

## Being Ant-worthy

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### ABSTRACT

To identify best practices and to maximize performance in our workplace environment we can learn far more from humble tiny insects than from top paid management consultants. In this perspicuous way of looking into the natural world, by possessing and inculcating within ourselves the approach of the ants, being conscious of all our capabilities and limitations, the possibilities of tremendous improvements in all human endeavors are endless.

**Key Words:** efficiency, harmony, order, fairness, peace, ant.

A legendary story of the fourteenth century Turko-Persian conqueror Tamerlane (Timur-Lang or Timur the Lame) of Samarkand recounts that when Timur's army was severely defeated in one of his early expansionist campaigns he was on the run. In a desperate attempt to hide from his relentless pursuers he hid in an abandoned building. As he sat there all alone, consigned to meet his inevitable and invidious fate, he noticed an ant carrying a large piece of food several times bigger than her own size. Timur watched with keen interest as the ant repeatedly tried to carry the food up and over a wall, only to have it fall down each time. The undeterred ant would tenaciously pick up the food and try again and again. Timur counted ten, twenty, thirty, ... attempts, but each time the weight of the food proved to be stronger than the little ant. It is said that finally, on about the seventieth try, the tireless ant managed to push the food over the wall into the nest.

So inspired by this display of perseverance was he, that he was led to proclaim: "If an ant can do it, so can I! I am by no means inferior to an ant, arise Timur and get back to work." And, as history attests, he certainly did do it. He regrouped his army, redoubled his efforts and ended up routing his initially implacable foes. The point here is that we should never cease to look into nature for inspiration. Apart from perseverance, patience and determination, we humans have a lot to learn from a tiny insect like ant and other species, and apply object lessons from nature to our personal lives and workplace environments, in order to achieve efficiency, harmony, order, fairness and peace.

A workplace environment is no different than the natural environment. In the natural environment the behaviour of all species is interconnectively goal-oriented. Millions of species work on day shift, millions of others on night shift, while some are migrant or seasonal workers. Everyone involved plays a vital role in the interactive operation of a vigorous ecosystem that is in a natural scheme of dynamical equipoise. Everyone involved knows his or her finely tuned role and submits to the perspicaciously designed laws of nature without any transgression. The complex system employed in nature always allows the best to evolve, the greatest good for the greatest number. It operates on cooperation and

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an overall equilibrium-maintaining-competition, rather than senseless, fraudulent, greedy and exploitive competition. It allows for the maximization of productivity in a most harmonious atmosphere, the end result being increased efficiency, optimality and above all, a total elimination of wastage in the grand recycling system of nature.

The resplendent teamwork involved in daily complex operations of an ant, bees or a termite colony is indeed a marvel of operational fastidiousness. Well-established division of labour for all castes and both sexes exists, with resources being shared equitably; they all operate in the best interests of the group with absolutely no supervision. Indeed, all members of each colony work together as a single unit in a highly organized manner with no central control. The governing laws are never subject of deviation or negotiation. Workers never go on strike or cut corners; the queen never takes advantage of workers and soldiers. The queen does not see herself as above the team and everyone else being subservient to her majesty, but as an integral part of the team. They know fully well, be it through a level of reasoning and/or instinct, that the survival of the colony depends on efficacious teamwork.

The success of this massive operation requires an effective communication and information sharing system which is achieved by releasing different pheromones, thereby passing on quick messages to one another, or to alarm the entire team, as well as to warn the intruders. Their communication and organizational skills combined with their superb sense of prioritization have made ants one of the most successful species in the ecological market. Despite their size, ants are a super-organism in nature's vibrant economy.

The interesting observation is that the best part of it in this workplace environment is that it is not even unionized, for there is no need for "protection" and neither are there any lay-offs, wrongful dismissals or awkward office politics. Lifetime job security with full benefits is inherently guaranteed. Just imagine a human workplace environment functioning like a termite or ant colony. The productivity would be at its highest level. Such a workplace would indeed be so peaceful and such a joyous environment to work in.



**There are more than a million tiny magnetic termites that work around the clock in each colony.**



**An amazing display of teamwork from a tiny ingenious creature.**

Take example of this remarkable hardworking social insect, have you ever considered a bee for instance. A bee colony must collect nectar from over 2 million flowers to make approximately one pound jar of honey. Bees are truly model citizens of this unique planet with superb work ethics; anything a bee eats is clean, anything he drops is sweet, any branch he sits upon does not break, and that which he produces never spoils. To be like a bee in a workplace environment is not to cut corners, not to be jealous of co-workers, to avoid bullying, backbiting, and gossiping about fellow workers — in short doing your job effectively and going home.

Here is a further example of harmonious behaviour: anthropological studies show that predators like spotted hyenas are very adept at cooperation and problem solving in their hunting strategies. Hyenas are well organized and follow a specific plan. The common strategy is to isolate the prey, and go for the kill when the prey is outnumbered and completely surrounded. If the pack runs out of energy and gets exhausted before the prey, the hunt is off. To avoid failure, the plan oversees initial risk assessment. Their strategic thinking is based on the existing circumstance, i.e. the type of prey and their numbers, presence of other predators, number of hyenas in the pack, etc. The pack always follows the lead of the dominant male or female, the one who possesses the best leadership skills. As a group they learn from trial and error and always hinge on the experiences of the older hyenas. For instance, anthropologists have learned that when a young hyena unfamiliar with the hunting task was paired with a dominant experienced one, the pack always succeeded in hunting with a minimal effort. This is indeed the best model there is. This holistic model can be implemented at workplace environment.

Likewise, the lessons from animal kingdom have been adopted in succession planning in workplace. The idea is to build and maintain a diverse workplace environment free from unproductiveness, transgression, discrimination, harassment and stress. HR professionals argue that it is indeed essential to create a workplace environment that operates on cooperation, where staff can harmoniously learn from one another. Managers are encouraged to promote teamwork and collaboration among co-workers, where both

veterans and rookies can be teachers to one another. An efficient and cohesive workplace is all about building the morale and productivity of employees and minimizing complaints, grievances, absenteeism, disruptions and legal wrangles, whereby everyone can get on with their work in a healthy and creative manner. The intrinsic feelings that motivate an employee to be creative, responsible, and eager, with a sense of being part of a team would be integral factors in the formulation of an unbeatable concatenation of 'environmental attributes' that would facilitate peace, happiness, satisfaction and useful productivity, for *all* and not just "top management". This way of conducting work has been incipiently creeping up on capitalistic employers over the last few decades who have been, behind the façade of magnanimity to the public, ensconced in solely the 'profit motive', so oblivious to humane, humanitarian and environmental considerations. Yet, once again, even in this area, it certainly looks like the design in nature has beaten the best human minds in optimal environmental workplace engineering, by millions of years! Perhaps one has to think like an ant to know this and if so, let's be an ant.

To identify best practices and to maximize performance in our workplace environment we can learn far more from humble tiny insects than from top paid management consultants. In this perspicuous way of looking into the natural world, by possessing and inculcating within ourselves the approach of the ants, being conscious of all our capabilities and limitations, the possibilities of tremendous improvements in all human endeavors are endless.

Note: Mehran Banaei is a freelance writer with a Masters Degree in Social Philosophy from York University. His area of interest is to make sense out of life.