

Chapter 4 - The Ancient Roots of Leadership

“...outdated primatology confused high rank with “leadership” in silly ways. An alpha male baboon is not a leader; he just gets the best stuff. And while everyone follows a knowledgeable old female when she chooses her foraging route in the morning, there is every indication that she is “going” rather than “leading.”—Robert Sapolskyⁱ

Leadership is not a modern invention. While contemporary corporations, political systems, and military organizations often present leadership as a specialized and structured skill set, it is, in fact, as ancient as humanity itself. Long before the existence of boardrooms and virtual meetings, human communities depended on leaders to navigate social complexities, allocate resources, and resolve conflicts. These fundamental leadership behaviors, deeply embedded in our biology, were crucial for the survival of early societies and continue to influence the ways we lead and follow today.

Evolutionary leadership theory identifies six critical fitness challenges in ancestral environments that influenced the selection for leadership traits: finding resources, managing conflicts, engaging in warfare, building alliances, distributing resources, and teaching.ⁱⁱ These challenges played a key role in selecting for and shaping the behaviors and attributes that are beneficial for effective leadership, traits that are still present in leaders today.

Leaders skilled at locating resources often exhibit strategic thinking and problem-solving abilities, enabling them to navigate complex situations to secure what is needed. Effective conflict managers possess strong negotiation skills and emotional intelligence, helping them resolve disputes and maintain harmony within the group. In the context of warfare, leaders need to demonstrate courage, decisiveness, and the capacity to inspire and coordinate the group in high-pressure scenarios. Building alliances requires social intelligence, trustworthiness, and the ability to foster cooperative relationships both within the group and with external parties. Leaders responsible for resource distribution must be fair, empathetic, and attuned to the needs of

the group to ensure equitable sharing. Finally, the role of teaching involves mentoring and imparting knowledge, which is essential for group continuity and the development of future leaders.

These elements of evolutionary leadership theory underscore how ancestral environments shaped the diverse skills and characteristics necessary for effective leadership, both historically and in the modern world. Understanding these evolutionary roots provides insight into the deeper motivations behind certain leadership behaviors, even if they are no longer as effective today.

This chapter explores the evolutionary roots of leadership and how understanding these primal instincts can enhance modern leadership practices. Here's what we'll cover:

- The origins of leadership as a response to ancestral survival challenges
- The “mismatch hypothesis” and its implications for modern organizational leadership
- Insights into distributed leadership and adaptability through evolutionary perspectives
- Strategies for leveraging evolutionary instincts to create more effective and resilient teams
- Practical approaches to building trust and managing complexity in leadership contexts

Leadership, deeply embedded in human evolution, originated as a means to address survival challenges and foster group cohesion. While these traits remain influential today, their effectiveness in modern contexts is often shaped by the disconnect between our ancestral instincts and contemporary demands—a concept explored through the “mismatch hypothesis.”

A Modern Mismatch

Mark van Vugt's research in evolutionary leadership theory provides a framework for understanding the ancient roots of leadership. He posits that leadership and followership emerged as coordinated strategies to address specific adaptive challenges faced by our ancestors. Through the “mismatch hypothesis,” van Vugt explains that many modern leadership challenges arise from a disconnect between our evolved leadership instincts and contemporary organizational demands. This hypothesis suggests that traits and behaviors once advantageous in ancestral environments may not align with the complexities of modern leadership contexts.

Van Vugt's work also distinguishes between two primary leadership styles: dominance and prestige. Dominance-based leadership relies on coercion and intimidation, often leading to compelled followership, while prestige-based leadership is earned through skills and knowledge, fostering voluntary followership. This dual model underscores the evolutionary foundations of hierarchy and leadership, highlighting how different strategies have been employed to navigate social structures.

