

# ANIMAL INSTINCTS

How pets can offer clues to a better workplace culture

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A colleague of mine recalls the time he switched jobs and found himself having a tough time adjusting to a new corporate culture. He went from a culture of collegiality and warmth to one of competition and hard edges. Every time he walked into his new office, even the different smell of the building made his stomach sink as he was reminded of what he had left behind — people he enjoyed being around who supported each other in serving their clients.

You may have had a similar experience, though perhaps you prefer a driven, internally competitive culture. As a leader, one of your roles is to determine what type of culture you want to create, encourage and reinforce. In doing so, you need to address questions such as, “What type of culture will help us achieve the results we promise to our clients?”

In her book, “Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals,” Temple Grandin offers some interesting observations about animal environments and

how they can offer clues to creating better working environments for people.

Admittedly, using the findings of animal research may seem like a strange place to begin in trying to understand human needs in a corporate context.

However, what Grandin calls to our attention

is the fact that animals, such as our pets, have the same core emotional systems in their brains as we do. Here’s an example of what to do and what not to do in your business.

## Do: Stimulate seeking, care and play

This is the basic impulse to search, investigate and make sense of the environment. Grandin describes it as a combination of constructs people usually think of as being different: “Wanting something really good, looking forward to getting something really good and curiosity.”

Within a corporate context, one might think of different ways to apply these. Wanting something could be connected to setting goals. What does an individual or group want to achieve? According to Grandin, having goals is one way to encourage mental and emotional well-being.

Grandin describes “looking forward” as the “Christmas emotion.” One could think of this in a corporate context as getting a bonus or having a pizza party or winning a trip to Hawaii. It’s something you anticipate or get excited about.

Curiosity is connected to seeking what is new. It’s wanting the bright, new and shiny thing. In today’s world, it’s often the latest technological development.

Suffice it to say that when employees believe that leaders care about them and the work you do for clients, the sense of well-being will be higher. When you add elements

of fun in the workplace, these enhance our sense of belonging, as well.

## Don’t: Allow rage, fear and panic

Let’s explore rage in some depth since it might be hard to easily translate this to a corporate setting in a way that is meaningful. In animals, rage occurs when they are captured and held immobile.

In an organizational setting, we see frustration when people micromanage us or exhibit behaviors characterized as that of “control freaks.” It’s that mild form of rage that sparks the slamming phone when someone crosses the line to tell us how to do our job.

Of course, any time there is fear, our brains can freeze up and we can shut down. We’ve all experienced that. And panic refers to our social attachment system. It’s what kicks in when employees feel a sense of loss when a beloved colleague or leader leaves. There can also be a sense of loss during a time of change as we move into the unknown, especially when, as leaders, we don’t prepare people well.

Regardless of the specifics of the culture you want to encourage, there is value in creating an environment that promotes seeking, care and play and minimizes rage, fear and panic. Making your organization a place that is aligned with what we know about human nature can only make it a more effective organization for you and your clients. <<

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