

“Meet the New Boss”

Primal Management: Unraveling the Secrets of Human Nature to Drive High Performance

(New York: AMACOM, 2009)

By
Paul Herr

A review by William C. Frederick, September 2009©

The view—not to mention the location—was totally and completely mind boggling. A full-page advertisement in, of all places, that refuge and champion of free-market capitalism—none other than *The Wall Street Journal*—and paid for by the paper’s corporate parent, Dow Jones. An oversized, two-color headline proclaimed “MEET THE NEW BOSS”, followed by a striking portrait of Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary thought and author of *The Origin of Species*. The ad told readers, “In today’s environment, only the fittest sales organizations survive. Ensure your survival.”

Huh? What’s going on here? After 150 years of Darwinian thought, has the Capitalist Establishment finally gotten natural selection’s message? If so, it’s about time. But the Dow Jones crowd can claim no bragging rights. After all, the Vatican Establishment came to terms with evolution some years ago. Ah, progress—of a sort!

Paul Herr, corporate consultant, seems at first to be another unlikely source of Darwinian wisdom. He’s been advising business for three decades, focusing mainly on employee engagement. Ah, but there’s the clue—how to get employees deeply engaged in their work and committed to their company’s goals. And why is that a tell-tale clue? Because Herr believes he has found the secret, one buried discreetly but actually in plain view if you know where and especially how to look for it. Here is his story.

Darwin himself might have written *Primal Management* for it charts a behavioral and organizational pathway laid down by long-term evolutionary forces at the very core of management decision making. Herr’s unique contribution is to update Darwin’s own views of emotions’ importance by constructing a neurogenetic emotion-based toolkit for managers who are looking for ways to enhance the productivity of their companies. Feed the five key socio-emotional appetites he identifies; heed the emotional physics driving a company’s workforce; let emotional intelligence share organizational space with pragmatic rationality—then stand back and watch your company soar far beyond its competitors.

Emotions are the key to corporate success *a la* evolutionary trends. Herr labels them “appetites” to emphasize the pleasures and pains associated with either satisfying or denying each emotion. If employees are to be fully engaged in their work, these five emotional appetites must be satisfied. Deny, squelch, or frustrate them, and there’s nothing but trouble in the corporate cage.

- **The Cooperation Appetite.** Humans are genetically programmed to cooperate with one another. Without social bonding, their survival chances would be nil. True also of our Paleolithic ancestors, humans have long found ways to identify closely with their affiliative groups—a process known as *cathexis* where individual and group blend together, forming “a networked superorganism with a shared identity and shared purpose.” Feeding this appetite is the main employee motivational force at work in the modern corporation.
- **The Competence Appetite.** Survival depends on employees’ skills if groups are to adapt successfully to a host of bewildering environmental challenges (think competitive markets). Seeking self-esteem within one’s group calls for mastery of the needed survival skills, pursued through “hard work, persistence, mastery, and pride in one’s profession,” with a powerful emotional kick when this appetite is satisfied.
- **The Skill-Deployment Appetite.** Exhibiting skill just once is not enough to satisfy one’s emotional cravings at work. In a dynamic environment, multiple talents are demanded continuously, feeding employees’ emotional reward systems over and over again as they help achieve company goals, leading to feelings “such as joy, elation, euphoria, ecstasy, exhilaration, and the pleasure of achievement.” Of course, this happens only when employees feel valued by the boss and accept company goals as worthwhile targets.
- **The Innovation Appetite.** Innovation—“curiosity” that yields “the pleasure of novelty”—spins out of the imaginative, intuitive, holistic, non-linear right-brain hemisphere. For humans, “innovation is not an option but an absolute necessity . . . designed to solve problems and cope with complex and changing environments. . . . We are, above all, the technological primate—the toolmaker . . . the most adaptable and successful mammal on the planet.” Because it is “an absolute necessity, nature has created a system of emotional incentives to reward new discoveries.” Companies that allow this “flow” of ideas stay ahead of their market rivals.
- **The Self-Protection Appetite.** This is the toughest, most explosive, and potentially most destructive emotional appetite served up in nature’s cafeteria line. “Designed to keep us safe and secure . . . and to protect human beings from physical and psychological harm,” it is also “the source of fear, jealousy, anger, rage, and anxiety.” Managers, beware! That sense of self and self-protection that underlies cathetic bonding of your employees can be fiercely and fearsomely expressed if threatened, ignored, or denied by mindless managerial decisions. Here, Herr lets it all hang out as he condemns the “destructive, fear-based management” of “value-destroying managers,” “poisonous leaders,” and “high-functioning narcissists” who play on the fears and anxieties of employees to achieve company goals.

Nature and workplace are linked directly, explicitly, and authoritatively, as Herr draws deeply on research in evolutionary biology, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, thermodynamics, and even a hint of complexity theory. The five emotion-based Social Appetites rest on a base of Biologic Appetites also essential to human survival. (f)MRI studies that he cites identify the locale and source of emotional up-wellings.