These two leadership styles manifest in modern organizations in both effective and problematic ways. Dominance-based leadership, while useful in situations requiring immediate action or control, can foster resentment and disengagement among team members over time. For example, a leader who rules with an iron fist may achieve short-term compliance but risks eroding trust and morale. On the other hand, prestige-based leadership, which hinges on respect and collaboration, often leads to stronger, more sustainable relationships within teams. Leaders who share their knowledge and encourage input from others inspire loyalty and innovation. However, in high-pressure environments, overreliance on consensus-building may delay critical decisions, demonstrating the need to balance these styles based on context.

The mismatch between our evolved leadership psychology and modern organizational demands becomes particularly apparent in several domains. Our brains evolved to manage relationships within small groups, yet modern leaders must coordinate thousands of individuals across global networks. Ancient leadership required

processing information from immediate, physical environments, while today's leaders must handle vast amounts of abstract data and digital communication. Where evolutionary leadership dealt with immediate, concrete challenges, modern leadership often requires long-term, strategic thinking about abstract possibilities.

Van Vugt's research on evolutionary leadership biases reveals how deeply ingrained our leadership preferences are. Humans show consistent biases toward physically imposing leaders during times of conflict (the "warrior-leader" hypothesis) and toward more cooperative leaders during times of peace (the "diplomat-leader" hypothesis). These biases explain why certain leadership styles gain traction in different contexts, even when they might not be optimal for modern challenges.

Van Vugt's work also highlights how followership evolved as a crucial complement to leadership. Humans developed sophisticated mechanisms for evaluating leader legitimacy, competence, and fairness. These mechanisms manifest today in how teams intuitively assess their leaders' effectiveness and how organizations formalize leadership evaluation processes.

The evolutionary perspective helps explain why certain leadership challenges persist despite decades of leadership development efforts. The tendency toward nepotism and in-group favoritism—while problematic in modern organizations—made perfect sense in ancestral environments where genetic relatedness often aligned with group cooperation. Understanding this helps organizations develop more effective countermeasures to these natural but potentially problematic tendencies.

Moreover, van Vugt's research suggests that effective modern leadership requires developing metacognitive awareness of our evolutionary predispositions. Leaders need to understand when their instinctive responses serve them well and when they need to consciously override them. For instance, consider an employee who is resistant to change, a common evolutionary trait rooted in our preference for stability and familiarity. In a modern organizational context, this resistance can hinder progress and innovation. By developing metacognitive awareness, a leader can recognize this instinctive reaction and work to address it constructively. They might choose to engage the employee in open dialogue, provide clear communication about the benefits of the change, and involve them in the decision-making process. This sophisticated understanding of our evolutionary heritage, when thoughtfully integrated with modern organizational needs, represents the future of leadership development.

The path forward lies not in denying our evolutionary past but in understanding it deeply enough to work with and around it effectively. By acknowledging both the strengths and constraints of our evolved leadership capabilities, we can create organizations and development approaches that better serve modern needs while honoring our fundamental human nature. This understanding enables us to build leadership systems that are both more human and more effective for today's complex world.

In this context, leadership development becomes less about imposing artificial behaviors and more about understanding and channeling our natural tendencies in productive directions. The most effective leaders will be those who can navigate the space between our evolutionary heritage and modern organizational demands, using ancient wisdom to solve contemporary challenges.

The Darwinian Executive Mind

The modern executive's corner office, with its carefully curated art and commanding views, serves the same evolutionary function as the dominant gorilla's perch in the rainforest canopy. This insight emerges from Gad Saad's groundbreaking work in evolutionary psychology, particularly his theory of Darwinian meta-frameworks.ⁱⁱⁱ Saad argues that human behavior, including leadership, flows from four fundamental

evolutionary modules: survival, mating, kin selection, and reciprocity. In the corporate jungle, these ancient drives shape everything from strategic decisions to organizational hierarchies.

