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**In the midst of a lighthearted tea-break, my friend William shared a profound metaphor with me – he said man is more chimpanzee than leopard:** humans are social animals, regulated and comforted by the power of the group. Leopards, on the other hand, are the lone sheriffs roaming the dense koppies of the bush. They are isolated beings, hunting on their own and only occasionally spotted by the trained eye.

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Every single person in the organisation has at least one peer... except the Big Boss. Close to 100% of employees have a group of peers where they can rehearse their sibling rivalry, offer a shoulder for peers to cry on during tough times and provide some straight, equal-to-equal feedback. There is camaraderie and collegiality. It is uncomplicated (albeit stormy) in its equity. The structure of organisations speaks to CEOs and the subtext is “be careful what you say to whom – it can be a political minefield”. The moment they are uncertain of something, they must be careful not to come across as a leader without compass and competence. The moment they want to drop their guard and be just an ordinary person, people judge them according to different rules. They are asked to be powerful yet not overbearing, social

but not familiar, authentic within the parameters of professional conduct. Be flawless, but for heaven's sake, don't be a goody two shoes!

As if this is not enough to make CEOs edgy, their job description ups the ante. There is no other job where so little is under one's direct control. They are held accountable for sales and costs, assets and returns, despite the fact that so many of the aspects that influence it take place far out of reach or control.

A clever person once defined complexity as the number of variables that affect something times the level of predictability of those variables. The CEO takes final accountability for delayed shipping due to hurricanes, trade union activity, market instability and the impact of fluctuating oil prices. Many volatile, compounding variables indeed!

Problem is, when you reach the position where:

***Variables x their Volatility = Radical Complexity,***

the CEO must seem strong, in control and steady. The more hectic the job, the greater the need for calm. Remember Rudi Giuliani's broadcast on 9/11 when he needed to speak with steadiness and resolve to assure people that the authorities were acting fast in the wake of the bombings, that New Yorkers would stand together and be strong on that day of unthinkable crisis? Everyone looked to him to see how they should react, feel and think. He had to set the tone and lead by example, regardless of his own

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emotions of shock and uncertainty. He had to give people the assurance that things were not out of control, even if he felt unstable.

On a smaller scale, and in a different context, of course, corporate leaders play the same role. But the fact that they can behave like leopards under these circumstances raises the big challenge: given the consistently high demands, what do they do to stay sane? How do they deal with the stressors within their solitary existence?

One CEO shed light on the issue and described himself to me as a solitary long-distance runner. He needs the same discipline and focus to keep himself company as did Bruce Fordyce in his heyday. He needs to coach and coax himself through phases of severe criticism and lack of support and keep himself in check when people dream him up. (NB Apologies but am not sure what “dream him up” means in this context? Buoy him up? Put him on a pedestal? I would suggest the latter...)it means the latter. You can use it

I think if I eat my porridge every morning and do my “Yes I can” meditation every hour, I might get to the place of dealing with such stress... but then the last dynamic that a leader must deal with will break my leopard back: people rarely tell them the truth.

The structure does not only speak to the CEO, it speaks to the employees and warns them “careful now, this person has power – she can take you

out anytime she wants, so best play it safe”. The power disparity implies invisible rules for any conversation a CEO might have with people in the organisation. They fudge a fact here and mould a presentation there, not to cause trouble, but to put out there what they think is acceptable. They see the impact of her leadership, yet cannot take the risk to share that with her. This void CEOs need to navigate requires a resilient person indeed.

So, the ultimate test for the Big Bosses is whether they can make peace with this vulnerable position: they have the power to hire and fire, decide, delegate and decree, yet they have a blind spot exactly where others can shine a searchlight. Followers and employees can see and feel the impact of the CEO's leadership in a way that is almost inaccessible to them. They are blinded and blind-sided by virtue of their position.

Although I realise that these are the realities of power and position, I do want to challenge the assumptions and behaviours that maintain the way leaders and followers interact. This void of real communication is the result of the perfect unplanned collusion between positional power and the power of visibility to impact on position.

Is the CEO a leopard because their people see him as such or do people see him as a leopard because he looks, smells and behaves like one?

I think it is time we stop putting our leaders on pedestals – this drives them into the koppies in

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the first place. One person cannot be clever and energised enough to be the single driving force of any organisation, department or country. Knowing this, why do we create such expectations and pressures?

At the same time, why would leaders concern themselves with the subtle whispers of bizarre expectations? They have the “power” to unpack unfair projections and challenge mixed or contradictory messages. And a final challenge to those in the CEO positions – do you (un-

knowingly) teach people to fear your response to their challenge, open feedback and collegial debate and therefore set yourself up to be blind-sided?

Yet, the one glaring advantage CEOs have from the leopard's lair is the view and the uncluttered vantage point that comes with the territory. They can detach themselves and see the whole valley. They can gain perspective and scan the environment – do the very things that distinguish their role from the other role players in the system.