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*He aha te mea nui o te ao?*
What is the most important thing in the world?

*He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.*
It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

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Social Supremacy at Work: Insights From the Natural World.
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Abstract
Social behaviour, its origins, development, and manifestation are the foundation upon which the game of life and survival are built. The biological and inherited basis for behaviour as seen in the natural world can provide valuable insights into how people behave and organise themselves at work. One or more individuals can rise above all others by displaying ‘social supremacy’. Conflict, competition, the fight for dominance, leadership and survival, are as apparent in the natural world as in modern organisations where colleagues jostle for power, position and place. Even within socially cohesive societies, structure, hierarchy and cooperation are required to ensure effective functioning of the group. The end result could be the continuation of the business for humans, or the survival of individuals or groups within animal communities. This paper focuses on the ‘conflict – cooperation’ dimension of work and draws comparisons between social supremacy at work and the natural world.

Keywords
Social supremacy, power, conflict, cooperation, workplace bullying.

Introduction
Top dog, queen bee, alpha male/female: what do these expressions have in common? They all use terminology from the natural world to represent an individual who rises, or is raised, above all others to have a dominant place in the relevant group. But why that particular individual? How do they get there? What function does this individual have in the relevant society? Humans are considered social animals, so do the same laws of nature apply? Are some also chosen, or hard-wired to jostle for position, and to be superior to others? Is this requirement for ‘social supremacy’ a product of the environment, or more innate factors such as genetic make-up and instinct? Do some workplace environments foster these types of behaviours? This article offers insights into human nature and behaviours at work, instinctive and other, by drawing comparisons with the natural world.

The Ecology of Work
Paid work has a central role in industrial capitalism and has various dichotomous aspects including “conflict and cooperation, satisfaction and alienation, tension and fit” (Noon, Blyton & Morrell, 2013, p. 19). This paper focuses on the “conflict and cooperation” dimension of work and draws comparisons between the work environment and the natural world; providing insights from comparative psychology, ethology and sociobiology.

The one constant in the current world of work is perpetual change. The drivers for change emanate from various sources including: globalisation; increased competition; economic imperatives; deregulation; privatisation; societal values; demography; skill shortages; and scarcity of resources (Noon, Blyton & Morrell, 2013). These influencing factors work together to increase pressures for better problem solving, creativity and innovation. At work, the impact of these forces are felt by individuals in way of changes to employment relationships (Beale & Hoel, 2011), work intensification, increased managerialism, having to do ‘more with less’, and increased workplace politics as mechanisms to compete and survive (Omari, Paull & Crews, 2013).

In highly charged work settings power plays can become rife, with individuals jostling for position, dominance and survival, albeit at times by ‘keeping their heads down’. Behaviours focused on ‘coming out on top’ are often driven by the quest for power: social supremacy. This may create conflict in the workplace, manifest through negative behaviours such as workplace bullying and have adverse consequences for others within the group, team, or community. If analogies are drawn to the natural world, these behaviours may also have a positive, yet less immediately observable benefit of cooperation within the group.

Outcomes may be the result of the formation of clear social structures, order, relationships, and protection by a strong and capable leader. The discussion which follows will explore the conflict-cooperation aspect of work, while drawing comparisons with relationships in the natural world; it will conclude with implications for research and practice in modern work settings.

Social Supremacy
All social animals are ‘status seekers’, hence there is always particular high tension between individuals who hold immediately adjoining positions in the ranking order (Lorenz, 1966/2002, p. 41).

The quote above refers to the natural world, but applies equally to humans as social animals. The individuals’ quest for social supremacy within their relevant group in the world of work can be compared and contrasted with the animal kingdom. The nature of the individual seeking this status, and the tactics used, are important in terms of: dominance and survival; conflict and aggression; and cooperation and support as will be discussed.

Domination and Survival
Competition is an aspect of everyday of life with a prime goal of: moving forward and upward. Employees must compete with others for choice assignments and postings. The progression of careers depends on how well individuals compete against others in selection and promotion processes. Therefore, competition is built into the very core of behaviour at work. Individuals, however, do not all compete at the same level and to the same extent; some have greater drive than others. For some, their very being and sense of self worth is entangled with their ‘place’: power, position and influence in the workplace. These individuals, usually Type A personalities, are generally driven, and display more competitive behaviours (Friedman, 1996). A question then needs to be asked: are there biological or physiological reasons for these predispositions and behaviours?

