

When it comes to what's for dinner, baboon society is no democracy

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In decisions about where to eat, baboons don't all have an equal say, according to a report in the November 20th issue of *Current Biology*, a Cell Press publication. Rather, most baboons in a group will follow their leader to a dining spot of his choosing, even if it means a considerably more meager meal for themselves than they could have had otherwise.

The findings challenge theories predicting that "democratic" rather than "despotic" decisions will be widespread among social animals since they should result in the lowest costs to individuals in the group as a whole, the researchers said.

"What leaders want and what groups are actually willing to do is a conflict faced in every workplace," said Andrew King of the Institute of Zoology (Zoological Society of London) and University College London. "Leadership in baboons appears to work for the very reason that leaders can provide considerable benefits to followers. Despite short-term costs—in this case, less food—followers may gain considerable long-term benefits, like reduced risk of being eaten by a leopard. We tend to think of ourselves as unique in the animal kingdom, but other animals can also show complex social patterns of despotism and democracy, and there may be much that we can learn and benefit from in understanding these natural patterns of leadership."

In the study, the researchers supplied wild baboons with experimental food patches. Those patches were arranged to create foraging benefits amongst group members that were highly skewed relative to the benefits

of naturally occurring food resources. Thus, the patches offered consistent incentives for a minority of dominant individuals to lead, and they resulted in consensus costs for the majority of followers.

Both baboon groups tested consistently visited the experimental food patch in preference to natural patches, the researchers report, indicating that despotic group decisions were the norm. "Baboons follow their leader to the experimental food patches we provided them with despite the fact that they get, on average, less food than if they all chose to eat elsewhere," King said. "So, there must be something else going on."

Indeed, they found that the baboons who followed the leader most closely were the leader's closest "friends" —the individuals the leader spent most time grooming and being groomed by. The researchers therefore suggest that the benefits of following the leader relate to other advantages that come with strong social ties. For instance, for females with young infants, close association with leaders may increase infant survival, as males will protect the offspring from the risk of infanticide by other males, King said. Other followers may gain similar protection as the more formidable, dominant males chase off would-be predators.

While the new findings offer important new insight into baboon society, they may also lend us insight into principles of leadership in our own lives and in the business world.

" Globalization, technology, and rapid social change are transforming the business landscape in ways that were unimaginable even 20 years ago. In the 11th Annual Global CEO Survey, more than 1,150 CEOs in 50 countries were asked what they would like to change. At the top of their list was 'the ability to adapt to change.' So how do leaders manage people through such a change?" King asked.

"Trying to understand how primates like baboons make group decisions,

how leaders emerge, and why followers, well, follow them, may well help us identify how our ancestors acquired the psychological foundations upon which modern leadership appears to be based."

Ultimately, he added, research like this might also explain why leadership so often fails.

Source: Cell Press

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