The consilience approach, central to Saad's work, suggests that leadership behaviors aren't merely cultural constructs but deep evolutionary adaptations. When a CEO makes a bold acquisition or defends market territory, they're acting on the same evolutionary programming that helped our ancestors survive and thrive. Understanding these patterns doesn't excuse poor leadership but provides a framework for understanding and improving it.

These evolutionary underpinnings manifest in subtle yet powerful ways throughout modern leadership practices. Consider the ritualistic aspects of corporate leadership: the quarterly earnings calls, the annual shareholder meetings, the strategic planning retreats. These events mirror ancestral displays of leadership competence and resource management. Just as tribal leaders would demonstrate their worth through successful hunts or conflict resolution, modern executives exhibit their leadership through financial results and strategic victories. The psychological weight of these performances is heightened by the same neurological circuits that once evaluated a leader's ability to ensure group survival. This explains why executives often experience disproportionate stress around these events; their brains process them not just as business requirements but as fundamental tests of their fitness to lead.

To further comprehend the intricacies of modern leadership, it is essential to delve into the four fundamental evolutionary modules identified by Saad: survival, mating, kin selection, and reciprocity. These modules provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing and improving leadership behaviors. By understanding how these ancient drives influence modern leadership practices, executives can develop a metacognitive awareness that allows them to leverage their evolutionary predispositions effectively and adapt their behaviors to meet the demands of contemporary organizational life.

Survival and Status: The First Two Modules

In Saad's meta-framework, the survival module manifests in how leaders approach resource allocation and risk. Consider how executives hoard cash reserves during economic uncertainty, an echo of our ancestors' food-storage behaviors. This same module drives territory defense, explaining why companies often overreact to competitive threats in their core markets while underinvesting in new opportunities. The survival instinct that once protected our ancestors from starvation now shapes corporate strategy, sometimes to the organization's detriment.

The mating module reveals itself in status-signaling behaviors. When executives engage in conspicuous displays of corporate power, they're participating in behavior called "costly signaling." Just as peacocks develop elaborate tails that technically hinder survival but signal genetic fitness, leaders invest in prestigious office addresses and high-profile media appearances. These displays aren't mere vanity—they serve evolutionary functions in establishing status hierarchies and attracting resources. The elaborate rituals of corporate leadership, from keynote speeches to earnings calls, parallel the dominance displays found throughout nature.

These two modules often interact in fascinating and sometimes destructive ways. Consider the phenomenon of corporate empire-building, where CEOs pursue aggressive acquisition strategies despite clear evidence against their value. This behavior perfectly illustrates the intersection of survival and status drives—the territorial expansion satisfies the survival module's urge to control resources, while the public conquest fulfills the mating module's need for status display. Such decisions, while potentially damaging to shareholder value, make perfect sense when viewed through the lens of evolutionary psychology. The CEO who builds an empire, even an unprofitable one, is responding to deep-seated evolutionary imperatives that prioritize resource control and status signaling over modern metrics of corporate success.

Amazon's aggressive expansion strategy in 2017 offers a real-world illustration of the survival and mating modules at play. The company's acquisition of Whole Foods and its push into sectors like healthcare and entertainment demonstrate the survival module—a drive to secure resources and dominate multiple markets. These moves echo the ancestral instinct to control vital resources, ensuring the company's long-term stability in the face of competitive threats.

At the same time, Amazon's decision to establish its second headquarters (HQ2) in Arlington, Virginia, after a highly publicized bidding process reflects the mating module. The extravagant office complex, complete with futuristic architectural designs and significant media coverage, acts as “costly signaling,” showcasing Amazon's dominance and status in the corporate world. This aligns with Saad's theory, as the headquarters serves to bolster the company's reputation and attract top talent, resources, and investors.

However, these strategies can sometimes clash with organizational efficiency. Critics argue that Amazon's relentless empire-building and diversification efforts can create inefficiencies and divert focus from its core business operations. Similarly, the HQ2 project faced criticism for emphasizing prestige and status over practical concerns like employee welfare. Through an evolutionary lens, these behaviors reflect the interplay of survival and status drives, often influencing corporate decisions in ways that may conflict with rational, shareholder-centric objectives.