Leadership researchers (e.g. Mehta & Josephs, 2010) found that dominant people have higher levels of testosterone (related to the drive response) and lower cortisol (controlling stress). Studies in social animals, such as monkeys have found that dominant individuals have similar hormone levels (e.g. Sapolsky, 1989). These findings may suggest that individuals, in nature and in the workplace, with the relevant physiological make-up and basic building blocks would be better placed to take on leadership positions, and may be more successful in dominant roles.

Physical behaviours are used by animals to demonstrate that they are superior to others in the group. This may include posturing and making oneself look bigger and stronger, as in cats puffing up in an encounter, or Australian frill-necked lizards flaring the skin/frill around their necks to look more fierce (Bustard, 1967); these behaviours are also observed in humans (Hall, Coates & LeBeau 2005). Studies (Baker et al., 2013) have suggested that taller, and/or bigger people, especially men, are perceived to have better leadership capabilities by appearing to be more dominant, healthy and intelligent. Individuals can deliberately employ forms of dress such as, business attire, bold colours, shoulder pads and high heels, in an attempt to demonstrate position or make themselves look powerful.

Access to resources is at the heart of any dominance and survival strategy. Resources range from the basics of food, shelter and safety, through to the ability to reproduce and pass on one’s genetic material. The ecological niche of an organism may be a key determinant in dominance and survival, as it can provide unique features that protect and provide. For example, Pallas’s cat lives and thrives in the cold climates at high altitudes in the Himalayas. The animal and its progeny, however, have low rates of survival in captivity (Kets-Riley et al. 2003). The extreme conditions in which this cat lives are thought to provide protection from common diseases and infections. In the workplace, specialist skills and roles
can determine one’s ‘niche’, and are associated with power, survival and progression derived from one’s expertise. The expert power of the niche specialist can provide protection from organisations, pressure and offer continuity of employment (Noon, Blyton & Morrell, 2013) (e.g., a software engineer with highly sought after knowledge and skills).

Forming dependent social relationships is yet another survival strategy. These are seen in nature through symbiosis (where both organisms are dependent on each other for survival), parasitism (where one organism survives by exploiting or harming another), and mimicry (where one organism is not affected, but another is protected by pretending to be the former). An example of symbiosis is the clownfish living within an anemone; the fish, which is territorial, protects the anemone from other fish, and the anemone which has stinging tentacles, protects the fish from predators (Lee, 2003). Parasitic relationships are readily seen in nature, for example, ticks and fleas on domestic and wild animals, and various types of tape and other worms in the body. Mimicry, a tactic of adopting resemblance, is also widespread in nature. Certain moths and butterflies have adopted wing patterns that resemble the eyes of predatory birds such as owls. This is a deterrent to their own natural predators, lizards and other small animals, who themselves can be the food source of predatory birds.

Building dependent social relationships is also readily observable in the world of work. Symbiotic relationships form between people by way of quid pro quo support, and with the building of coalitions and factions. Parasitic relationships may be less visible, but can include reliance and pressure on colleagues in return for favours or benefits. Mimicry in the workplace can relate to in-group out-group behaviour, as described in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Omari, Paul & Crews, 2013), or behaviours designed to look like in-group behaviours. An example of the latter is the individual who, while not being part of the in-group, adopts dress and behaviours to appear to belong.

Social animals live in populations, this collective approach gives the group a better chance of survival, as there is safety in numbers and further protections to be had. A population comprised of a number of individuals, however, needs social structure in order to function effectively, such as is seen in colonies of social insects (e.g., ants and bees). This is usually achieved through a prominent leader in the group with power over others who may be allocated different roles. Similar conditions are seen in organisations in the formation of sub-cultures. These are naturally socially cohesive sub-groups of the larger population with common values, purpose, and goals, which may be similar to or different from the wider culture of the organisation (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). The power of the leader in the natural world may manifest itself in terms of choice of breeding partners, foraging grounds, or prime access to resources such as shelter. The workplace leader may be able to choose their social circle and colleagues, gain access to scarce resources such as funding, and command benefits.

The concepts of the selfish gene and nepotism are analogous. The selfish gene refers to the differential and preferential treatment of relatives or friends. This is especially prevalent in collectivist cultures which place enormous trust and value on kin or members of the in-group (Wated & Sanchez, 2012). Reciprocal nepotism is found to have positive results for individuals and family businesses through enhancing social exchange relationships (Jaskiewicz et al., 2013). Similar behaviours are seen in baboons where the social rank of females has been related to nepotism. The position of an individual’s mother and sisters on the social ladder is related to their own; the higher the rank of one, the higher the rank of the other. Females with more sisters have an increased chance of reaching higher ranks, and those baboons who lose their mother in their early years are not supported, and do not reach high ranks (Lea et al., 2014).

