

Is Your Office a Jungle? 5 Office Animals You May Encounter and How to Deal with Them

By Dan Stockdale

The variety of strengths, weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, and talents in your organization determine whether every day in your office is a peaceful hike toward profit or an endless slog through the thick underbrush of drama and politics, accompanied by the constant threat of danger and attack.

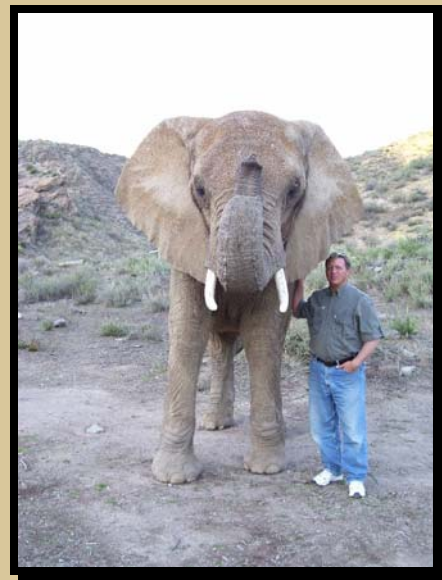
When you can identify the personality types of those who work for or with you, you can better learn how to deal with those traits that sometimes make those people difficult. The comparison of people to animals is meant to be light-hearted, with no intention to insult or belittle humans. While there is obviously no direct correlation between people and animals, you will clearly recognize some character traits and behaviors – perhaps even in yourself – in the following five animals that will help you to work with others on your team.

Office Animal #1: Snakes – Few animals face as much prejudice as snakes, who have a reputation for being sneaky and manipulative. In reality, snakes are very independent and highly adaptive in terms of the camouflage, which protects them from predators and allows them to catch their prey.

In the office, the snakes are *not* the office gossips or troublemakers! Rather, they are the people who prefer to keep to themselves and do their work, lying low in their quiet, unassuming way. Like their animal counterparts, most office “snakes” are beneficial to the environment and pose no danger to anyone. They will strike, though, if they feel threatened.

To handle human snakes, you must be observant: What does this individual perceive as threatening? Make no sudden movements around “snakes”; they hate sudden disruptions, so avoid abrupt changes and try not to spring anything on them out of the blue. Snakes work best when they feel as if they are always in the loop about matters that could affect them. Just because they’re quiet and don’t always make their presence known doesn’t mean that they don’t want and expect to be involved. Include them in all relevant decisions and make sure they’re aware of the status of projects so that nothing sneaks up on them.

Office Animal #2: Elephants – In the wild, these majestic creatures are similar to humans in many ways: they have similar life spans and maturity phases, are bright, empathetic, and have great memories. Their massive size gives them tremendous power, and if you’ve ever seen the aftermath of a stampede, you know that a lot of inadvertent damage can occur to the surroundings.



Dan with Nellie in California

Working with human “elephants” is the opposite of working with the snake; you don’t want to surprise a snake, but you don’t want an elephant to surprise *you*! Office elephants throw their weight around, exercising power simply because they can. They may or may not even realize the damage this behavior can cause. Usually, they have acquired this power over time, but they don’t have an official role in which to use it. A manager may change positions within your company, for example, after a number of years, and therefore see many changes over that time. This knowledge of the organization’s history and politics can be powerful. What’s more, even if the current role doesn’t give the “elephant” any real authority in the new position, he or she may hang on to the power inherent in the *former* position and try to bring it to bear in the current one.

When you work with or supervise an “elephant,” consistent contact is essential to help ensure that he or she won’t use power and authority to make decisions that negatively affect you or projects. Stay in communication, speaking to the individual frequently, presenting ideas, and getting feedback. Even if you’re not always able to use elephants’ ideas, at least you will help them to feel included in the process, and they will be more likely to tread lightly than stampede.

Office Animal #3: Meerkats – These animals sprang into the popular imagination in animated form in *The Lion King*. Intensely loyal to their colony, meerkats take turns vigilantly watching out for predators.



