half years old. So traumatised was the youngster with the loss of his mother he died within three weeks.

Some 35 years after Flint's death Dr Goodall was telling me about Flo and Flint's deaths. In October 2008 Dr Goodall and I had just concluded a three week tour speaking to business audiences about the implications of instincts for leaders. In vividly recalling Flint's death, Dr Goodall said that she could describe it as nothing other than grief. Upon Flo's death Flint stopped eating and with his immunisation system so weakened he quickly deteriorated. Back closer to the time she wrote, 'The last short journey he made, pausing to rest every few feet, was to the very place where Flo's body had lain. There he stayed for several hours ... he struggled on a little further, then curled up—and never moved again.'

The first of our nine instincts is *social belonging*. We are a social animal; we are not loners. As a social animal, we gain our sense of identity from our membership of two groups: our family group that naturally numbers about seven people, and our extended clan which can number up to around 150.

Let's make concrete the connection between instincts and organisational life. The building block of human communities is family groups. Given that we have just

recently emerged into offices and factories, it follows that the building blocks of organisations are, or should be, small family-sized teams. With our need to connect intimately with a small group of others numbering around seven, it also means that nothing drives us to distraction faster than if our immediate work team is dysfunctional. It means that as organisations grow towards 150, people will begin to say, ‘It’s not as friendly as it used to be.’ And when numbers go significantly beyond 150 we will have stronger bonds to our department or subsidiary than to the whole organisation to the extent that silos and internal competition will tend to occur as departments compete for resources and recognition.

Family

Our strong sense of community and lifetime family bonds comes from our reproductive strategy as a species. There are not many animals on the planet that have this lifetime family bond as their survival strategy.

Our strategy is to invest everything in the raising of a few offspring—we focus our reproductive energy on just a few children. Some animals adopt a strategy at the other extreme. A mother turtle, for example, swims up to the beach during the night, digs a shallow hole and lays her eggs. She covers her eggs with sand, and that’s her mothering duty done! The hatchlings have all the information they need to survive and the species plays the numbers game where enough hatchlings—around one in a thousand—hopefully survive through to adulthood to reproduce.

We humans don’t play the numbers game. Human parents, particularly mothers, invest heavily in raising an infant to reproductive age. After birth, a human baby’s brain takes another year to complete its physical growth and quite a few years before the youngster could hope to survive on their own. The human mother has the capacity to give birth to only a handful of children over her lifespan. With this incredible investment in an offspring, it’s not surprising that the bond between parents and offspring, and between direct family members, are for life.

There is something special about families and our primary sense of identity that comes with being part of a family. In April 1846, the Donner party consisting of 87 men, women and children set off from Illinois en-route inland to California on the

west coast of the US. Unfortunately for the group they reached the Sierra Nevada mountains later than expected and became trapped by an October snow storm and camped to face the winter. Come spring, 40 of the party had died due to the atrocious conditions. But curiously, a high proportion of people who survived were members of family units and a high proportion who died were young men travelling alone. Only three of the 15 single men survived and the only woman who died was travelling in a small group of four.

We're just not loners and family holds a special place. James Bain spent 35 years in a Florida gaol wrongly sentenced for a crime he didn't commit. When he was freed in December 2009 he was asked on the steps of the court house how he got through so many years in prison. He answered with his engaging smile, 'By maintaining myself and to get home to my mum.' When asked what he planned to do now he was out, he said, 'I'm going home with my family. I'm going to see my mum. That's the most important thing in my life right now.'

We are not surprised by this human response. It is a key part of what it means to be human and an instinct we share with chimpanzees.

Taronga chimpanzees

Through my work using zoos as a base, I have become friendly with a number of wonderful primate keepers. Louise Grossfeldt is head of primates at Sydney's Taronga Zoo and her colleague, Allan Schmidt, is a senior member of her team. They generously share their stories of their chimp community to assist leaders gain insight into the natural condition for social animals.

The chimpanzee community at Taronga is one of the best zoo-based communities in the world, mainly due to the size and complexity of the group that reflects the wild condition of chimps. There are 19 individuals in the chimp community at Taronga. The 19 chimps represent six families. There are three adult males, and the multi-male, multi-family nature of chimpanzee communities is a key part of the social complexity, coalitions and politics in the life of a chimp.