Kinship and Reciprocity: The Social Modules

The kin selection module explains the persistent challenge of nepotism in organizations. Despite modern emphasis on meritocracy, leaders consistently favor those within their inner circle. This tendency extends beyond literal family to include what might be termed “psychological kinship”—the strong bonds formed in executive teams and mentor relationships. Understanding this module helps explain why purely rational approaches to organizational design often fail to overcome ingrained favoritism.

Reciprocity, the fourth module, governs alliance formation and maintenance. Successful leaders intuitively grasp this principle, building networks of mutual obligation and support. The exchange of favors, information, and opportunities that characterizes executive relationships mirrors the reciprocal altruism observed in primate societies. This module explains why purely transactional leadership approaches often fall short—humans are wired for ongoing reciprocal relationships.

The interplay between kinship and reciprocity creates what Saad terms “tribal coalitions” within organizations. These coalitions manifest in the familiar phenomenon of corporate silos, where departments or divisions operate as semiautonomous tribes, complete with their own hierarchies, customs, and alliances. Leaders who emerge from particular silos often maintain stronger loyalty to their original tribe, even after ascending to broader organizational roles. This explains the common observation that CEOs tend to favor and promote executives from their former divisions or functional areas. The combination of psychological kinship with reciprocal obligations creates powerful networks that can either strengthen or fragment organizational culture, depending on how they're managed. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for leaders attempting to break down silos or integrate merged organizations. More importantly, learning how to *apply* this dynamic is critical.

From Understanding to Application

The path forward lies in integrating the insights of both van Vugt and Saad to address the challenges of modern leadership. Van Vugt's “mismatch hypothesis” emphasizes how evolved instincts like dominance and prestige shape leadership behaviors, while Saad's Darwinian meta-framework explores how survival, mating, kin selection, and reciprocity continue to influence decision-making and organizational dynamics. Together, these perspectives highlight the tension between ancient drives and contemporary demands, offering a road

map for leaders to harness these instincts productively. By understanding how traits like prestige-based leadership or reciprocity align with modern values, while mitigating the drawbacks of dominance or nepotism, leaders can design systems that respect human nature while meeting the complexities of today's organizations. This synthesis of theories not only deepens our understanding of leadership but also empowers organizations to build cultures that thrive on collaboration, adaptability, and purpose.

Recognizing these evolutionary foundations transforms how we approach leadership development and organizational design. Instead of fighting against these deep-seated drives, successful organizations channel them productively. For instance, formal mentorship programs provide a structured outlet for kin selection tendencies, while clear succession planning helps manage status competition.

The survival module's influence on risk assessment can be balanced through formal decision-making frameworks that force consideration of both threats and opportunities. Understanding the mating module's role in status display helps organizations design recognition systems that satisfy the need for status while advancing organizational goals.

Most importantly, Saad's framework suggests that effective leadership requires working with rather than against our evolutionary nature. The executive who understands these drives can better manage their own behavioral tendencies and those of their organization. This doesn't mean surrendering to every evolutionary impulse. Rather, it means designing systems that acknowledge and channel these drives productively.

Consider how successful organizations manage the reciprocity drive through formal alliance structures and partnership agreements, or how they satisfy status-seeking through carefully designed advancement paths. These approaches succeed precisely because they align with our evolved psychological mechanisms while adding modern structure and accountability.

The future of leadership lies not in denying our evolutionary heritage but in understanding it deeply enough to harness it effectively. As organizations become more complex and globally interconnected, leaders who grasp these fundamental drivers of human behavior will be better equipped to create effective, sustainable organizations. Saad's contribution isn't just theoretical—it provides practical insights for anyone seeking to understand and improve leadership in the modern world.

