

# Our Ancestors Did Not Reward Bad Leadership (and Neither Should We): Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word

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Of all the three-word phrases prone to irritate - 'Sorry, sold out', 'Please try later' and 'Blue sky thinking' - one is guaranteed to leave many of us seething. The mere mention of 'Wall Street bonuses', due to be paid either in December or January, is enough to get many ordinary folk foaming at the mouth.

Why is so much bitterness directed at bankers? Because, during the financial crisis, they broke several social norms that have characterized group living in our species over hundreds of thousands of years. In our new book, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership* (Harper Collins, January 2011), we argue that many of our workplace instincts - such as hating the two-faced middle manager, liking the boss who asks after our kids, and sharing gossip about promotions and pay rises - have come down to us through evolution, which primed us to live in groups with leaders.

Before the advent of agriculture a mere 13,000 years ago, our species lived in largely egalitarian groups, often nomadic, with minimal wealth disparities between individuals. Sharing became the norm and, given that the only real wealth was meat and other forms of food, hoarding was pointless. It was hard to carry around, and a rotting carcass is not something you'd want to keep under your bed. And so group members who struck lucky one day would share their kill - in the hope that their act of kindness would be reciprocated by other members during leaner times. Those who showed exceptional leadership gained some extra rewards - perhaps a bigger meal or a finer cut - but not ostentatiously so.

We have thus risen to become an intensely reciprocal species: if a friend gives an expensive birthday gift, we feel obliged to do the same. Our emotional repertoire has developed to oil the machinery of reciprocity - we feel pride when we reciprocate, guilt and shame when we don't and anger if the other party does not reciprocate. Christmas is the perhaps the ultimate demonstration of our reciprocal nature: when you and your wife exchange a pair of snowman socks and novelty ear muffs, the two of you have not only provided a cozy gift for cold appendages but also affirmed your bond to each other.

So, how do the bankers fit in? Well, they did not act like good group members. They took when times were good - in terms of high salaries and bonuses - and now seem to be taking when times are bad, even though they have been fingered as being responsible for the recession. Where is the reciprocity? Few, if any, bankers have said sorry - an omission which we interpret as a lack of guilt and shame. While others tighten their belts, bankers appear to feel entitled to carry on living the high life, especially mind-boggling after public money has bailed them out.

By most standards, bankers are rewarded handsomely for their work, and our species is exquisitely attuned to wealth disparities. To our evolved natures, it seems innately and grossly unfair that these disparities should be magnified by the acquisition of bonuses. Our ancestors might not have punished failure - after all, anyone can have a bad day - but they didn't laud it either. Rewarding failure removes the incentive to do better next time. And given that your ancestors were smart enough to last until you came along, you can bet they didn't dish the fillet steak to the hunter who came back empty handed.