

# Executive **EDGE**

## ALPHA MALES, SOCIAL DARWINISM, AND OTHER BORROWED THEORIES

Almost concurrently with the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, business philosophers began taking his observations and applying them to their own world. The phrase "survival of the fittest" was the cornerstone of what became known as "social Darwinism." Although the callousness of the late 19th century has largely receded into the past, business continues to look to science both to lend it identity and provide dynamic models for its structure.

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene* brought behavioral genetics into the national consciousness, and his career in explaining science to the public has led him to his present position as Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, England. This position places him at the heart of the ongoing dialogue between business culture and scientific theories.

One increasingly prevalent concept, especially in the rapidly expanding field of genetics, is that certain human behaviors are "hard-wired." Dawkins isn't so sure. "Take the theory of selfish genes.

It can be used to predict almost anything." Would a hard-wired trait such as loyalty have been useful for holding together hunter-gatherer groups? Is loyalty "hard-wired"? Or is it related to kin-



ship ties, or the benefits from reciprocated loyalty? Scientists don't really know. Cooperative groups fare better than individuals for a multiplicity of reasons, says Dawkins.

The fact that powerful personalities often rise to the level of senior manage-

ment has led some business theorists to apply wolf-pack imagery. These men have a behavior and innate charisma which supposedly makes them "alpha males," born to be leaders.

"You have to recognize that hardly any of the research on alpha males is relevant to humans," Dawkins says. Alpha males among wolves or lions rise to the top because they want to be the one male that mates with all the females. Dawkins doesn't dispute that certain leadership-related psychological traits may be rooted in humanity's past, but he thinks they are not the result of an immediate desire to procreate.

Although the role of science is becoming more and more important in our daily lives, Dawkins advises people to think for themselves and not to rely on scientific theories of genetics or zoology to provide imagery for the world at large. He advises people to try to understand issues themselves, their sources, and why they exist. "Scientific literacy is its own reward," he says.

From Diane Coudu, "What is Science Good For?" Harvard Business Journal, January 2001, pp. 159-163.

## MATERNITY ISN'T OVER AFTER THE LEAVE

A quick quiz: what has saved CIGNA Corporation \$300,000 in health costs, given it a 77 percent improvement in lost work time, and addressed a nationwide health concern—but can get employees at other companies harassed or even fired if they act on their own initiative? The surprising answer: breastfeeding.

Because only 7 percent of U.S. companies have separate space available, most nursing mothers must cloister themselves in offices or bathrooms to pump breast milk. Employers are under no legal obligations to allow breaks for the purpose, a fact that sets the United States apart from most other developed countries. The only exception is Illinois, which in July 2001 began requiring

employers to put aside time for this activity.

Many companies ignore the issue simply because it is ticklish. Ronald K. Beam, vice-president of RETTEW Associates, discovered that he was uncomfortable when a worker requested that she be able to pump. Despite his disquiet, he installed an extra electrical outlet in the women's restroom and a refrigerator for mothers' use.

The health benefits of breast-feeding are clear, according to the U.S. surgeon general and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Most nursing mothers cease to do so after returning to work, and one third of women never even start.

Refrigerators and privacy to pump are definitely beneficial steps, but also

desirable are consultants, manager training, and pumping equipment subsidized by employee health benefits. Mattel, Inc., goes so far as to pay the cost of couriering breast milk back to mothers' homes. Nestle USA Inc., a large provider of baby formula, encourages its employees to breast-feed—even though it also gives them a discount on its formula product.

Breast-feeding mothers and their infants incur fewer sick days and lower health care costs. Maternity leaves can be shortened while the mother continues to nurse, and women are more likely to return to work rather than give up on trying to balance work and family.

From Diane Brady, "Give Nursing Moms a Break at the Office," BusinessWeek, August 6, 2001, p. 70.

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