Learning and adaptation are also dominance and survival strategies. At times, beneficial coping mechanisms sometimes go too far due to continued lack of stimulation, or hostility, resulting in behavioural disorders in animals, for example, repetitive behaviours seen in bored caged bears (Vickery & Mason, 2003). Dogs subjected to abuse can suffer psychological damage and develop unusual behavioural patterns to cope and survive (McMillan, Duffy & Serpell, 2011). Learning and adaptation are also responses to negative workplace behaviours such as bullying. Some victims subjected to negative behaviours reported adapting their own behaviours and using negative tactics against others. They saw this as the only way to and survive and get ahead (Omari, 2005).

Dominance and survival in nature and in organisations are not dissimilar. Factors in common include: biological and physiological motives; posturing and presence; the niche; dependent relationships; living/functioning in a collective; nepotism and preferential relationships; and learning and adaptation.

Conflict and Aggression
The involvement of people within an organization, people with different attitudes, values, and beliefs, seems to create a “natural” environment for conflicts to break out, as there will “naturally” be a difference of opinions, a competition for power and territoriality, jealousy, prejudice, envy, and problematic group dynamics (Luzio-Lockett, 1995, p. 12).

Conflict occurs in situations where the goals of two or more individuals or groups do not align, it can be functional and lead to better outcomes, or dysfunctional where it escalates to a serious level. The former can lead to new perspectives and more synergistic solutions, while the latter often becomes personal and can severely hamper relationships. Social conflict is equally visible in the natural world and human behaviours. Territorial behaviour, a form of interplay for superiority, as referred to above by Luzio-Lockett (1995) is one such example. Here, an individual tries to claim and protect resources of one kind or another, while one or more others compete for the same. Demarcation disputes are examples of workplace territorial behaviour in humans, while predatory animals, for example large felines, display similar (intraspecies) behaviour with rival others for hunting and breeding grounds.

Lorenz (1966/2002, p. 15) observed that fish were far more aggressive (in protecting their territory) towards their own species than others, and were more aggressive towards other fish from different species which resembled them in terms of colour and appearance. Similar looking fish were seen as more of a threat due to their likeness. This is analogous to ‘patch’ mentality in the workplace (Fleming, 2010) where competition may exist for superiority and dominance within eligible groups, for example, among peers for the same resources or senior roles.

Conflict or threat is often responded to by fear and further action to ensure survival (Singer, 1990), whether retaliating (fight) or fleeing (flight). This can easily be seen in potential prey escaping at the earliest hint of a predator nearby, or alarm calls of social animals to the rest of the community, such as seen in some monkeys (Seyfarth, Cheney & Marler, 1980). Fear responses can also be seen in the workplace, for example in bystanders of workplace bullying who determine their response according to their analysis of the situation resulting in a range of behaviours from no action, to positive intervention and corrective action (Paull, Omari & Standen, 2012).

Envy as an emotional response, is linked to some forms of aggression and can emanate from competing for social status and position in the workplace, including for a promotion or a choice assignment. Social undermining in humans is often motivated by envy with those displaying this being reportedly less psychologically connected with others at work (Strongman, 2013).

Similar responses constituting a form of envy have also been reported in dogs (Range et al., 2009) and other primates (e.g. Brosnan & de Waal, 2003) where negative reactions and behaviours have been observed resulting from the unequal disbursement of rewards, for example different kinds of food.

As a survival strategy, the retaliation of a group of prey against a predator in the natural world is called mobbing as defined by
Lorenz: “Social animals in particular take every possible chance to attack the ‘eating enemy’ that threatens their safety” (1966/2002, p. 23). This behaviour is prevalent among social birds subjected to attacks by carnivorous predatory birds (Pavey & Smyth, 1998). The term mobbing was first used in the workplace by Leymann (1990) to represent negative interpersonal behaviour threatening safety in the workplace: “ganging up on someone or psychic terror … schizophrenia, where the victim is subjected to systematic stigmatising” (p. 119). Although the term as described by Lorenz (1966/2002) specifically refers to a group of prey attacking a more powerful predator, Leymann’s description included workplace bullying from a more general perspective: “top down, bottom up and among peers. Power has been identified as being at the heart of workplace bullying scenarios, with negative behaviours having many dimensions ranging from isolation and exclusion, to threats and verbal or physical attacks (Omari 2007). All of these behaviours are also seen in nature.