In November 2009 the chimps at Taronga were temporarily relocated while their exhibit underwent a major refurbishment. The relocation was as sensitive as an office move, planned with as much thought as we would expect our office move to be managed. Louise and her team planned the move around family groups. The politics amongst the male chimps also featured prominently in the keepers' planning. Adult males are almost always rivals for the top job, and the relationships between males is observably more intense and more dynamic than between the females.

The first group moved the 200 metres to the temporary exhibit was the alpha male, Lubutu, and his family along with the two oldest females. Lubutu was comfortably established in his new territory when on the third day the second of the adult males arrived.

Chimbuka, this second male, was still unconscious and in the care of the vets when Lubutu spotted him. All hell broke loose. Lubutu went into a wild display, hair hackled so he looked twice his size, screaming and banging on walls and screens. A fully-grown adult chimp with around five times the strength of a human male creates an awesome display. Arrivals of females over the previous two days had not created such a response from Lubutu.

After his health check Chimbuka was left to wake up in the den. When he did wake Chimbuka freaked out. In the wild, male chimps never leave their territory so being moved to a strange location would indeed be instinctively frightening. The keepers opened an access raceway so the females might greet and comfort him.

But the females were reluctant to go to him, presumably frightened by Chimbuka's frenzied display and presumably torn by the decision confronting them—on the one hand, if they left him alone his mood might deteriorate and he might become more dangerous, yet if they went to him they might be attacked. The group of seven females plus juveniles and infants wavered at the edge of the raceway some ten metres away. They oscillated, teetering on going forward and then shrinking back. Individual chimps, not moving themselves, encourage others to go forward. No one moved. The group was frozen.

From the back of the pack comes Bessie, Chimbuka's 60-year-old grandmother. She wants to get to her grandson. Bessie is frail, stooped and moves awkwardly. She is blocked by the band of petrified observers. Like Moses, she parts a path and makes her way through the group. Finally, she gets to the front of the pack. She crosses the precipice and reaches her grandson. She pauses just before him as if saying, 'Come here, Sweetie' and gives him a big hug. The reassuring effect is instant—Chimbuka quickly calms down. The other females now gather round and reassure him. There are some things only a mother or grandmother can provide.

Family as the organisation building block

Given that we humans moved from villages into offices and factories only 250 years ago (and for many countries outside the Western world, many years fewer than that) we bring the basic construct with us to work—our need to bond intimately with a few people. These people become our 'as if' family and we want that group to be close-knit and functional. Many of us even describe our teams as being 'just like family'.

Given the critical role of family for the human condition, it is not surprising that our organisations are, or at least should be, built upon family-sized work groups of around seven people. This was the natural size of family in primitive days—mum and dad, perhaps a grandparent and a few children. The range in this group is five to nine, or seven plus or minus the standard deviation of two.

'Seven' is significant for the human brain. The working memory of the brain has, on average, the capacity to handle seven items. After seven, plus or minus two, we tend to make mistakes. Seven digits of a telephone number are quite easy to remember, while eight is challenging for the average human. Up to seven is the number of people that work in a syndicate team at a conference—eight is quite dysfunctional due to the increased mathematical combinations. In a study by physicist Peter Kline of Medical University of Vienna analysing the size of a committee that is the most dysfunctional, the number that stood out as the worst was the committee size of eight.

Seven or so people as a group is the size that can best create a sense of intimacy. *The Economist* magazine asked Facebook to test whether the technology of social networking revealed any trend of people's intimate contacts. In the research

conducted by Dr Cameron Marlow, the ‘in-house sociologist’ at Facebook, *The Economist* reported:

... What also struck Dr Marlow ... was that the number of people on an individual's friend list with whom he or she frequently interacts is remarkably small and stable. The more ‘active’ or intimate the interaction, the smaller and more stable the group.

Thus an average man—one with 120 friends—generally responds to the postings of only seven of those friends by leaving comments on the posting individual's photos, status messages or ‘wall’. An average woman is slightly more sociable, responding to ten. When it comes to two-way communication such as e-mails or chats, the average man interacts with only four people and the average woman with six ...

The analysis concluded that despite the capacity of online social networking sites, humans ‘still have the same small circles of intimates as ever’.

