



Meerkat Moments

Leaders and Teams can learn something about cognitive bias and situational awareness from Meerkat behaviour.

These cute little animals actually have a charming behavioural trait that helps to keep them all alive. Good teams can learn a valuable lesson from it.

They will always have at least one Meerkat posted as a look out to ensure that the 'big picture' of team survival is being observed even when the bulk of their team has their heads down with day-to-day work.

The look out is posted to maintain situational awareness and to observe for threats to their physical safety (birds of prey, big cats etc.), but the technique also has scope as a broader analogy for other team dynamics.

One of our best facilitators was observing a team of mostly detail-oriented perfectionists (Completer Finishers in Belbin Team Role theory) on a recent team project.

They were clearly so absorbed and task focused that the "bigger picture" objectives were being ignored. People with high Completer Finisher styles can have great strength when it comes to the details, and are marvelous at making sure high standards are being executed, but they can also fall into tunnel vision under pressure as a result.

Our facilitator said to them "you guys need to just stop and have a "Meerkat Moment".

It was a perfect way of making the point that we need to be aware of the impact that our weaknesses can have on team performance.

It also sparked healthy conversation around occasionally pausing to look up and see how we are operating together in the context of the actual mission. Perhaps even having someone as a "look out" empowered to point out threats to the team's decision-making quality.

We may not want to hear such feedback about our behavioural weaknesses in the heat of the moment, but like a good team of Meerkats, if the threat is real, then it's for our own good. Helping a person or a whole team become aware of such biases can easily be done with respect, tact and humour by the right person for the job.

Many potential action, thinking and socially oriented biases exist within teams and they can pose just as big of a threat to business team success as a hungry Eagle can to a Meerkat clan.

Looking carefully at not just what we are doing, but also how are we doing it can be extremely valuable for a team.

Neuroscientists refer to the sort of tunnel vision, leap before we look and other thinking traps for a team as “cognitive bias”, a tendency for teams under pressure to succumb to poor decision-making driven by too much *like with like* and emotional reactivity.

When the pressure is on, the reactive neuro-limbic system triggers emotional “amygdala moments” that can take the place of rational and quality thinking from the higher brain. In some circumstances this can be useful, but in others it can lead to an insidious spiral of poorly framed decisions.

People in teams, and the cute furry animals in their team, have “Meerkat Moments” for matters of physical safety, so why not also for behavioral matters that could greatly assist the team?

In practical terms, when a project is being delivered under pressure one such “Meerkat” on duty as an observer to team process, could save a team a lot of time, effort and money or simply preserve an important relationship or two within the team.

It does require a high degree of trust, authenticity and openness within a team to do this well, but just stopping to check on whether the way we are operating together is actually helping or hindering the achievement of our objectives can save a lot of grief.

Imagine a team of highly intelligent analytical types (Monitor Evaluators in Belbin theory) falling into “paralysis by analysis” and risking the timeline or success of a project by overcooking the risk analysis. No matter how talented the people, the biases still occur under pressure.

To have a “look out” realize that this is impacting team performance, and to remind them of the balance needed for risk analysis with let’s say ‘speed to market’ may save that project.

Having a balanced team of various Team Role contributions and thinking styles can be a big help. Knowing in advance what your biases are, and having strategies in place to recognize when performance is suffering, then pulling back from the brink is a valuable insight to have indeed.

We find that profiling an entire team with Belbin is a great way to identify strengths and weaknesses within a team upfront, and to intelligently inform strategies for countering those biases when they occur.

So when you are next in a high pressure or complex environment with your team, think about the cute little Meerkats (not just the ones that sell insurance) and keep an open mind to how valuable an occasional “look out” may be for your team's success.

Meredith Belbin said it best when he reminded us that ***“nobody is perfect, but a good team can be”***.

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