

## Book Reviews

Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 272 pages. ISBN 978-0061963834, Hardcover, \$25.99.

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Editor's note: *In the spring 2011 issue, the journal devoted its entire book review section to a trio of reviews examining Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership. The review below is offered as a complement to those appraisals, from the perspective of a former corporate executive who lived the life of commerce on both sides of the hiring and firing lines.*

### The biology of business

It is morning, and an equatorial sun glints over the distant eastern horizon. The tribe stirs from its nocturnal rest, its council elders grouped in a circle around their chief, awaiting his instructions for their daily battle against hunger and predation. As a weakened prey is sighted, the group's members position themselves for a coordinated ambush, calculating the angle of attack, and the wounded beast is taken down and devoured.

The above scene is from the African plain of 13,000 years ago. With some literary license, it could just as easily describe this morning's headlines about a corporate struggle on Wall Street. For in business, as in biology, the key to survival is natural selection, the adaptation of an organism—or an organization—to a new or hostile environment. Whether the players are wearing leopard skins on the savannah or pinstripes in the boardroom, a critical element of survival is the identification of potential leaders.

The central tenet of *Naturally Selected* is that, in searching for leaders, modern civilization subliminally reaches back in time to identify those same elementary traits as did our remote ancestors. Authors Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja lead us on a figurative trek

upriver through a lushly annotated landscape in a good-faith effort to find parallels between primitive and contemporary leadership characteristics, and to locate the genesis of how society selects its leaders today.

The book is provocative, in a good-natured way, a creative presentation of the various methods and personalities of leadership. The authors draw upon formal research and contemporary personalities to make their case that today's leadership recruitment is adumbrated in our remote past, that the ancient tribal campfire meetings have cast evolutionary shadows on the walls of our twenty-first century meeting rooms. The notion that cultural evolution has outsprinted biological evolution is so obvious as to be axiomatic, but the authors provide enough substance and wit to keep the pace of their thesis flowing.

This is all well and good. Yet the general business reader might question whether another book on applied leadership skills is necessary, when the bookshelf is stocked with such titles as *Swim with the Sharks by Staying Alive*, *Dig Your Well Before You're Thirsty* and, the progenitor of all such titles, *Looking Out for #1*.

Where this metaphoric expedition of discovery takes an alarming turn is in Chapter 6, "The Mismatch Hypothesis," which advances the argument that, however ill-adapted, primitive leadership criteria (tall, fit, healthy, charismatic, male) are still employed subconsciously and deleteriously within modern society. While this theory demonstrates a firm grasp of the obvious, when it comes to form-fitting their theories over the world of commerce, the authors unfortunately evince little understanding of how business works. When the ancient shamans exorcized evil spirits from the tribe, they used an effigy, a proxy, to channel the threat away. *Naturally Selected* uses a similar straw man to imbue him with their superficial—at times, outlandish—conceptions of business and business leaders.

As an overture prefigures the themes of a symphony, the authors score their distracting ignorance of economics with a medley of clichés, beginning in their prologue and later returning with variations on a theme. "Industrialization means we now work in large faceless corporations run by remote figureheads who assume charge of anything" (p. 10). The authors' cartoonish imagery conjures a Depression-Era Daddy Warbucks gleefully lighting his cigar with the same

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dollar bills he begrudgingly wafts down to his grimy, exploited steel mill workers on payday. This is an off-ke and disingenuous characterization of business. The face of capitalism today is less Daddy Warbucks and more Daddy Starbucks, a mid-level executive whose career is based upon soft-selling a research-tested four dollar product to a post-industrial, information-age, latte-fixated employee working in the digital cloud while sitting on an ergonomic chair in her home office, listening to streaming music on the Internet, while eating a gluten-free veggie wrap. If there are any grimy, exploited proletarians working in a steel mill today, they are increasingly likely to be assembly line robots.

The authors frequently hobble their thesis by offering hyper-generalized assertions about business posing as settled fact. For example, a subset of the Mismatch Hypothesis is the Savannah Hypothesis. Regard this claim: "... when we select our leaders, we consistently favor fit, tall, good-looking males" (p. 150). To inspect at random the leaders of just one dominant consumer-related industry, one doubts that Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, or Sergey Brin would draw many followers in a bar room or boardroom based solely on their physical, sartorial, or especially tonsorial appeal.