In the book, other aspects of our instinctive need to connect with an *as if* family unit are explained. We then turn to the implications for leaders.

Implications of this instinct for leaders

Here’s a snapshot of what we have learned about the family element of the instinct of *social belonging*.

1. We gain our identity as a member of a small intimate group of around seven people.
2. We carry this *as if* family model with us into our workplaces.
3. Yet our work team cannot really be family—that’s the preserve of direct family members.
4. Hence a leader in modern workplaces is challenged with a paradox of leading a family size group which desires to act *as if* it is family but can never be and should not be so.

There are significant practical implications of our natural family condition which, if incorporated into your toolkit, will make managing people easier.

Implication 1. Team size

The size of a team determines whether it is set to be functional or dysfunctional. To be designed to be functional, teams should number around seven members.

If a manager is leading a team much smaller than five or larger than nine, it's useful to know that there will be some unnatural challenges.

A small team of, say, two people is too small for those two individuals to feel a sense of belonging. Typically, small teams suffer a sense of isolation. Small teams should be merged or at least connected to the next level so that individuals have a sense of belonging to a family-sized unit.

Teams can be too big. If a team is larger than nine people then the team is too large for people to have an intimate sense of connection and too large for the manager to lead.

In some organisations teams swell to 15, 20 or even 30 people. Be aware that such over-sized teams create a foundation of dysfunction. The leader is not able to spend the necessary time with each person. The team will struggle to deliver outputs. Team members become frustrated that the leader can't respond to their requests fast enough. Factions or cliques will emerge in the team. This group is way beyond the size with which we bond intimately.

A group of middle managers of a manufacturing business shared with me their recent experience. They had teams of around 30 people reporting to their team leaders. The teams were structured around this size in order to save 'unproductive headcount' of managers. The assumption was that because the work of the 30 staff was routine production work, the structure could work. Frustrated with the low level of productivity in the group and after trying a range of possible solutions, the managers finally changed the structure and appointed team leaders to lead teams of around seven. Instantly the facility became more productive. Decision-making sped up,

production obstacles were removed, groups were more efficiently in touch with each other and resources were more appropriately allocated.

The ideal is seven, plus or minus two, meaning between five and nine. This team size applies irrespective of the level of the organisation. A senior team of 14 will be too big for the executive members to gain a sense of intimate connection. Cliques will most likely form. A team this size will have duplicated functions and a width of coverage too broad for the head of the team to sufficiently cope. For senior executives a team size of five to nine is functional for another reason—such a team will naturally represent the range of functions that the CEO will need a line of sight to. These roles will represent the voices the CEO needs at the table for effective decision making. If the CEO has many more than nine voices, it can almost be guaranteed that voices will be duplicated and energies diluted. With such a large team the CEO will also be trying to skate across too many subjects and the operation will be hampered.

Flight Centre is a global organisation employing around 14,000 people in the travel industry. The company is regularly awarded Best Employer status in countries where it operates. One reason for its ongoing success is that it bases its organisational structure on human instinct principles which it calls ‘family, village and tribe’. In its retail travel stores, call centres and central functions, Flight Centre has teams of no more than seven staff. According to the Human Resources Director, Michael Murphy, ‘Any time we compromised the rule of seven and even had eight staff in a store, productivity dropped. From painful experience, we will not compromise team size, our family team, of seven in number. This family unit is a foundation of our business, both in terms of the connection of people and the accountability of managers.’

For Flight Centre, if a store is generating business that justifies more than seven people then the company opens another store in the same neighbourhood. The company will pay the extra infrastructure costs of a second store rather than suffer the predictable decline in productivity that accompanies a team larger than seven.

Flight Centre wisely knows that it’s impossible for staff to connect to a human group of 14,000. However, they also know that they *can* have a highly engaged group of staff if there is a strong sense of belonging. If staff members are highly connected at

the local level within their team of seven and in their village of around 80 people then the company has a band of loyal, energetic people. The company has replicated this model around the world and attributes its growth, stability and sustainability to this principle.

In the book, we go on to explain another five implications of the family element of our *social belonging* instinct along with an explanation on the clan element. And the other eight instincts are explained and the implications for leaders outlined.