

Learning from the Animal Kingdom – Management, Leadership and Teamwork

Weelan HO, Principal of PGA Consulting Limited, Consulting Advisor to MR-Asian Consulting Limited, and Director of Ascent Global Service Pty Ltd (Australia). For more information, visit www.pgaconsulting.com

On seagull management, be a duck or an eagle

My client told me an interesting story when we met for breakfast one morning. His coach came in one day and said, “I am going to teach you about **seagull management** today, as you do this very well”. My client was rather pleased and thought to himself, at least I have got something right and do something well. Then he thought about it and asked the coach “What is seagull management?” The coach replied, “You go round making noises, creating problems along the way, and when you leave, people have to mop up the pieces.” In other words, his colleagues needed to spend time resolving additional problems created by his management style!

Seagull managers are usually not to be found when there are problems. They fly in, make a lot of noise, dump the problems on everyone, and then fly out.

In his book Gung Ho, Kenneth Blanchard talked about seagull management. He also pointed out that there are two types of people in life – ducks or eagles.

- Ducks go quack, quack, quack when there is any problem
- Eagles soar and take care of any problem

The question is: do you want to be a duck or an eagle?

As supervisors and managers, we must be careful not to practice seagull management. It is often easier to give comments, criticisms that are ‘packaged’ as suggestions but are often not concrete and specific, and then expect our subordinates to make the changes and fulfill our requirements or expectations. If there are issues and problems that need addressing, it is better to be an eagle than a duck. No one appreciates a duck.

Learning from the animal kingdom: the squirrels, the beavers and the geese

The term “gung ho” suggests someone who is spirited, competitive (wants to excel), aggressive (sets aggressive goals) and ready for action (builds capability and is always on the go).

Gung ho management is about leadership and teamwork. Kenneth Blanchard draws analogies and observations from the animal kingdom, which he terms the spirit of the squirrels, the way of the beavers and, the gift of the goose.

The spirit of the squirrels

Squirrels keep busy moving seeds and storing food for the winter. They know that they won't be able to survive the winter if they don't work diligently when food is plentiful. Their work is important and well understood, leading to shared goals, and the same commitment and values guide them towards the same plans, decisions and actions. In short, they know that what they do are worthwhile tasks that lead to a secured, plentiful winter.

The way of the beavers

We often hear the term "busy as a beaver". Beavers have drive and energy and these sustain them. They seem to know their responsibilities, and are in control of achieving their goals, doing the right work in the right way. Beavers don't hide a good tree from others. They share information and work together to build a good dam using trees and mud.

The gift of the geese

Geese fly in a flock, not solo, and travel very much together in a straight line, making noises encouraging other geese to join them. The head of the geese takes the lead; the others fly together, cheering each other on through their long and tiring migratory journey to reach their destination.

Learning points:

The spirit of the squirrels demonstrates that we need to feel that our work is worthwhile and contributes to a meaningful goal. This makes us feel good about our contributions and self-esteem. Beavers are in control of their goals, with very clearly marked territories, each knowing their areas of responsibility. Their lesson to us relates to having very clear goals and standards, and the importance of people who are doing jobs to be clear about the jobs' requirements and being given the opportunity to perform to their capabilities. Having control requires accurate and up-to-date information. Therefore, only through constant communication, active listening and responding to the people who work with us can we achieve the best results. The gift of the goose, cheering others on, demonstrates that acknowledging, encouraging, giving feedback along the way is also important. So cheer others' progress, not just their results. Practice finding positive things to say instead of only focusing on the negative.

If we can learn from the three animals and practice what they do, we can achieve excellence and at the same time work happily with engagement and commitment.

The donkey

You might have heard of this story before: if you have, please read it again as the lessons it imparts are invaluable. (**Note:** My thanks to May Jefford who sent it to me, who in turn got it from someone else, and our thanks to the original writer who gave us all an interesting story with great lessons.)

One day a farmer's donkey fell down into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally, he decided the animal was old, and the well needed to be covered up anyway; it just wasn't worth retrieving the donkey. He invited all his neighbours to come over and help him. They all grabbed a shovel and began to shovel dirt into the well. At first, when the donkey realized what was happening he cried horribly. Then, to everyone's amazement he quieted down.

A few shovel loads later, the farmer finally looked down the well. He was astonished at what he saw. With each shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey was doing something amazing. He would shake the dirt off so it fell to his feet and then to step on it so that he moved a step up.

With every shovel load of dirt that the farmer's neighbours threw down the well, the donkey would shake the dirt off his back and use it to move further up the well. Pretty soon, to everyone's amazement, the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and trotted off happily!

Moral of the story

Life is going to shovel dirt on you, all kinds of dirt. The trick to getting out of the well is to shake it off and take a step up. Each of our troubles is a stepping stone. We can get out of the deepest wells just by not stopping, never giving up! Shake it off and take a step up.

The donkey returns...

The donkey later came back, and bit the farmer who had tried to bury him. The gash from the bite got infected, and the farmer eventually died in agony from septic shock.

Moral of the story

When you do something wrong, and try to cover your back, it always comes back to bite you.

Summary

Kenneth Blanchard's 'Gung Ho' uses seagulls, ducks, eagles, squirrels, beavers and geese to teach us about people, leadership and teamwork. The donkey teaches us to be courageous and not to give up in times of difficulty. It also reminds us to be honest and not to cover up our mistakes because whatever cover-ups we make, they will always come back to bite us.