The biology of business

It is morning, and an equatorial sun glints over the distant eastern horizon. The tribe stirs from its nocturnal rest, its council elders grouped in a circle around their chief, awaiting his instructions for their daily battle against hunger and predation. As a weakened prey is sighted, the group’s members position themselves for a coordinated ambush, calculating the angle of attack, and the wounded beast is taken down and devoured.

The above scene is from the African plain of 13,000 years ago. With some literary license, it could just as easily describe this morning’s headlines about a corporate struggle on Wall Street. For in business, as in biology, the key to survival is natural selection, the adaptation of an organism—or an organization—to a new or hostile environment. Whether the players are wearing leopard skins on the savannah or pinstripes in the boardroom, a critical element of survival is the identification of potential leaders.

The central tenet of Naturally Selected is that, in searching for leaders, modern civilization subliminally reaches back in time to identify those same elementary traits as did our remote ancestors. Authors Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja lead us on a figurative trek upriver through a lushly annotated landscape in a good-faith effort to find parallels between primitive and contemporary leadership characteristics, and to locate the genesis of how society selects its leaders today.

The book is provocative, in a good-natured way, a creative presentation of the various methods and personalities of leadership. The authors draw upon formal research and contemporary personalities to make their case that today’s leadership recruitment is adumbrated in our remote past, that the ancient tribal campfire meetings have cast evolutionary shadows on the walls of our twenty-first century meeting rooms.

The notion that cultural evolution has outprinted biological evolution is so obvious as to be axiomatic, but the authors provide enough substance and wit to keep the pace of their thesis flowing.

This is all well and good. Yet the general business reader might question whether another book on applied leadership skills is necessary, when the bookshelf is stocked with such titles as Swim with the Sharks by Staying Alive, Dig Your Well Before You’re Thirsty and, the progenitor of all such titles, Looking Out for #1.

Where this metaphoric expedition of discovery takes an alarming turn is in Chapter 6, “The Mismatch Hypothesis,” which advances the argument that, however ill-adapted, primitive leadership criteria (tall, fit, healthy, charismatic, male) are still employed subconsciously and deleteriously within modern society. While this theory demonstrates a firm grasp of the obvious, when it comes to form-fitting their theories over the world of commerce, the authors unfortunately evince little understanding of how business works. When the ancient shamans exorcized evil spirits from the tribe, they used an effigy, a proxy, to channel the threat away. Naturally Selected uses a similar straw man to imbue him with their superficial—at times, outlandish—conceptions of business and business leaders.

As an overture prefigures the themes of a symphony, the authors score their distracting ignorance of economics with a medley of clichés, beginning in their prologue and later returning with variations on a theme. “Industrialization means we now work in large faceless corporations run by remote figureheads who assume charge of anything” (p. 10). The authors’ cartoonish imagery conjures a Depression-Era Daddy Warbucks gleefully lighting his cigar with the same