with thousands of years of
evolution behind us, it is
natural that humans want
to dominate the animal
kingdom. With
our brainpower, it is just as natural to make
things complex.

Yet, when delivering training programmes, overly
complex and theoretical models can actually hinder
their success as those involved often fail to see the
relevance to their own lives in their organisations.

Although we might hate to admit it, at heart,
we are still very much part of the animal kingdom.

Using lessons from nature, people can clearly
see a way to analyse the behaviours within an
organisation or team and find a non-threatening
way to relate to, and reflect on, their
own behaviour. We can, for example, learn a lot about effective
teamwork by examining how animals co-operate
in nature. During the millennia, humans have
become expert at veiling their emotions and
instincts, yet lurking behind the veil are some basic
needs. The beauty of other animals is that what

you see is what you get. Animals are not coloured
by consumerism and politics, and teamwork is
often essential for their survival.

There are a surprising number of behaviours
that occur in nature and that can be related to our
own organisational structures. We only need to
look at some of the interesting habits of one of
the most common creatures in the world to see
how complex structures can be developed by many
hands making light work.

Ant society

The ant is a very busy creature living in a complex
system. Collectively, a colony of 40,000 ants has
the brainpower of one human being. At the top
of the colony is the queen ant, which has a whole
army of worker ants that serve her and look after
her precious eggs. To not do so would put the
existence of their entire colony at risk.

In addition to protecting and serving the
queen, worker ants have different roles and
responsibilities. Some build, some are foragers,
some are defenders, some are explorers for new
nest sites and others have the role of tidying and
putting out the rubbish.

Relate this to our business world, with a chief
executive at the top and numerous workers with
different roles to play to ultimately keep the
organisation profitable and surviving in a hostile
environment called ‘business’. The workers are
committed to their role, because the company
provides them with the ability to buy food and
shelter, and with a sense of purpose. They have a
shared goal whose primary objective is profitability
and, ultimately, their survival.

Okay, so we have made our world far more
complex than that but, when you strip back all
the complexity and really get down to why people
work, is it really so different?
Occasionally, in the ant kingdom, the Slave-Maker Ant will raid the nests of other ants and steal their pupae. When these new ants hatch, they work as slaves within the new colony. We could perhaps call this an acquisition!

Is it natural to work with no conflict?
We can also relate animal behaviour to how we might work in teams. In business today, the concept of ‘team’ is changing and more teams are being pulled together across departments or organisations to focus on specific projects.

Selected for their skills and expertise, and often working remotely, individuals need the support of their whole team to meet overall objectives. This is not a natural situation and, to be honest, it is fraught with conflict and misunderstanding in the early stages, while team members adapt and find ways of working effectively together.

There are few animals that will comfortably co-operate from the beginning. Normally you will see some jostling for leadership position, in-fighting, submission or eviction before a group will interact comfortably.

To expect a new team to pull together from day one is a very high, and perhaps unachievable, expectation. Companies need to be aware that working in a new team requires some time for members to adapt to their new environment. Training can really help newly-formed teams to recognise that early conflict is normal and move to a more productive stage as quickly as possible. Coaching and mentoring is also useful during this stage and can be particularly helpful in supporting less experienced members of the team.

Mentoring matriarchs
Some animals also recognise the importance of mentoring within their social structure, the most obvious being the matriarch of a herd of elephants. The matriarch is usually the oldest and most experienced female elephant; the rest of the herd is usually made up of her daughters and their calves.

She influences the herd more than any other group or individual. In a crisis, they will rely on her to make the major decisions about their course of action. As the first and eldest elephant, the matriarch is instrumental in teaching her daughters how to care for their young, who will then help care for their younger siblings, training and preparing them for when they have their own calves.

Sometimes, the matriarch is not a born leader and another will step up to the task – an elephant with the qualities required to nurture, teach, build confidence and earn respect. For elephants this is never about overpowering an individual to achieve a leadership position, as in some other social structures within nature. Rather, it may present through a challenge to the authority of the matriarch or a decision being made by the rest of the herd.

It would be great if all teams worked as smoothly as this, yet the reality is that conflict can easily occur if two people are jostling for leadership position. The key to avoiding this situation is to set clear boundaries and have clear roles and responsibilities. This clarity within the

References
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2 http://www.andrews-elephants.com/matriarch-elephant.html
3 Towery T L The wisdom of wolves: Nature’s way to organizational success Wessex House Publishing (1997)
team cements it and allows members to get on with the activity that is essential to the project.

The wolf pack

This clarity of role is very evident within the wolf pack. Although many people may think the wolf pack is more about ferocity than order, there is actually a very sophisticated group dynamic within every pack. Wolves naturally organise themselves into packs to maintain stability and assist with hunting. The groups are usually between three and seven, are always led by an alpha male and alpha female, and often comprise their offspring until they mature and venture elsewhere.

The attitude of the wolf is always based upon ‘what is best for the pack’ and he knows explicitly what needs to be achieved for its survival. While there are alpha males and females, each member of the pack understands exactly what is expected of them. In truth, there are usually no more than five to eight wolves howling in a pack. The secret is that the wolves are always careful not to duplicate each other. Each wolf assumes a unique pitch, respecting the individuality of the other members of the pack.

