When baboons think like you

In job interviews for managerial positions, candidates with the widest mouths most frequently land the positions.

Imagine a scenario of a newly discovered isolated people group in a remote corner of the Amazon rainforest. The small clan of nearly two-hundred people never had any contact with the outside world of any kind.

They viewed airplanes passing overhead as a type of large but elusive bird. Several such uncontacted people still exist in the world today. Many speak unique ancient languages unchanged over the millennia from outside influences.

In our hypothetical new people group, imagine if the citizens still made their decisions on who leads them based on the physical attributes of their prospective leaders. The group’s leadership selection rotated on which male in the clan possessed the widest arm bicep. The members
happily followed whoever possesses the widest bicep. Looking through our lens of modernity, we might mock such seemingly prehistoric thinking since surely we know that no correlation should exist between the physical attribute of someone and the worthiness of a leader.

Now, shift your thinking. What if you learned that the lost people were actually not in the depths of rural Brazil, but actually really exist as the politicians in the United States Senate?

In honour of this, my 200th Business Talk column in the Business Daily, let me share a humourous yet unnervingly realistic workplace leadership phenomenon. Humans live according to shockingly ancient perceptions that constantly play upon our subconscious mind that then influences our conscious thinking in ways most people are not often fully aware.

Our brains evolved in the Rift Valley to quickly distinguish between friend or foe, food or danger, and, interestingly enough, leader or follower. Humans can quickly in less than one second gain a perception about someone or something.

If our eyes stumbled across a lion, in ancient times, our brains would instantly notice the danger and take evasive and defensive actions. Even in the modern era, if while walking down Kenyatta Avenue in the Central Business District of Nairobi we observe a man without a uniform holding a gun, our brain would immediately focus the body on awareness and escape mode. Our brain’s nimble abilities helped make humans the undisputed dominant species on the planet.

However, many people become shocked to learn the extent to which our ancient survival modes still persist to this very day and lead most individuals to astonishingly irrational decisions. Our subconscious evolved in order to protect us from simple immediate threats.

The subconscious sets in the innermost areas of the brain surrounded by the more recently evolved higher order thinking sections. The innermost ancient subconscious controls our urges, emotions, fears, and instincts. These gut reactions percolate up, so to speak, into our conscious reasoning thought. Humans often fail to identify where their mood or gut feelings originate when thoughts pop into their conscious mind.

Disturbingly, how people choose their leaders actually originates from the subconscious parts of the brain and we select our leaders exactly the same way as other primates, such as gorillas, chimpanzees, and monkeys. Newly released research from Daniel Re and Nicholas Rule at the University of Toronto found that humans, orangutans, bonobos, etc. all choose leaders based on the width of one’s mouth. Yes, you read it correctly: mouth width. In the wild observing and measuring primate leaders of animal family groups as well as in comparison of US Senate candidates and success in elections, the individuals with the widest mouths wind up being the leader a statistically significant portion of the time.

Moving on to corporate offices and board rooms, employees with the greatest mouth width correlated strongly with leader selection. In job interviews for managerial positions, candidates with the widest mouths most frequently land the positions. In controlled experiments, people select individuals with the greatest mouth width as their leaders.