The evolutionary perspective adds a crucial dimension to leadership development, complementing rather than replacing other approaches. By understanding the deep roots of leadership behavior, we can design interventions that work with human nature rather than against it, creating more effective and resilient organizations in the process.

The Divergence of Modern Social Dynamics: Faux Social Structures and Communication

Here's where things get complicated: our evolutionary disconnect is further exacerbated by technological advancements and the "unnatural" nature of modern digital communication. While we're wired for small-group dynamics, modern leadership often unfolds within vast, artificial social networks—structures constructed through technology and social media. Unlike the intimate, face-to-face interactions of our ancestors, today's leaders typically communicate with their teams and followers through screens, emails, and social media posts, which strip away nonverbal cues essential for building trust and fostering meaningful connections.

On the surface, social media gives the illusion of connection. Leaders can reach thousands or even millions with a single tweet. However, digital communication lacks crucial non-verbal cues—such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice—that are essential for building trust and rapport. Our brains evolved to

navigate social interactions in real time, relying on these subtle cues to assess trustworthiness and empathy. Without them, the quality of our communication suffers.

This brings us to the concept of faux social structures—digital spaces where interactions occur, but the depth of connection is often superficial. Leaders who rely heavily on social media or remote communication to cultivate relationships with their teams risk alienation. Our brains simply do not process these interactions in the same way as face-to-face communication. As Mark van Vugt and his co-authors note, “The absence of physical co-presence in digital communication environments reduces the availability of cues that are essential for trust and social cohesion.”^{iv} The result is a disconnection between leaders and their teams, where communication feels distant and impersonal, and trust and cooperation may fail to mature. In remote work environments, this problem is exacerbated by the absence of daily interactions, making it increasingly challenging for leaders to build and maintain the social bonds critical for effective leadership.

Remote Leadership and Complexity: Evolutionary Instincts Meet Modern Challenges

Leading in today’s digital world demands that leaders navigate a level of complexity that far exceeds what our evolutionary wiring was designed for. Our brains, evolved to function optimally in small, close-knit groups, are wired to read subtle social cues, understand body language, and extract meaning from face-to-face dialogue. These intuitive abilities were critical for survival in traditional societies, where leaders interacted daily with group members, relying on immediate feedback and social intuition to guide decision-making.

According to social neuroscientists like Matthew Lieberman, our brains are essentially “wired to connect.”^v Humans are built to detect and interpret social signals—facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, and posture—allowing us to gauge trust, empathy, and social status within milliseconds. This network of abilities involves various brain regions, from the prefrontal cortex, which aids in making judgments about social situations, to the fusiform facial area, which specializes in recognizing faces and emotions. When communication occurs in person, our brains perform a seamless dance of social interpretation, helping us navigate complex interactions with high intuition and accuracy.

However, the modern era of communication—where leaders oversee vast, distributed teams via email, Zoom, Slack, and other digital platforms—introduces a significant evolutionary mismatch. Remote communication lacks the aforementioned nonverbal cues our brains rely on to assess social dynamics, leaving us at a disadvantage in truly understanding and connecting with our teams.

Moreover, the sheer volume of communication in the digital age creates a phenomenon known as oversaturation. In traditional societies, leaders managed face-to-face interactions with a relatively small number of people, all sharing similar experiences and perspectives. Today, however, leaders are bombarded with an overwhelming amount of communication—from texts and emails to social media notifications—while managing large teams that are geographically dispersed and culturally diverse.

Robin Dunbar’s research on social networks suggests that humans can maintain stable social relationships with approximately 150 people, a figure known as “Dunbar’s number.”^{vi} Beyond this, the complexity of managing additional relationships and communication becomes cognitively taxing. Leaders today are often required to manage thousands of employees, leading to what Mark van Vugt calls “cognitive overload.”^{vii} Our brains, equipped to handle limited social interactions, struggle to cope with the complexity and volume of modern communication. This overcommunication not only overwhelms our social intuition but also erodes the quality of our decision-making.

