

Meetings at the Waterhole

by Tom Warney

I don't know anyone who doesn't love meetings. They're so much fun, and provide so many wonderful opportunities for practicing such virtues as patience, restraint, tolerance and forgiveness (sometimes).

The same types of people seem to show up at any meeting, regardless of the meeting's size, purpose, frequency or duration.

And it is almost always *people*, by the way. It's rare in my experience to have a dog, a cat, or a goldfish attending a meeting, but in most cases don't you think that would improve things? The unconditional love of a dog, the curiosity and playfulness of a cat, the bright attention of a goldfish? Think about it.

No, I hear you say – There are already enough animals at the meetings I go to, and they're not pets, either. More like jungle animals, really, complete with teeth, claws and dangerous attitudes, ready to spring to attack at the slightest provocation.

Okay, so "it's a jungle in here." Viewed from the safety of our safari wagon, here are a few favorites you may recognize as we pass the waterhole where they gather together (please keep your hands and feet inside at all times, and make no sudden moves):

The Sloth. They...move...very...slowly...and...are...always...late. They take even more time explaining why they're late. When they hang around, they appear to be dozing. They often leave early, too, so how do they manage to be late for their *next* meeting as well?

The Hawk. The Hawk has a fine eye for detail. The screeching cry of this jungle bird sends terror to all lesser creatures as it circles above, noting that procedures have not been properly followed, that this or that point is invalid, and that there are several misspellings in the report.

The Lion. Lions are quite sociable, and often travel in a family group, called a "Pride", or sometimes "Cronies". They growl and pounce in a coordinated way, cooperating on a kill – which may be one of your tender ideas or plans. They are dangerous when hungry (never put it to a vote close to lunch), but, fortunately, they spend a lot of their time sleeping.

The Parrot. Recognizable from their bright plumage, always the latest fashion, and their piercing repetitive calls, Parrots are always ready to repeat what they have heard on tv or read in a magazine, including the latest fad, the newest slang, the most recent management craze.

The Cape Buffalo. These great animals are generally passive and content, milling around chewing and gossiping in their herd. If threatened, though, they will circle, ready to fend off anyone who would challenge the *status quo*. When they put their heads down they are totally immovable. The human version may or may not actually wear a cape.

The Antelope. There are actually many varieties of antelope, and they all have the characteristic of bolting and running at the first sign of trouble. Unlike the Buffalo, who will stand and defend when required, the Antelope will race away (possibly to an urgent appointment or even another meeting), leaving others to handle the danger. They won't get blamed later if things turn messy.

The Hyena. Identifiable from their eerie laugh, Hyenas travel in packs, snapping at the heels of the fleet-footed animals that are intent on getting ahead. They claim to be doing a service by bringing down the weak and the tired. Hey – that could be *me!*

The Python. This large snake employs a technique whereby it will trap you with a logical point, and then another, and another, gradually tightening the coils of the argument until it slowly squeezes the breath out of your fine proposal. The trick with Pythons is: Never let them get that first coil around you!

The Giraffe. The Giraffe prefers to take the higher, elevated viewpoint on any topic. The air is so thin up there where its head is that the rest of us can't breathe it. They can see a long way from up there, but could we get down to some practical details soon?

Well, that's all that have turned up today at the waterhole – but I'll bet you've spotted a few more on your own safaris. Who's who in your jungle?

Remember: All creatures perform a function in nature, and they can all be useful – it's just a matter of directing their "talents" to the right tasks.

Sloths can show us our need to slow down a bit and take it easy. Hawks make great legal advisors. Lions make excellent loyal defenders of the organization. Parrots can keep us up-to-date with new ideas and trends. Buffalo can show us what our core values are, and Antelopes are sensitive to dangers that might impact all of us (get them to tell you before they run off). Hyenas can sharpen us up and get us to pay attention to what's going on. Pythons can be persistent negotiators. And Giraffes can remind us of our higher purpose and long-range vision.

Though these creatures may not make ideal pets, they can be befriended and even tamed. All you need is patience, understanding, and, if necessary, bribery with a tasty snack. Just be sure you're not the snack.

* A version of this article, titled "What to Do When Your Colleagues Act Like Animals", appeared in the February, 2005 **Administrative Assistant's Update**.

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Aurora, Ontario, Canada
TomWarney.com

Taming the Menagerie

How can you deal with these dangerous creatures when you find yourself face-to-face in the jungle? Here are some tips:

Sloths: Make sure they get reminders of up-coming meetings and appointments. Thank them sincerely when they do arrive on time. What might motivate them? Some socializing before the meeting? Blueberry muffins?

Hawks: Put the Hawkeyes in charge of checking the fine details and ensuring overall procedures are followed. "Sid, keep us on track, here...."

Lions: Make use of their extensive social networks to disseminate news. If you need to "work the connections", call a Lion.

Parrots: These birds can often help you identify the target group for a new idea or product, or help you design a strategy for selling to that group. Ask their advice.

Cape Buffalo: Know the habits and language of the herd, and use "safe" words and phrases to win their trust. "This is like the successful project we did two years ago...."

Antelope: For anything new and threatening, likely to scare them off, sell the benefits first. Get their mouths watering for the tasty reward, and they won't stray far.

Hyenas: Laugh back at them – in a friendly way, of course. “Say, Jane,” (smiling), “You aren’t saying that you don’t think I can handle this?” (More smiling) “Are you?”

Pythons: Keep referring back to the main goal or intent of your idea. Turn their logic to your side. “How do you see us meeting this target?”

Giraffes: Acknowledge the “higher view” (“That’s a great overall perspective.”), and then gently invite them to look at practical applications (“How would that look in action?”).