Individuals who have been subjected to unfair or hurtful treatment at work can retaliate in many ways when feeling threatened. At the most basic level there may be a breach of the psychological contract, and therefore a breakdown in the fundamental trust and engagement between the employee and the organisation (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). At a more sophisticated level there may be payback in the form of revenge (Jones, 2009). The retaliation may be benign at face value, as seen through passive-aggressive behaviour; through to more overt behaviours such as reverse-bullying (Omari, 2007); or even escalated to the level of violence (Baron & Neuman, 1998). Similar behaviours have been reported in mistreated animals. Camels have been reported to hurt those who hurt them, and chimpanzees have done the same (McCuough, 2006). Domestic animals, such as dogs and cats, have also been known to retaliate by ‘misbehaving’ on their return from a stay in kennels or catteries.

Lorenz (1966/2002, p. 44) was of the opinion that aggression “far from being the diabolical, destructive principle that classical psychoanalysis makes it out to be, is really an essential part of the life-preserving organization of instincts”, as it helps individuals achieve dominance and assist in group survival. Conflict and aggression in nature and organisations are similar in purpose and tactics. Some of the factors common to both are: territorial behaviour, fear, envy, mobbing and revenge.

Cooperation and Support

Even within socially cohesive groups, some form of structure or hierarchy is required to ensure effective functioning. The end result could be the continuation of the business for humans, or the survival of individuals within a congress of baboons, pack of wolves or clan of meerkats. Here, individuals take on key roles in the group in order to protect, guide and lead others.

Survival for social animals depends on effective cooperation between members of the group. Ant colonies are superorganims, formed of highly specialised members each with their own function upon which the survival of the colony is dependent (Kelly, 1994). A recent, previously undocumented, example of this behaviour is the daisy ant chain in South East Asia observed by Wild (reported by Crew, 2014). Here, the members of the ant community were filmed transporting a significantly larger and heavier prey (a millipede) cooperatively by forming long chains and linking to each other mandible-to-abdomen. This has been reported as an unprecedented example of cooperation in social insects which may have progressed to another level of sophistication, perhaps in response to recent environmental changes and scarcity of food. Cooperation is seen everyday in the world of work, whereby, specialist staff each perform unique roles in order to ensure organisational sustainability, in turn ensuring their continued employment. Cooperation between worker bees or ants in order to thrive and survive can be likened to workers on the factory floor or in offices everyday.

In mammals, wolves were found by Range and Virányi (as described in Fang, 2014) to be far more collaborative than dogs. Wolves, which have packs with established strict hierarchies, were found to be tolerant and cooperative, while dogs were seen to form steep hierarchies with dominant animals demanding obedience from subordinates. Range and Virányi suggest that dogs were bred for the ability to follow orders and be dependent on human masters, and that domestication has not enhanced their cooperative abilities, as dogs and many of the other domestic animals not working towards a common goal. The history of the dog-master relationship may be more about dogs co-existing with humans with little or no conflict; obedience playing a major role in that relationship. Obedient behaviour is also seen in the world of work, generally in hierarchical and autocratic work settings where there is a clear leader who is not to be questioned (an extreme of which was demonstrated by the controversial Milgram experiments in the 1960s). Obedience may result in continuation of the organisation, and co-existence of the members of a group, but with little engagement or deep commitment to collective goals.

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Noonan et al. (2014) found that primate brains may reflect inherited tendencies relating to the individual’s position in the community hierarchy. Monkeys at the top of the social group had larger amygdalas (specialised structures related to the expression and processing of fear) that were found in baboons and gibbons. In contrast, lower-status monkeys had smaller brains with lower amygdala activity, indicative of ‘white matter’ and ‘grey matter’ differences. This suggests the possibility that the ability to express emotion is related to the individual’s position within the group hierarchy. The expression of ‘pecking order’ has its roots in the hierarchical behaviour of chickens as described by Schjelderup-Ebbe in the 1920s (Masare & Allee, 1934), but has been adopted in business lexicon to demonstrate relative standing in work or organisational settings. In nature, pack living animals self-organise into strict hierarchies in terms of role and standing. This is the way in which they collaborate effectively as a group. Social stratification is also observed in meerkat clans where complex social structures, rank and a constant struggle for dominance prevail; yet, as a community, there is significant cooperation between group members, even to the point of raising unrelated pups (Meerkat Society n.d.).

The formation of emotional bonds is seen in the natural world as in human interactions; both elephants (Byrnes et al., 2008) and chimpanzees have been reported to grieve, and mourn the loss of kin and fellow group members (King, 2013). It is unclear whether this is a demonstration of compassion, altruism, or a manifestation of the ‘selfish-gene’. Balter (2014) reports on the work of others detailing examples of cooperative breeding in some birds, monkeys and meerkats; that is, taking care of each other’s young, sometimes by unrelated adults. The formation of emotional bonds also has a significant role in the workplace. These bonds often act as mechanisms for social support to enrich workflow and mitigate against stressful workplace interactions, as seen in organisational change or workplace bullying scenarios (Cassidy, McLaughlin & McDowell, 2014), where unsupported employees feel powerles, helpless, and often alone.