The Cognitive Strain of Overcommunication

This deluge of communication creates a paradox: while leaders are more connected to their teams than ever before, the quality of those connections is often superficial. When inboxes overflow and meetings stack back-

to-back, it becomes increasingly difficult to invest the emotional energy necessary to build genuine relationships. In the absence of body language or tone, leaders are left to infer the emotional context of messages, leading to miscommunication or, worse, decision-making based on incomplete, incorrect, or misunderstood information.

For instance, without face-to-face interaction, a simple email requesting feedback can be misinterpreted as disengagement or apathy when, in reality, the leader may be stretched too thin to offer a more personal response. This ambiguity forces teams to make assumptions, which often results in misaligned expectations and diminished trust.

Additionally, the sheer volume of decisions that leaders must make—often without immediate feedback—can lead to decision fatigue. This phenomenon is well documented: the quality of decision-making deteriorates after an extended period of overthinking or continuous decision-making. Today's leaders are tasked with managing rapidly changing situations while being bombarded by constant communication demands, which strains the brain's capacity to process information effectively.

This cognitive overload has profound implications for leadership effectiveness and organizational culture. Research shows that leaders operating under constant digital stress exhibit decreased empathy and emotional intelligence—precisely the qualities needed for effective leadership in complex organizations. The brain, evolved for face-to-face tribal interactions, struggles to process the abstracted nature of digital relationships. This creates a vicious cycle where leaders, attempting to maintain connection through increased digital communication, actually become less emotionally attuned to their teams. The result is a kind of organizational autism, where vast amounts of information flow freely, but genuine understanding and emotional resonance become increasingly rare.

Leveraging Evolution Theory in Leadership

Do you now understand that your caveman brain is still calling a lot of the shots? Between territorial instincts making you overprotect your department's resources and tribal thinking causing you to favor your inner circle, it can feel like you're trying to run a modern organization with Stone Age software. But here's the good news: understanding your evolutionary wiring can actually transform you into a better leader. By recognizing these ancient patterns—and learning to work with them instead of pretending they don't exist—you can create stronger teams, make better decisions, and build more resilient organizations. Let's explore how to stop fighting your inner chieftain and start channeling those prehistoric instincts productively.

Read the Room: Ancient Skills in Modern Settings

Our brains developed sophisticated mechanisms for reading social situations, originally designed for small, face-to-face groups. Today's leaders can leverage this innate ability by paying attention to subtle social cues in their teams. When team members seem disengaged or resistant to change, these are often signals that basic social needs aren't being met. Modern leaders should create opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interactions, even in predominantly digital environments. Regular in-person meetings, even if less frequent, can build stronger bonds than constant digital communication.

Manage Social Networks Effectively

While our brains evolved to handle relationships with roughly 150 people, modern leaders often manage much larger groups. Rather than fighting against this limitation, effective leaders can work within it by creating smaller, interconnected teams. For instance, structuring departments as semi-autonomous units with clearly defined roles and fostering regular, meaningful communication within these teams can help. Leaders can also appoint team leads or managers who act as connectors, ensuring seamless collaboration across units.

Encouraging informal social interactions and regular face-to-face meetings within and between these groups strengthens relationships and maintains cohesion. Think of large organizations as networked collections of tribal-sized units, each maintaining its own social dynamics while connecting to the larger whole. This approach allows for more natural relationship building and better information flow.

Leaders can further enhance this structure by implementing practical strategies such as cross-functional projects and rotational roles that allow team members to interact beyond their immediate groups. For example, a tech company might create “innovation pods,” where employees from marketing, engineering, and design collaborate on short-term initiatives, fostering broader connections while maintaining their primary team identity. Similarly, leaders can use digital collaboration tools like Slack or Microsoft Teams to create virtual spaces that replicate tribal dynamics, enabling small groups to exchange ideas and resources efficiently. Hosting regular town halls or all-hands meetings where team leaders present updates also ensures alignment while maintaining the focus on interpersonal connections within smaller units. By intentionally designing workflows and social opportunities that mimic natural social groupings, leaders can mitigate the cognitive strain of managing large networks while boosting both engagement and productivity.

