

Territorial Games: Understanding and Ending Turf Wars at Work

by Annette Simmons (AMACOM, 1998)

Chapter One: Genius Into Cruel

“A turf conscious manager can grind genius into gruel.”
Thomas A. Stewart, *Fortune Magazine*

That’s the problem, isn’t it? Creative spirits, motivated enthusiasts, and innovative drivers become the casualties of an organizational turf war. Once people start wrangling for a territorial advantage, pushing their hidden agendas, and undercutting their peers, no one is focused on organizational goals. The turf war mentality lowers our sights, and we waste valuable time and effort crushing an enemy who could be, and should be, on our side. We lose too many valuable resources to the “friendly fire” of organizational turf wars.

And it’s getting worse. In our effort to do “more with less,” we have inadvertently inflamed new turf wars as people fight for more of the “less” they are supposed to be doing “more” with. Now what?

When fights over limited resources and rewards siphon off the valuable creative juices of a work group or sabotage organizational goals, we usually have one standard response: We sit in someone’s office or gather over a beer and we gripe about it. The clichés and jargon peppering our language is testament to the frequency of these gripe sessions. We call them turf wars, power struggles, office politics, and ego battles. We identify factions, camps, and empire builders and malign their destructive influence on our ability to get the job done. And then we shake our heads and shrug our shoulders as if the whole pattern were an unavoidable fact of life. Some of us hone our political skills with the philosophy that “it’s a jungle out there” and that it’s “do unto others before they do unto you.” Others take the peacemaker role. Very few try to understand the wars well enough to end them.

This book is a tool for those of you who are tired of fighting the wars and tired of playing the games. Einstein said you can’t solve a problem with the same thinking that created the problem. So we need a new way to look at turf wars. My goal is to reframe the discussion of turf wars and territorial games so you can stop looping through the same old solutions and conversations that bring you right back to where you started, with nothing changed.

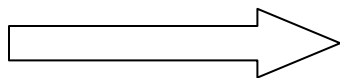
A New Perspective: Studying the Opposite of Cooperation

Everyone is so focused on increasing cross-functional cooperation, collaborative efforts, and partnering arrangements that they don't stop to focus on the forces working to prevent cooperation. When people aren't cooperating, what are they doing instead?

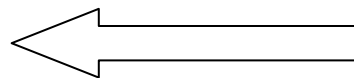
I have counseled many executives who said they to learn to listen better. My standard approach is to tell them, "Find out what you are doing instead of listening and stop doing it." They think I'm crazy at first. But eventually they admit that they are usually trying to get to another meeting, talking on the phone, or thinking about what they are going to say next. One client described his definition of listening as "the time I have to wait before I get to talk again." At least he was honest. These executives didn't need listening skills. They had been to "listening skills" courses. They knew all about "active listening." They could nod at the right times, hold the contact, and even "reflect back" a paraphrase of the speaker's words. They had the "skills," but they still weren't listening. They didn't need to learn how to listen. They needed to learn how to not "not listen." We don't need to learn how to cooperate. We already know how. We went to the training session. What we need is to learn how to not "not cooperate." And more important, what drives us to not cooperate.

There is a broad base of knowledge out there concerned with creating good ways to cooperate. Management consultants, training professionals, human behavior experts, and others have contributed theories, processes, and strategies to increase the forces for cooperation. Powerful group processes designed to increase cooperation are readily available. So with all those forces helping work groups to achieve cooperative behavior, how can we explain the uncooperative, apathetic, and divisive behaviors that we see? What is the force driving some people to withhold information? Is it to exclude an entire department from the strategic planning process? Is there some hidden force working against all our well-intended efforts that generates uncooperative behavior?

REASONS TO COOPERATE



???? RESISTANCE ????



This book holds that there is a hidden force in all of us that limits our desire to give 100 percent wholesale cooperation. We have an innate desire to hold something back for ourselves or for our group (however we define that). This hidden force could be labeled with any of a dozen labels. In order to study and discuss it we have to choose one. I have chosen to label the force driving uncooperative behaviors a *territorial impulse*.

Studying the Territorial Impulse

More than a definition, we need a blueprint describing the observable characteristics of territorial behavior *in organizations*. It isn't important to understand the territorial behaviors of animals or the territorial behaviors of den mothers are a Boy Scout meeting. We don't need to understand the territorial behavior of the three-spined stickle-back fish—although their territorial dance of snorting bubbles at each other and then aggressively shoving their snouts in the sand and staring each other down has its corporations today, as described by eyewitnesses.

