

Thriving in the corner  
Big cats de  
You

Mark Barnes

# THRIVE

Surviving in a Corporate Jungle



Illustrations by Greg Clifton

# Thrive

## Surviving in a Corporate Jungle

Mark Barnes

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This version was published on 2014-07-25



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# Acknowledgements

This book has to be dedicated first and foremost to my family, who have endured years of pain and suffering when I let my work life encroach on our valuable time together.

The content of the book, however, is dedicated to all the people I have encountered, emulated, learned from and occasionally avoided during the last 25 years. It would be unfair to single out any individuals within the various communities I haunt, because although I may have certain personal favourites, even those with whom I don't personally connect constantly remind me just how ignorant I am. I believe it is through increased recognition of one's own ignorance that true wisdom can be realised. Those with whom I have worked in the past will know the pleasure I have experienced from our interactions, and I hope they will also take heart that I still think about the struggles they face while they climb their own personal mountains. I hope they reach the peak.

One thing I am compelled to mention before we explore the jungle is how much I hope you like the artwork for the book. I have had the immense privilege of working with Greg Clifton (<http://www.lordart.co.uk>) on a few projects now and therefore I knew there was no one else who could better capture the spirit of this book. They say a picture is

worth a thousand words, so if you find my text a bit light in places, it's all Greg's fault for so beautifully expressing it with such creative illustrations.

I also want to say a special thank you to the early reviewers of the book, in particular Jeremy Cohen and Eric Tachibana. They were kind enough to read and correct extremely early copies, where my thoughts were still indistinct and I had barely set the stage. I've spent several years working in corporations so I know that it is extremely important to blame others, so I blame them entirely for any apparent structure you might stumble upon. Thanks to those early reviews, this book is hopefully significantly easier to simply pick up and enjoy.

I can't even take credit for all the words in the book. Thanks to my editor Bryony Sutherland (<http://www.bryonysutherland.com>) there is not only grammar and spelling, there are also some particularly well-chosen words and meaningful phrases where previously there was nonsense. These words have enhanced the tone of the book considerably and helped bring everything to life. Of course, she'll possibly want to shoot me, 'cause I didn't let her edit this bit ☺

There are several books I must mention due to the profound impact they have had on me:

- **Slack:** *Getting Past Burnout, Busywork, and the Myth of Total Efficiency* by Tom DeMarco (Crown Business 2001)

- **Rework:** *Change the Way You Work Forever* by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson (Crown Business 2010)
- **Joel on Software:** *And on Diverse and Occasionally Related Matters That Will Prove of Interest to Software Developers, Designers, and Managers, and to Those Who, Whether by Good Luck or Ill-Luck, Work with Them in Some Capacity* by Joel Spolsky (Apress 2004)
- **The Inmates Are Running the Asylums:** *Why High-tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity* by Alan Cooper (Sams 1999)
- **Peopleware:** *Productive Projects and Teams* by Timothy Lister and Tom DeMarco (John Wiley & Sons 1988)

Every technologist I've encountered is on a personal journey. My journey is deliberately one of chaos and randomness. It is from chaos I often uncover opportunity. My quest, if I had one, would be to find simplicity wherever I find man-made complexity. From my own personal experience, simplicity, when encountered, is a thing of awe-inspiring beauty.

*I hope you enjoy the book.*



*Happy Reading...*



# Map Of The Jungle



To assist adventurers, the following guidelines will help you find your way around this book.

*Exploring The Jungle* is for new explorers to help them adjust to corporate life. It presents examples of strategies I have witnessed that work, not just from those starting out in corporate life, but also those who are switching from one organisation to another.

*Surviving The Jungle* presents examples of strategies for staying content. When the thrill and excitement of the early days wears off, different strategies must come into play. Ignorance is rarely an acceptable defence.

*Thriving In The Jungle* is where we re-write the rules of the jungle. The scenarios presented here are not for everyone – surviving a corporate alone is a challenge, and ‘thriving’ is sometimes only possible when the planets are in alignment, accompanied by a full moon, flying pigs and a unicorn or two.