The Digital Communication Challenge

Our ancestors relied on face-to-face interaction, reading body language, tone, and facial expressions to build trust and understanding. Modern digital communication strips away many of these crucial, subtle signals. Smart leaders recognize this limitation and adjust their communication strategy accordingly. Save complex or sensitive discussions for in-person meetings. Use digital channels for straightforward information sharing, and include video whenever possible for important remote conversations. Remember that a five-minute face-to-face chat can often accomplish more than dozens of emails.

To navigate the challenges of digital meetings effectively, leaders should take extra steps to ensure their message is clear and well-received. Complex or nuanced points that might be misinterpreted without visual or tonal context should be emphasized, repeated, and accompanied by clear, concise slides or visuals. For instance, a manager presenting quarterly goals during a remote meeting could use diagrams or infographics to highlight key takeaways, reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding. Leaders should also anticipate areas where confusion might arise and proactively address them, offering examples or analogies that resonate with the team.

Additionally, effective digital communication involves creating space for interaction. Leaders should allocate ample time for Q&A sessions or feedback loops during and after their presentations, encouraging team members to seek clarification and voice concerns. For example, after discussing a new policy during a virtual meeting, a leader might use polling tools to gauge understanding or open the floor for follow-up questions, ensuring everyone is aligned. Incorporating these strategies not only compensates for the lack of nonverbal cues but also fosters a sense of engagement and trust, vital for maintaining strong team dynamics in a digital environment.

Balance Instinct and Analysis

Our evolutionary heritage equipped us with powerful instincts for reading social situations and making quick, intuitive decisions. However, modern leadership often requires dealing with abstract problems our ancestors never faced. Effective leaders learn to recognize when to trust their gut and when to step back for more analytical thinking. For routine social interactions and team dynamics, instinctive responses often serve well. For complex strategic decisions or long-term planning, taking time for deliberate analysis usually produces better results. Develop the discipline and self-awareness to know which mode is best suited for the current situation.

To strike this balance, leaders can employ tools and frameworks that complement their instincts with data-driven insights. For example, a leader planning a major product launch might begin by relying on their intuitive sense of market trends but should validate these instincts with customer surveys, competitive analysis, and financial forecasts. Similarly, using decision matrices or scenario planning tools can help leaders dissect complex challenges systematically, ensuring that their choices are both instinctively sound and logically robust. This integration of instinct and analysis not only leads to better decisions but also builds confidence within teams, as employees witness their leader blending decisiveness with thorough preparation. Cultivating this duality requires practice, reflection, and a willingness to adjust approaches as situations evolve.

Create Adaptive Organizations

Our ancestors succeeded by adapting to changing environments, and modern organizations need the same flexibility. Rather than implementing rigid hierarchies, consider creating fluid structures where leadership can shift based on the challenge at hand. Sometimes you need the equivalent of a hunter tracking prey, someone with deep technical expertise leading a specific project. Other times you need a diplomat managing relationships between departments. Let different types of leaders emerge based on the situation.

However, adaptive structures can be hindered by the natural tendency for “territory guarding,” where individuals or teams resist collaboration to protect their perceived domains of influence. This behavior, rooted in evolutionary instincts to safeguard resources, can create silos and stifle organizational growth. Leaders can counter this by fostering a culture of shared goals and interdependence. For example, cross-departmental incentives, such as shared metrics or collaborative bonuses, can align objectives and reduce competition. Open communication channels, like regular cross-functional meetings or joint project reviews, further break down silos by encouraging transparency and trust. By addressing territorial instincts head-on and replacing them with a collaborative mindset, organizations can create an environment that thrives on adaptability and mutual success.

