

# Why your boss is white, middle-class and a show-off

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The way male managers power dress, posture and exercise power is due to humans' evolutionary biology, according to research from the University of New South Wales (UNSW).

Prehistoric behaviours, such as male domination, protecting what is perceived as their "turf" and ostracising those who do not agree with the group is more commonplace in everyday work situations than many of us want to accept, according to the research which was carried out in hospitals.

"This tribal culture is similar to what we would have seen in hunter gather bands on the savannah in southern Africa," says the author of the paper, Professor Jeffrey Braithwaite, from UNSW's Institute for Health Innovation.

"While this research focuses specifically on health care settings, the results can be extrapolated to other workplaces," says Professor Braithwaite.

"Groups were territorial in the past because it helped them survive. If you weren't in a tight band, you didn't get to pass on your genes," he says. "Such tribalism is not necessary in the same way now, yet we still have those characteristics because they have evolved over two million years.

"It's a surprise just how hard-wired this behaviour is," says Professor

Braithwaite. "It's predictable that a group will ostracise a whistleblower, for instance. It's not good, but it's understandable in the tribal framework. It explains all sorts of undesirable behaviours, including bullying."

Professor Braithwaite's research is based on hundreds of interviews and observations of health workers over a 15-year period. He used an evolutionary psychology approach – incorporating archaeology and anthropology of the earliest known humans – to compare with modern behaviours.

It is hoped the research can be used to develop strategies to encourage clinical professionals to work together more effectively.

"We need to stop being simplistic and realise that changing behaviours and encouraging teamwork is much harder than we think," says Professor Braithwaite. "Getting different groups together and talking through some of the differences, and appreciating some of the unwritten rules which drive people, are crucial steps in improving trust.

"We also need to re-think education. We train doctors in a completely different arena from nurses and allied health staff, then we bring them together in the workplace after they graduate and expect everyone to be team players," he says. "We need to bring them together much earlier in the educational process."

Other features include:

- Meetings are held in the most senior manager's office, who typically dominates proceedings
- Managers do not spend as much of their time as people think sitting reading quietly, or attending to paperwork in front of a computer. They are out there manoeuvring and positioning at meetings, one-on-one

encounters and coffee cliques.

-- Managers rarely take lunch or tea breaks

-- Non-managerial staff regularly take an allocated period of time for breaks

The paper has just been published in the *Journal of Health Organisation and Management*.

Source: University of New South Wales

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