

# Bosses who build trust vs. bosses who bare teeth

BY KEVIN SHINKLE  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Richard Conniff has spent much of his career writing about savage beasts. So it wasn't a leap to immerse himself in the corporate jungle and the world of corporate scheming. The result is the recently published "The Ape in the Corner Office: Understanding the Workplace Beast in All of Us" (Crown Business, \$25).

The result shakes up traditional notions of dog-eat-dog Darwinism. Nature, he says, has built us to be nice. Things like doing favors and building coalitions are crucial to getting ahead. But don't be fooled: Conflict is a major part of corporate life — and managing it is essential.

Conniff grew up in Montclair, where his father still lives. His first job out of college was covering Union County for The Star-Ledger from 1973 to 1975.

He won the 1997 National Magazine Award for his writing in Smithsonian, and the 1998 Wild-screen Prize for best natural-history television script, for the BBC show "Between Pacific Tides."

Conniff, who lives in Old Lyme, Conn., was interviewed last week via e-mail.

**Q. Your writing for National Geographic and Smithsonian is mostly about animals. Why a book about workplace behavior?**

**A.** When I am not tracking animals in the Serengeti or the Amazon, I often write about people at work: how a supermarket runs, or how a top medical team handles assembly-line open-heart surgery.

I saw enough of the same be-

haviors in both worlds to think I could have a little fun — and also learn some useful lessons.

**Q. For instance?**

**A.** Alpha apes and humans often step on subordinates, and the subordinates often pass it on. It's called "redirected aggression," and it helps you lower your stress hormone level and recoup your dignity. Unfortunately, it can also poison a workplace. So you need to recognize that the tendency is dangerous and take it out on a treadmill or a punching bag instead.

**Q. So being the ape in the corner office doesn't necessarily mean being brutal?**

**A.** Some alpha chimps rule by brute force. Others cultivate subordinates and share the rewards of the hunt. It's the same with human bosses.

With either type, understanding the behaviors — simple things like facial expressions, or the biology of being the righthand man — can help you survive and prosper.

And by the way, talking about animal behaviors, and laughing about them, is also a good way to get human behaviors out in the open that you might feel awkward discussing more directly.

**Q. What's your favorite ape/manager story?**

**A.** Leslie Wexner of the Limited once launched a sales campaign called "Win At Retail," or WAR. He used real battle footage. Then he strode across the stage like Patton and admonished his sales reps that "Retail is war!" And, good grief, this was at a company

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2. **Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything**, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner; William Morrow, \$25.95
3. **Now, Discover Your Strengths**, Marcus Buckingham; Free Press, \$30
4. **Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking**, Malcolm Gladwell; Little, Brown & Co., \$25.95
5. **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable**, Patrick Lencioni; Jossey-Bass, \$22.95
6. **The Intelligent Investor: The Definitive Book On Value Investing**, Benjamin Graham; Harpercollins, \$19.95
7. **Value Investing: A Balanced Approach**, Martin J. Whitman; John Wiley & Sons, \$34.95
8. **Winning**, Jack Welch; Harpercollins, \$27.95
9. **The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference**, Malcolm Gladwell; Back Bay Books, \$14.95
10. **The Little Red Book of Selling: 12.5 Principles of Sales Greatness**, Jeffrey Gitomer; Bard Press, \$19.95

that sells women's lingerie! I try to get people to see that, even for animals, the war mentality isn't the smartest way to succeed.

**Q. You write that chimps engage in aggressive encounters 5 percent of the time and more positive interactions 20 percent of the time. Which way is it going in the workplace?**

**A.** My book argues that our lives are really about cooperation far more than conflict; it's just that we're built to pay more attention to the negative stuff.

Even companies that supposedly hate each other often do deals together. Like Sun and Microsoft, or Apple and IBM. Companies are also starting to recognize that cooperation works better than conflict with their own employees.

For instance, the Gap recently published a report detailing man-

agement abuses in its Third World factories. Even Wal-Mart claims to be fixing some of its most notorious work practices.

**Q. Who are the worst apes? The best?**

**A.** Can we talk about my first boss at The Star-Ledger? Okay, how about Jeff Skilling, who flipped the bird at his own employees and turned Enron into a kleptocracy? Or Hank Greenberg, who ran AIG on the principle of always taking unfair advantage?

There are plenty of good bosses around, too — A.G. Lafley at Procter & Gamble, David Neelaman at JetBlue. We just notice the bad ones because they're more of a threat — and, okay, more fun to read about.

Kevin Shinkle is The Star-Ledger's deputy business editor.