Build Trust in Modern Contexts

Trust developed in early human groups through shared experiences and direct observation of behavior over time. Modern leaders can recreate these conditions by ensuring regular meaningful interaction with team members. Create opportunities for shared challenges and celebrations. Remember that trust builds through consistency and presence. Your team needs to see you navigate both successes and failures with integrity.

Beyond individual relationships, trust also strengthens an organization’s culture by fostering alignment around shared values and goals. Leaders who openly articulate their vision and demonstrate alignment between their words and actions set the tone for an inclusive, purpose-driven culture. For instance, leaders can encourage trust by actively involving employees in shaping organizational initiatives, whether through feedback sessions, brainstorming workshops, or co-creating team charters. These efforts signal that everyone’s contributions matter and that leadership prioritizes collaboration and inclusivity. Over time, this collective engagement creates a culture of trust that cascades through all levels of the organization.

Trust also serves as a buffer during times of leadership failure or organizational stress. When trust is deeply embedded in the culture, teams are more likely to rally together in the face of setbacks rather than becoming fractured or demotivated. Leaders can reinforce this resilience by acknowledging mistakes transparently and framing challenges as opportunities for collective growth. For example, a leader who admits to a failed initiative but highlights lessons learned and invites team input on next steps demonstrates humility and commitment to shared success. By cultivating this atmosphere of trust and accountability, organizations can align employees toward a unified direction, enabling them to weather challenges while strengthening their cultural foundation.

Develop Future Leaders

Leadership development should focus on building adaptability rather than prescribing specific behaviors. Help emerging leaders understand their natural tendencies and when these serve them well or need modification. Teach them to recognize the difference between evolutionary appropriate responses and situations requiring more modern approaches. Most importantly, help them develop the self-awareness to navigate between these modes effectively.

Drawing on evolutionary principles, organizations should design leadership development programs that leverage both ancestral instincts and modern requirements. For example, rotational programs mirror the adaptive challenges faced by early human groups, where individuals had to shift roles—hunter, mediator, teacher—based on the situation. Exposing emerging leaders to varied roles across departments encourages the flexibility that evolved for survival and success. Similarly, mentorship programs replicate the teaching roles of ancient leaders, where knowledge transfer ensured group continuity and growth. By emphasizing collaboration and shared goals in these programs, organizations also address our innate tendencies for alliance-building and reciprocity. Grounding leadership development in these evolutionary traits enables future leaders to channel their primal instincts effectively, fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of modern complexities.

The Path Forward

Effective modern leadership requires understanding both where we as humans came from and where we're going. Our evolutionary heritage provides powerful tools for building trust, reading social situations, and coordinating group efforts—the very tools that have built the modern world. Yet the fast-evolving contexts of today require us to apply these capabilities thoughtfully and sometimes override them with more analytical approaches. Success lies in knowing when to rely on each mode. By understanding these dynamics, leaders can create organizations that leverage the best of our natural capabilities while adapting to modern demands.

i Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 441.

ii Mark Van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, *Selected: Why Some People Lead, Why Others Follow, and Why It Matters* (Profile Books, 2010).

iii Saad, Gad. *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption*. New York: Psychology Press, 2007.

iv Mark van Vugt, Stephen M. Colarelli, and Norman P. Li, “Digitally Connected, Evolutionarily Wired: An Evolutionary Mismatch Perspective on Digital Work,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 10, no. 5 (2012): 856, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/20413866241232138>.

v Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* (Crown Publishers, 2013).

vi Robin Dunbar, “Dunbar’s Number: Why We Can Only Maintain 150 Relationships,” *BBC Future*, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191001-dunbars-number-why-we-can-only-maintain-150-relationships>.

vii Mark van Vugt, “Mismatch: An Interview with Mark van Vugt,” *Prosocial World*, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://www.prosocial.world/posts/mismatch-an-interview-with-mark-van-vugt>.