This reviewer has worked with a sufficient number of major executives in leading corporations to offer that the overwhelming majority of these executives would regard being described a "fit, tall, [and] good looking" as welcomed but risibly transparent flattery. That's not how it works. The ancient tribal leadership markers of visibly superior health, strength, and height might have left some residue in our numbers-driven, media-saturated, insta-brand world, particularly in elective politics, but business leadership selection today is based on proven achievement, not physical appearance. When assessing a leader's profit-making potential, you want a strong upward trendline, not a strong downward jawline.

Another misstep occurs when the authors stray into a field in which they have no particular expertise: politics. Regrettably, this book offers far too many examples of contemporary political figures whose leadership verdict has not yet been rendered in the court of history. There should be no assumption, based on external appearances alone, that evolutionary leadership is the dominant motif in politics, bringing

to mind Henry Adams' acerbic, post-Civil War comment that "...the progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant [is] alone enough to upset Darwin."

Then there is the usual grumbling about how women are underrepresented in modern leadership circles. The authors make no nod toward vanguard 20<sup>th</sup> century female leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Corey Aquino, or even the quite new ascensions of President Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, President Dilma Rousseff in Brasil, Prime Minister Julia Gillard of Australia, Angela Merkel in Germany, and many of other female heads of government. The hands that formerly rocked the cradle now rock the ship of state. Female leadership is not strictly a new phenomenon, either. Upon the throne of the United Kingdom have sat two women for nearly 125 of the last 175 years, formidable women, at that: Queen Victoria, and Elizabeth II. One could look to Elizabeth I, Joan of Arc, Queen Boudicca, Cleopatra, or hundreds of other examples of female leadership in a predominantly "male" role.

In the business world, women hold the senior positions of major corporations in such number that they can no longer be considered an anomaly. Women CEO's currently or recently have presided at Pepsico, Hewlett-Packard, Kraft, Yahoo!, Avon, and scores of other companies, gainsaying any claim that women cannot reach leadership roles. Van Vugt and Anjana undermine their case with some questionable interpretation of data of female leaders in business. Consider this: "...adding just one female director cuts the risk of bankruptcy by 20 percent" (p. 161). Someone should tell the authors that correlation is not causation. There is no causal relationship between the representation of women on a board of directors and that corporation's balance sheet. None. This is not a misapplication of common sense; it is an abuse of it. Business is about the bottom line; it is *the* most accountable of professions, far more than politics, journalism—or academia. Businessmen who fail get fired; academics who fail...revise and resubmit.

Finally, and as long as we are talking about applied theory, the authors miss the evolutionary Elephant in the Living Room. The real change in leadership is no longer the brute force of personality or physical stature; leadership is derived from the

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fulfillment of consumer desires. Today, the reputation of the *product* is far more important than the attributes of the *chief executive*. Nobody especially cares that Howard Samuels is the chairman of Starbucks (well, Mrs. Samuels cares). Starbucks' profitability was created by aggressive marketing and customer loyalty to a favored product. Leadership has passed from the individual to the product. While every prehistoric morning our ancestors made a simple, binary to-do list with one item ("Today: survive or die"), our modern executives' agendas are far more nuanced, layered, and less under their direct control. A safer life, perhaps, but one less heroic.

History demonstrates that one cannot predict the quality of leaders until they are called upon to lead. The salient qualifications—strategic vision, perseverance, a commonsense adaptability to change—do not usually reveal themselves until they are tested. Pedigree, academic achievement, prior experience are useful tunes to call, but only when the bugle

summons does it become clear whether a person can lead others through mortal danger.

Despite its occasionally grievous mischaracterizations of business leadership, *Naturally Selected* is a stimulating read, a launching point for discussion in the classroom, at an executive retreat, or for reflection on an executive's "to read" list. Modern life is evolving at warp speed and any insight into our biological development should be welcomed.

### Note

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