*Corporate Animals* is a light-hearted overview of the various animals we will meet throughout the book.

*Corporate Ecosystems* explores the wildlife found in a few different sectors.

## Jungle Binoculars

We've all heard the term 'Corporate Jungle' but as with most of the terminology we use, we rarely give it a passing thought. The term itself conjures up a certain imagery, which will probably stay with you whenever you subsequently encounter this analogy.

But, what would happen if we start introducing new meanings or imagery to the term? *Thrive* is an attempt to explore this concept by using the term as a lens or filter (binoculars, if you like) for everyday corporate life. In this way we can inject a little fun and perhaps along the way we may also discover new ideas to help us appreciate corporate life more deeply.

Throughout the book, the various characters and themes introduced are entirely based on real-life observations. If, while reading, you find yourself somehow identifying with a character or a situation, this is clearly coincidental and not in any way consequential. Everything presented within *Thrive* is a distillation of multiple real people from multiple organisations, all demonstrating similar behaviours and traits in real situations.

This book is also not about changing the corporate culture; it is simply a collection of consistent observations from multiple corporations operating in diverse sectors in multiple regions. Some of the observations may seem unreal, or exaggerated, but they aren't. Hopefully, by presenting these observations, *Thrive* will provide you with some ideas

of how to adapt your behaviour so you can actively enjoy life in the corporate jungle. Alternatively you can always explore new corporations until you find a jungle you like.

## Packed Lunch

In the corporate jungle there are several terms we use regularly to explain the status of the individuals within the organisation. Of course, most corporates will have an organisational hierarchy, with official management and reporting lines. Some corporations do aspire to be 'flat', but that is only an aspiration and there will undoubtedly still be individuals and groups who hold influence and sway over others.

In jungle terms, this would be the 'Pecking Order' or 'Food Chain'. We already use these terms to imply seniority or power. The higher up the organisational structure you are, the more pecking power you have - alternatively we'd say you are higher up the food chain. This is only natural to us, since as humans (a subset of animals), we are already pretty high up the natural food chain anyway.

When we think about the pecking order, we get a very natural glimpse at how resources (people, places, tools) are allocated. This is not necessarily the same when we think about the food chain. The corporate and animal food chains differ when you consider the underlying mechanism of obtaining food. In the animal world, the lions go out and hunt; they certainly don't sit around basking in the sun, waiting for the ants to bring them the meat from an antelope killed by a bite from a poisonous snake. However, in the corporate world this is almost exactly what happens. The higher up the food chain you are in the corporate, the

more food will be served to you from those below – it's like the famous passage from Douglas Adams' *Restaurant At The End Of The Universe*<sup>1</sup> where the cow enquires politely<sup>2</sup> how he should be served to the diners in the restaurant.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8695.The\\_Restaurant\\_at\\_the\\_End\\_of\\_the\\_Universe](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8695.The_Restaurant_at_the_End_of_the_Universe)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.saunalahti.fi/~huuhilo/dna2.html>

## Rules Of The Jungle

This is the easiest chapter: there simply are no rules in the jungle, regardless of the rules that may appear to be in place. Every single rule will have at least one exception, without exception.

Corporations survive *despite their rules*, not because of them. If anyone were foolish enough to attempt to follow all the policies, procedures and guidelines that a corporate laid in their paths, they'd probably spend their first year reading them and their second year deciphering them ... by which time they'd have been replaced with new policies, procedures and guidelines.

The trick with rules is to understand the *exceptions* to the rules, or more importantly the *ceremony* required to get an exception. These ceremonies can vary from formally begging before an animal court (officially titled council, steering committee or review board), to simply taking a big cat down to a local watering hole for some liquid refreshment. Responsible corporate animals, or good corporate citizens, will follow as many rules as possible but challenge the ones that matter most.