Individuals within a society may improve their chances to compete and survive by learning from others with successful strategies. In organisations this is seen through role modelling by leaders, and socialisation of new recruits. The adoption of cultural traits has also been observed in the natural world, for example in Japanese macaques. One monkey was observed by researchers to have learnt to wash its food in water to separate wheat from sand (as sand sinks and wheat floats), demonstrating a degree of problem solving and innovation to forage effectively and survive. Some years on, it was observed that the whole society within which this monkey lived had adopted the behaviour (cited in Trivedi, 2004), in effect a
form of cooperation. The monkey with the original experience and idea had shown superiority in terms of behaviour; the other monkeys in the group had observed this successful strategy, learnt from, and adopted the same innovative behaviour in order to deal with their food more effectively. Similar social learning has been seen in baboons (Claidière, Smith, Kirby & Fagot, 2014) and in chimpanzees where tool-use has been learnt and adopted by a group in the form of using moss-sponge as a drinking vessel (Hoebel, Poisot, Zuberbühler & Grüber, 2014).

Cooperation and support are at the heart of survival for social animals as the group is only as strong as the bond between its members. The importance of social support in humans is well documented (House, 1981). Recent studies have found that connectedness is equally important in wild baboons, where social individuals, especially females live an average of two to three years longer than their less social counterparts (Archie et al., 2014). Individual interactions and connectedness are mechanisms through which both humans and animals function to ensure individual and group continuity. Obedience; social rank; building coalitions and factions; forming emotional bonds; and adopting cultural traits are all critical factors in the establishment of social status within communities. Conclusion and Implications for Research and Practice The globalised world is one where competition within and between boundaries is the norm. Organisations need to reposition themselves: changing structures, technology, people, and culture. Such changes erode social bonds established between organisational members, in turn creating uncertainty. Kets de Vries (2014, p. 22) talks of the "Darwinian soup" in reference to organisations in crisis, with clear connotations of the "survival of the fittest".

The biological and inherited basis for behaviour as seen in the natural world can offer valuable insights into how people behave and organise themselves in work settings. Competition, the fight for dominance, and leadership are as apparent in the natural world as in modern organisations where colleagues jostle for power, position and place. The quest for social supremacy is a survival strategy: be it in the natural world, or the work environment. The basic genetic make-up and innate abilities of humans; the capability to learn and adapt; and the environment within which humans function, are all key determinants of behaviour. Studies of social behaviour, its origins, development, and manifestation in the natural world can provide valuable insights into how people behave and organise themselves at work.

This paper has implications for research and practice. Further studies of the ‘conflict-cooperation’ dimension of work during times of change, and possible threat, will benefit from deeper exploration. It would be prudent for practitioners to be mindful of these issues in organisations generally, and in management of change programs specifically. Counterproductive behaviours, organisational deviance, conflict, aggression and workplace bullying emanate from an underlying notion of threat to a person or group, and can be seen as survival tactics in themselves. Connectedness, nepotism, forming of complex relationships and bonds, and basic ‘safety in numbers’ strategies are also mechanisms for competing effectively in a ‘hostile’ world.

The environment, be it natural or work settings, can moderate or buffer outcomes. The notion of ‘fit’ is as important in ecology as in organisations. Those who fit, function effectively, with a competitive edge, and will thrive and survive. Organisational practitioners need to be cognisant of these requirements and adapt appropriately to human resources strategies to survive the “Darwinian soup” (Kets de Vries 2014, p. 22). It is important to note that outliers, or exaggerated behaviours such as deviance and bullying, are sometimes responses to threatening stimuli.

As the natural and work environments continue to change, individuals and groups have developed strategies to reposition themselves for continuity and survival. Insights into human nature, and parallels with the natural world are useful in the understanding of what makes individuals, groups, and organisations optimistic, resilient, cooperative and innovative. Novel adaptations and sets of behaviour may emerge in response to new stimuli. What remains likely is that structure and order, and learning are inherent requirements for competing successfully. Certain individuals need to rise above all others by displaying social supremacy in a positive and cooperative manner. These individuals have unique qualities and resilience, and are especially gifted in being able to form strong social bonds with others in the population or society, and can help others fill into step for the greater good. Notwithstanding the positives, there is also a dark side to social supremacy in the workplace where destructive and negative behaviours are employed, and a ‘win at all costs’ mentality prevails; an area worthy of further research and attention.

References