Office meerkats are the same way, always looking out for each other and the good of the entire group. They are excellent at developing and nurturing relationships, and will do whatever it takes to make sure the group functions as a team. When working with “meerkats,” you must avoid doing anything that seems inconsistent with the goals of the organization. Such behavior is likely to incur the wrath of meerkats, who are happy to inform the group if they discover behavior that undermines the group.

Don’t take this loyalty for granted, though. It can be easy to forget about those employees who are loyal and committed and don’t make trouble. Because meerkats are not necessarily the showiest of office animals, you must remember to recognize and appreciate them. They deserve attention for consistently being present with the right attitude and the right work ethic, making sure the job gets done.

Office Animal #4: Vultures – Like snakes, vultures are sadly misunderstood. This scavenger, though decidedly unattractive, actually plays a crucial role in the health of the ecosystem.

In the office, human “vultures” commonly are committed to their projects and the company’s goals. You can identify office vultures by looking on the sidelines, where they tend to lurk, waiting for an opportunity to gain favor, sometimes at others’ expense. If you have vultures on your team, let your boss know often what you and each individual on the team is doing, so that a vulture can’t fly in and steal credit.

If you're supervising vultures, communicate with each team member through informal one-on-one status updates. Ask what exactly they are involved in and how they feel the team is working together. You'll find that vultures' language will be full of "I's" and not a lot of "we's." Even when questioned about the team, they'll focus on what *they* are accomplishing rather than what the team is achieving.

Human vultures simply have huge egos, and to deal with them most effectively, you must stroke those egos and make them feel like they're very important. Assign them personal projects and individual responsibilities, so they can shine on their own, not through taking credit for others' work.

Office Animal #5: Donkeys – The attributes most of us associate with donkeys are stubbornness and a bad attitude. They're definitely not passive wimps, and they're excellent pack animals, but you may not know that they are also clever and curious, and possess a long history of positive cultural associations in mythology and folklore.

You can't be truly successful if you're surrounded by "Yes" people all the time, and no team can function at its best without a variety of perspectives. Donkey types bring that to the table. They keep you and the team honest and thinking about other options. They are committed, and want to do what is right. Unfortunately, donkeys often think that their way is the right way. The only right way. End of discussion.

While it's true that office "donkeys" carry a lot of weight and often accomplish a great deal, they famously buck, too. Therefore, find ways to give donkeys complete individual responsibility for a project. Let them know that they will be held entirely accountable for the project, whether it works or not. Give them the flexibility and latitude to do whatever they want to do to get results, but also make them accountable for the end product. They may learn eventually to listen to feedback from others, especially when they see that their way doesn't always work.

Work with the Animal in Us All

Whether you're the organization's CEO or a member of a project team, you have at least a little bit of one of these animals in your personality, maybe even more than one. Unless your office is out in the wild, you have been trained and adapted to your environment, and you may have to train others on your team or in your employ as well.

You don't like to feel you are being dictated to, not matter your animal "type," and neither do your fellow inhabitants of the office jungle. Like animals, few humans really enjoy being told what to do, but we will all do many things willingly when we feel as if doing so is our own idea. So when you need to deal with office animals, observe them closely so you know their types. Then, anytime you can make them feel as if the idea you're presenting to them is theirs, not yours, you will be far more successful at getting what you want from them. When that happens, you'll have flocks of happy employees who positively contribute to the company's bottom line.



Dan and Pepe Discuss Job Performance

About the Author: Dan Stockdale is a speaker, author, consultant, and exotic animal trainer. He is President of Adventures In Leadership, Inc., an educational firm that specializes in applying the principles of positive reinforcement to organizational issues and sales performance. His principles allow clients to achieve exceptional results while maintaining a positive, energetic environment. Dan also accepts 20-25 keynotes per year where he demonstrates his philosophy of management using live animals. You can find out more about Dan Stockdale at <http://www.AdventuresInLeadership.com> or by calling 877.3.JUNGLE.

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