What you'll typically find in the jungle is that most rule-makers (typically bears and elephants) will not actually follow their own rules. A prime example of, "Do as I say, not as I do," or, in jungle parlance, a resounding "YES" to the question, "Do bears defecate in the woods?"



# Exploring The Jungle



The early days in any new corporation are always an exciting, exhilarating and even bewildering experience. This settling-in period is the perfect opportunity to get out and explore. It is also an important period because, while you are busy investigating the flora and fauna, the jungle will be reciprocally observing your every move.

Just like real jungles, every corporation has its own particular mélange of animals, so it can be a very useful exercise during those early days to find out as much as you can about the particular corporate ecosystem you have joined.

The animals (people and teams) you encounter during this period will have a lasting impact on your survival. At the fringes of the jungle, the wildlife tends to be less deadly or vicious than that in the centre and therefore you don't need to be as concerned about making mistakes or appearing foolish by asking silly questions. That's not to say it will be all rosy – one false step and you might end up fighting off bears, or a circling vulture might spot a weakness and swoop down upon that weakness for years to come, pecking it apart with its razor-sharp beak.

Whatever you do while exploring, don't forget to use this time to build up a survival toolkit.

## Be Inquisitive

It is a fact that during the first few days of life in a corporate you will ask questions that may seem a little silly – once you know the answer, that is. Instinctively, we don't want to appear foolish and therefore ultimately start refraining from asking questions.

The longer we stay in the corporation, the more finely tuned our senses become to any warning signs around us and the less likely we are to stray from this safe path of conformance. A few brave individuals may dare to continually ask silly questions, perhaps using the phrase 'devil's advocate' as protection against the evil jungle forces, but it's often much easier and safer to just assume the questions have already been asked. This assumption invariably leads to instances where no one ever questions critical decisions. In fact, the more important a decision, the less likely anyone is to question it.

Corporates can even go as far as to impose silly rules, such as being 'net positive'. This makes it much harder to apply critical thinking, which often relies on fully exploring negative aspects of a situation as well as fully exploring alternatives. If the corporate is rushing headlong in a certain direction, then asking if they happened to look at an alternative can be perceived as negative, as it is potentially just slowing them down, or side-tracking them. You can quite often find corporates wading through swamps, simply because they are so focussed on the destination, they

didn't spend enough time mapping their route.

It is actually quite astonishing that many corporates can eloquently explain, in immense detail, why they are trudging a particular path. Ask why they shouldn't do it, or what they'll do if the path gets muddy, and watch in amazement as a tropical mist descends, faces mysteriously glaze over and a complete and utter sense of bewilderment emerges. Clearly, you just asked a *silly question*, because how could they possibly *not* follow the agreed path? After all, they can't possibly afford to fail – surely they have no choice but to succeed?

“Thanks Sally, I'm glad you asked if we had considered what happens if we aren't allowed to store our customer data off-site, but we didn't need to quite frankly - we can't afford to store it on-site so there's nothing to debate. We have no choice.”



# Thriving In The Jungle



Thriving In The Jungle Chapter 4

While many individuals are more than happy to simply survive, others need the thrill that comes from progress. For these individuals, they need to constantly find new tools and form new relationships with the animals and the ecosystem.

Whereas survival can be achieved through adapting yourself as much as possible to the environment around you, thriving is usually only possible through a constant desire to change. This could be changing yourself, the problems, the ecosystem or even the corporation.

Thriving usually involves taking slightly more risks than surviving. Even something as seemingly safe as being promoted up another rung in the corporate ladder can be risky if the corporate subsequently decides to perform a staff-culling exercise to appease anxious shareholders.

Despite the apparent idiosyncrasy, thriving is entirely possible even if by doing so there is a direct negative impact on the corporation. Corporations have surprisingly few meaningful mechanisms to ensure that those thriving are providing any benefit to the corporation.