Neurotransmitters, molecular activity, hormones, brain receptors, deep-lying neural circuits spring into action, producing feelings, attitudes, and motives that play out on the workplace floor and in corporate cubicles. *Primal Management* is indeed a prime example of what I have begun to call “Natural Corporate Management” that is based squarely on the dynamics of nature and on an equal managerial awareness of nature’s explicit role within all business firms.

Beyond this major break-through accomplishment, Herr offers a few other goodies for students of today’s corporate behavior.

- Because “*emotions rule* in every aspect of human behavior,” the “pure rationality” of free-market economic theory is a shibboleth. “Hyperrational management is not truly rational at all because it denies human history, human biology, [and] human behavior.” Take that, Milton Friedman!
- Because “human beings are fundamentally designed [by evolution] to live in small, tightly knit tribal communities,” the typical overblown corporate hierarchy based on “coercive power” is non-functional. Do I hear evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar and business ethicist Tim Fort cheering?
- Because human culture is activated by the natural impulse to survive, culture itself is nothing but a manifestation of nature. Survival requires group skills; demonstrating such skills brings self-esteem; a desire for self-esteem leads to ready acceptance of group “programming” of tribal members; this cultural programming is a subtle, powerful, and effective route to the evolutionary survival of individual and group. Evolutionists Steven Pinker (*The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*) and Matt Ridley (*Nature Via Nurture: Genes, Experience, and What Makes Us Human*) would be quick to say, I told you so!

Herr’s anchor to workplace reality takes the form of “three contrarian [corporate] leaders and their unconventional companies”: the late Ken Iverson, chairman of Nucor Steel; the late Harry Quadracci, founder, president, and CEO of Quad/Graphics; and Ricardo Semler, CEO of Semco SA. Herr demonstrates time and again how “each of these leaders worked harmoniously with human nature and achieved spectacular success in the process.” They built their firms’ marketplace success on a solid foundation of the emotional physics described in *Primal Management*. In other words, the theory actually works, which is a comforting thought. In addition, there are metrics available to measure the gap between company goals and workplace commitment to those goals (the Horsepower Metric) and a Tune-Up Metric to “diagnose which social appetites are misfiring.” Hey, this guy isn’t up in the clouds, he’s grounded in the actualities of human nature as displayed in corporate workplace dynamics.

Focused as he justifiably is on the singular importance of emotion as an organizational motivator, consultant Paul Herr may be inadvertently overlooking or underplaying a couple of issues that will disturb some of his readers from the scholarly community. Since these issues are entangled with one another, I’ll treat them together.

The trouble lies mainly with his “superorganism” idea: He says, “Corporate superorganisms . . . are composed of individual human beings who think and act as one,

much like a tribe. . . . The group consensus will then organically define values and goals and set standards of behavior [that] achieve the goals that serve the group's survival." Two troublesome issues emerge, especially for those who remember Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) where unthinking conformity to a company's organizational dictates was roundly condemned as causing unprincipled trampling on the individual rights of employees. Do superorganisms promote an indefensible workplace conformity—a 1984 kind of lockstep rigidity—for the sake of the tribe's (read the company's) survival? Self-imposed conformity can be as restrictive as top-down conformity. Remember, Enron's employees enthusiastically loved and supported their company's go-go culture. WorldCom's whistleblower was trashed by fellow workers. To his credit, Herr flags these negative possibilities and warns against their baleful influence; and he makes a point of respecting the diverse worldviews of his readers and saying explicitly that "each of us has our own, personal, idiosyncratic goals and values."

An even more nettlesome question is whether all corporate superorganisms *should* survive in the Darwinian marketplace—tobacco companies? environmentally destructive coal mines? greenhouse-gas polluters? Wall Street shysters? Once again, Herr registers awareness of the problem by invoking such phrases as "a greater moral purpose" and "core values that transcend money" and "a moral imperative" as found in a range of Jim Collins' *Great to Good* companies. He might have gone beyond these generalities by digging even deeper into the emotional brain-scape of *Homo sapiens*. There one finds an entire layer of emotional reinforcement, or neural circuitry, operative well beyond the boundaries of any single superorganism—in the scholarly trade, it's called "sociocultural values" which invoke and activate a host of diverse normative principles, rules, and values, both positive and negative in their impact on human consciousness, business-and-society relationships, and normative judgments generally. As Herr himself argues (above), nature and culture are functionally linked, so he might have gone on to say that such sociocultural value systems are as thoroughly a product of Darwinian evolution as those emotional cues that drive superorganisms toward survival. But, look, Herr is a corporate consultant trying to convince his clients that nature is a big player in the business game. That's a big enough task for anyone, and Paul Herr is to be praised for this book's brilliant thrust to the very heart of the matter.

Primal Management is without doubt the best extant example of Natural Corporate Management in action—a practical, usable, workable guide for managers who want to harness the power of human emotions to enhance their firms' market success while simultaneously serving society's broader needs—all of this in the name of Darwin himself. *The Wall Street Journal* seems to have gotten it right after all: Meet the New Boss!