

# learning edge



## PARTNERING WITH LEARNING & HR PROFESSIONALS

Tough times mean that good decision-making and skilled managers are critical to retain talent and adapt to fast-changing markets. Yet you need to provide that help in the face of...

### ...TIGHTER BUDGETS

Training is an easy target for executives looking to quickly slash costs,

### ...LOW RESPONSIVENESS

Professionals don't want to look like they've got time on their hands, or that they don't already possess the skills they need,

### ...SKEPTICISM

Making the connection between soft skills and bottom-line results more important than ever.

## LET US HELP.

In order to be helpful during this critical time, we want to offer the latest scientific thinking, show what it can teach us about management and communication, and make it immediately useful to managers and executives facing real problems.

Cross-Disciplinary Learning is Crucial for High Performing Execs

## Soft Skills, Hard Science, Real Results

by Sheila Heen

### CASE STUDY 113

*Jim was delighted to have lured Angelique away from a rival firm, and to add her to his well-functioning team. Angelique's experience promised to add fresh ideas, and Jim spent significant time ensuring that she got the resources and background she needed as he steered her onto key projects.*

*Textbook leadership, no? Then why was productivity on the team falling, and morale beginning to erode?*

Individuals are complex enough. For each individual you add to a group, you multiply exponentially the relationships, trust issues, alliances, status-jockeying, competitiveness, and frustration that can take hold and grow. Even well-functioning teams are vulnerable to becoming fractionalized, eating up attention and energy that should be put into collaborative productivity. How can a team leader like Jim understand what's gone wrong, so he can get them back on track?

### Monkeys on Fairness and Team Productivity

Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal at Emory University have been studying group behavior among primates for years. In a recent study, Brosnan taught a group of capuchin monkeys to perform a bit of "work" - putting a pebble into a cup. Each time they completed the task, they were given a small reward - a slice of cucumber. Nice, straightforward reward system. Brosnan puts two monkeys side

by side, both performing happily and collecting their cucumbers.

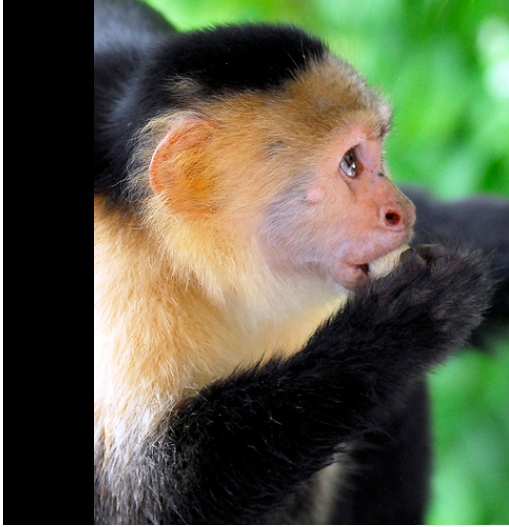
Looking back on our case study for a moment, this is the equilibrium under which Jim's team was functioning well, prior to Angelique's arrival. Work felt fairly distributed. Rewards evenly distributed. The team is productive. Tireless. Happy.

Back on the monkey front, things change. Brosnan starts giving *one* of the monkeys grapes instead of cucumbers.

Capuchin monkeys like cucumbers. But they *love* grapes. All hell breaks loose.

The monkey still getting cucumbers can't believe it. Formerly cooperative, the industrious capuchins refuse to work at all. They screech in protest. In some iterations, the cucumber monkey stops working. Others throw the cucumbers back at Brosnan. One throws it on the floor and stomps on it (and the neighboring grape monkey reaches in, grabs it and eats it).

Apparently the desire for fairness is hardwired not only in humans, but in our primate cousins as well. And inside any team or community, individuals look to peers to judge whether they themselves are being treated fairly. If you are getting the same treatment as someone you consider an equal, all is well. Or if you have a good explanation for why they are getting better or worse treatment -- you can tell a story that explains the difference -- harmony and productivity reign.



Let's come back to Jim's formerly harmonious team. Angelique arrives. Jim is excited about his coup in recruiting her, and is anxious to get her up to speed and working on some of their highest visibility projects. He has lunch with her regularly, filling her in on organizational history and coaching her on dealing with particular players. He gives her extra attention in team meetings, taking pains to point out her contributions, to help her gain the respect of her peers.

From Jim's point of view, he's simply trying to help her get on a level playing field. *Jim doesn't realize that from the team's perspective, he's giving Angelique "grape" treatment.*

Worse, Jim's attempts to "fix" the problem entailed giving Angelique more and more responsibility. This seemed both logical, and fair -- after all, his other team members were failing to perform. Shifting some of their responsibilities to Angelique was something he did simply to ensure the work got done. And Jim figured it should have served as a wake-up call to the sudden slacker team members, right?

Wrong. It simply confirmed that Angelique was getting grapes -- more and more special treatment - while they were punished for not being happy about cucumbers. As is so often the case, the leader's attempt to fix the problem actually made it worse.

Once Jim learned about the capuchin response, he suddenly understood why his actions were provoking such negative reactions on his team. He knew fairness around compensation was important. He wasn't paying attention to the other perceived "rewards" that come from the attention, assignments, and appreciation a leader can offer or withhold. In addition to the extra time, attention and choice projects Angelique got from the beginning, he was now giving her more and more grapes.

What now?

### A Round of Grapes for All

Jim now needs to have several conversations, and he needs a number of key skills to do it.

1. Jim needs to be able to *take responsibility for his contribution* to this dynamic, both with Angelique, and the larger team.
2. He should *explain his good intentions, but acknowledge the bad impact* it has had on the team, and also on Angelique's entree into the organization.
3. Finally, he needs to share his analysis, *ask for reactions, and then engage the team* in re-distributing responsibilities and opportunities.

Let's not be facile about this. Jim needs some skill development and coaching to help him have these conversations. And there are likely to be a series of conversations over time -- with Angelique, with individual team members, and with the group. Jim's new (improved) behavior is likely going to be a shock to the team, since as things slid from bad to worse, he had become increasingly dictatorial in his decision-making. Whether they experience Jim as genuine hinges on whether Jim himself believes in what he is saying - whether his

thoughts are aligned with his words and actions.

For Jim's team, there was a happy ending. Jim's awareness and behavior improved over time, and the team talked more openly about expectations, rewards, and perceptions. His team's ability to restore their working relationships, and survive during challenging times may owe a thanks to a few angry monkeys in Atlanta.

### About Us

At Triad, we integrate the latest research into our practice working with senior management.

For those who are skeptical of soft skills, drawing on the latest learning about brain circuitry, emotional processing, behavior change, and the effect on bottom line outcomes can be transformative. They suddenly see the link between the soft skills and the performance of their team. And they are eager for more.

For more information about Triad, drop in on our website: [www.diffcon.com](http://www.diffcon.com), or give us a call at (617) 547-1728, to see how we can help you and your organization. It all starts with a conversation.

For more information about the research discussed here, see: Sarah F. Brosnan and Frans de Waal, "Monkeys Reject Equal Pay," *Nature*, 425: 297-299.