## Climb

Corporate jungles offer many ways to get ahead. Wearing our trusty jungle binoculars, we won't see the corporate ladders that everyone else talks about, but we will witness the occasional metamorphosis, quite a few dangly vines, lots of rope ladders and, if you are particularly lucky, spontaneous flight.

Rope ladders are the most common choice for ascending into the jungle canopy and they would certainly appear to be the safest. Of course, you do need to be wary of the snakes when climbing rope ladders, as snakes love nothing more than to coil themselves up on these. There is usually an abundance of rope ladders in the average corporate jungle, but the ladders will all tend to look remarkably similar. You can also never tell quite how far a rope ladder will go, meaning there is a risk you can only get so far up into the canopy and be left stranded.

Dangly vines are inherently dangerous; you'll hear tales of people using them to get up, but you will never know if the vine can take any more weight, or indeed, whether the vine is healthy. The typical corporate dangly vine is usually well sign-posted as 'fast track', 'talent recognition' or some other combination of corporate HR buzzwords.

Metamorphosis is much more interesting, watching reptiles become almost primate, or vice versa (and sadly more common) as primates turn into reptiles. What you will see though is that corporations have a tendency to re-

ward metamorphosis handsomely. Despite being perfectly happy, and surviving well as a primate, there are sometimes no further opportunities to climb higher in certain areas unless you are willing to become the snake. That doesn't mean that once you become a snake, you must remain a snake. If you are lucky, you may witness someone perform just such a temporary change and as soon as they get to the next branch, they could then morph back into a primate and drop down a new rope ladder for the other primates still stuck below.

“Hi Andy, I have some great news. Because the company has announced there will be mass redundancies this year and the fantastic job you are doing - we've decided not to promote you. This means you should be safe from the cuts and you can try again next year. Well done.”



# Corporate Animals



Any corporate environment will be filled with a wildly diverse collection of individuals. Every human trait and characteristic will be found lurking somewhere, leading to some interesting behaviours, interactions and rituals. There are many scientific ways to classify and pigeonhole the people, the behaviours and the cultures. This book uses none of them.

The following section will examine the main animal groups and how they could be applied to a jungle setting. My experience is that most individuals usually have the characteristics of two or three animals, which will vary based on the particular circumstances of any given encounter.

It is well worth remembering that every animal you encounter within a corporate jungle is there for a reason and it would be far too easy to think the jungle would be better off without, say, snakes ... that is until we realise just how effective snakes are at keeping the elephants and bears away from the monkeys and ants.

## Elephants

*These giant beasts are considered to be keystone species due to their impact on their environments. Other animals tend to keep their distance...*

In order to meet the onerous legal, risk, security or auditing requirements, most corporates will centralise these responsibilities to dedicated teams or departments. Within these departments you will typically find several experienced experts in their respective fields.

These experts tend to be single-minded and rather thick-skinned. They are typically unchallenged within the jungle and can even destroy the environment with relative impunity.

Elephants never forget, and so they are able to pull previous incidents and facts from their vast archives to support their position. Due to the reverence they demand within the corporation this is usually sufficient to end all further discussions on any given matter. Matters of compliance are beyond monetary considerations and therefore decisions within this area can be created based on what is best for the corporation, regardless of any cost implications.

Other occasions where you might encounter elephantine individuals is whenever there is a legacy (be that technol-

ogy, process or group) that the corporation doesn't really want, but can't quite get rid off. These elephants are a particularly endangered species, but since they are the only ones who can remember why they exist or what they do, they also remain a very protected species. This protection often allows them to force others to conform, ignoring any requests to improve, because "it's working, so why change it?"

Elephants are the main source of the exquisite ivory used to construct the towers protecting most of the bears you will meet in a corporate jungle. It is for this reason that, wherever you find elephants, the chances are you'll also find a few bears close by.

It is completely illegal and forbidden to do anything that could possibly harm an elephant. And although you may not always see them, you would be wise to double check when expounding loudly on what you perceive to be outdated issues. You never know when one is hiding in the corner.