This is also true for team communication: by expressing their own uniqueness, while respecting and encouraging the uniqueness of others, the unity of the team becomes a strong, formidable force.

However, for the wolf pack, there are strong consequences for failure. If they don’t work together, they will be lonely and go hungry. In organisations, too, the consequences of failure should be clear, yet the reality is that there are often few consequences for a lack of achievement or failure to deliver.

Therefore, as well as the purpose of the team being made clear, so too must be what constitutes failure. Without both aspects being defined, responsibility may not be taken by every individual, causing resentment and further conflict.

When individuals take responsibility for their input to the group, great things can happen. At the performing stage of a team, members of the group are self-motivated and knowledgeable and can handle the decision-making process without supervision. Dissent is expected and allowed, as long as it is channelled through a means that is acceptable to the team. When the team has ironed out its differences, it can be a formidable force against competition.

The common enemy

Nothing unites a wolf pack as much as a common enemy. Although most packs respect the boundaries of others, there are times, particularly when food becomes scarce, when one encroaches upon another’s territory.

If the trespassers refuse to leave, the alpha leaders fight while all the others wait to see who will win. They rarely draw blood; rather, it is a question of who raises their head highest or is the first to be pinned down on his back. If the fight is between female alphas, the territorial dispute may be settled by a howling contest rather than a physical battle.

Sometimes a wolf on the defending team will cross over to the other pack and steal a couple of its adolescent members. The leader of the trespassers will lose the fight because of the distraction. The victor will not allow the adolescents to return; instead, they become part of his wolf pack. After the fight, the victors re-mark their boundaries with a very potent scent.

In the wolf pack, there is a distinct hierarchy that clearly establishes leadership and boundaries, which unites it as a team. In our own teams, once the boundaries, roles and responsibilities have been clearly set, it is usually up to individual members to bring together their expertise, knowledge and research to move a project forward.

Achieving more through communication and teamwork

By examining the insect world, we can clearly see how this gathering of information can make a colony more productive. Scientists have found that a foraging bee that has found a good food source will perform a dance for other bees in the hive, which indicates the location of the food source. This information allows the other bees to tap into the food source, thereby becoming more productive within the hive.

Pooling this information helps the whole colony achieve more and this can easily be related to the

The appointed leader does not always need to be the person to give pace to the project: there may be different leaders at different stages of its development

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4 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4536127.stm

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The extent to which the needs of individuals are served or suppressed. 5


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The purpose of working in teams. Each person has a role to play within the team and they can achieve more collectively than they can by working separately.

A popular animal analogy to this 'together everyone achieves more' concept is the Lessons from Geese prose, which was believed to have been first written by Robert McNeish in 1972.

He had observed geese for many years and was particularly interested in their flight formation and how they flew such great distances during migration. He noted that, as each goose flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird that follows. By flying in a V formation, the whole flock has a far greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. When the lead goose tires, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies to the point position, so that different geese take it in turns to keep up the speed of migration.

In our business world, the appointed leader does not always need to be the person to give pace to the project: there may be different leaders at different stages of its development.

The most important point is that the team understands the direction in which it is heading and that it can achieve its goal quicker and more easily when its members work together and are willing to accept and give help whenever it is needed.

Reward and recognition
It is always important to be encouraging to members of the team, particularly if they are younger and less experienced. One of our courses at Festo involves taking a group to the Hawk Conservancy, to participate in falconry and learn

As well as the purpose of the team being made clear, so too must be what constitutes failure
some of the techniques used to train young birds.

There is a distinct difference between the responsiveness of a more mature, experienced bird and one that has just started its training. An experienced bird will know where it is expected to fly and will do so with consistency and precision, and is justly rewarded with a tasty treat. The less experienced bird will often feel apprehensive and fearful around a group of people and naturally will prefer to stay out of the way.

No amount of shouting or cajoling will encourage the younger bird to perform in the same way as the more experienced bird. It is a far slower process that can only be achieved by encouragement and reward, not shouting or punishment.

**When the Emperor says ‘adjourn’**

Finally, a team needs to recognise when it is time to adjourn. When the job has been done and the work is self-sustaining, it is time to adjourn. This might be when sales targets are being consistently met, or when all product glitches have been ironed out. For us in the human world, it can sometimes be difficult to recognise the best time to stop, but I leave you with the following analogy…

Emperor penguins live in the Antarctic and they are the only animal whose breeding season is in the winter. The teamwork involved in ensuring their young survive takes place in some of the harshest conditions in the world.

After laying her eggs, the female transfers full responsibility for the project of nurturing them to her male partner, while she disappears to feeding grounds for two months. During this time, the males spend much of their time sleeping and huddling together gently rotating as a group, so that they take turns on the outside. A single penguin would perish from the cold and lose his offspring.

Two months later, and after the chicks have hatched, the females return and the males then take their turn to feed – their job is done – but they return approximately 24 days later to help feed the chicks and support the mother by taking turns with her to visit the feeding ground.

After about two months, the chicks have their juvenile plumage and can start their independence, although they may be topped up with food by their parents for a short time, before full independence. The parenting is done and it’s then time for the next project to start. **TJ**