Just as we might film the stickle-back fish, why not observe the real McCoys and Hatfields in their natural habitat, and study their habits? Imagine video cameras positioned in your conference room and hidden in the halls and photocopy room—and the documentary that could be created about behaviors at product design meetings, budget meetings, team-scheduling meetings, or hallway discussions of work in progress. This book is like a written documentary of those behaviors.

Interviews describing the behaviors in today's organizations that represent the opposite of cooperation were collected like miles and miles of film. This book is the edited version, grouping like with like, drawing conclusions, and offering ideas on the origins of these behaviors.

After analyzing hours and hours of interviews with people like yourself, I have developed a list of the ten most common and most destructive behaviors displayed during a corporate turf war. For simplicity's sake I call them territorial games and devote a chapter to each, beginning in Part Two. However, I feel it is important first to consider the *why* of territorial games before we look at the *what*.

Playing Territorial Games to “Survive”

The territorial impulse is deeply rooted in our survival programming. We are territorial because territory helps us survive. It did so thousands of years ago and it still does today. If you look at it backwards, survival needs stated the whole concept of territory. The problem now may be that we are still using old territorial behaviors that are no longer appropriate to our new environment.

Defining “Survive”

It used to be so simple. Survival opportunities were food, sex, shelter, and good hunting grounds. Survival threats were lions, tigers, bears, natural disasters, and anyone else who wanted our food, sex, shelter, or hunting grounds. Necessary emotions included fear, anger, and desire. Our prehistoric shortlist or behaviors included things like fighting, fleeing, grabbing more, having sex, and marking borders.

Life is actually simpler today in terms of survival issues. We don't have any, at least not real ones. Certainly not in corporate life. Who was the last manager you knew who died from a loss in market share? Who was executed when she ran over budget? It doesn't happen. Yet we use words like *killed, injured, flesh wound, invade, defend*. We talk and act as if our survival were on the line.

The truth is, our egos are on the line. In the unfortunate logic of neuro-association, self-image got mixed in with the survival programming. The emotional equipment designed to protect us from lions, tigers and bears and to help us find food, sex, and shelter keeps running even when the lions are in cages and our tummies are full. We are being run by out-of-date programming that operated thousands of years to perpetuate the survival of the species. Our threat response system (the limbic system—more on that in Chapter 2) remains, hanging around waiting for an emergency so that it can take over our more rational brain and propel us into a repertoire of defenses and attacks designed many, many years ago to protect us. It reminds me of Barney Wife waiting to jump into action. Barney got tired of waiting for real emergencies so he got creative. Just like our limbic system.

No real threats? We'll create some. No unmet physical needs? Fine, let's find new needs. Here is where it gets interesting to hypothesize. What are the basic human needs? Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is as good a guess as any. He says humans begin with the needs of hunger and thirst and, once those are satisfied, move on up to security and protection, belonging and love, self-esteem, and, finally, self-actualization. Just because our culture may be climbing up this ladder of needs doesn't mean that there has been a correlate redesign of our biology. We have the same limbic system for self-esteem needs that we had for hunger and thirst needs.

When self-esteem is threatened, it is as if our psychological survival has been threatened. When we see opportunities to enhance our self-image, it can stimulate desire as strong as that felt by a caveman looking at a ten-dinner-size prey. The limbic system snaps into action, generating emotions like fear, anger, and desire. Each emotion prompts some preprogrammed impulse to act, and we mindlessly allow these impulses to drive our behavior.

Territory and Survival Needs

At some point we humans developed an awareness of past and future. When considering needs this is a very important concept. Territory is the answer to meeting future needs. Without territory we have to start over every day to find new ways to meet our needs. However, if we can appropriate a little land to call our own and protect that land, when we wake up tomorrow morning our shelter needs are handled. If we were smart enough to find some prime real estate, then our hunger and thirst needs require much less effort as well.

As evolution progressed, our limbic system—always scanning for a survival edge—picked up on this fact. “Find and protect a territory” had been one of the first impulses for the primitive human as he scrolled through his crude list of things to do today. From this perspective, we can view territoriality as a primitive instinct, right up there with the urge to reproduce.

It is important to see that the urge to occupy and own territory does not automatically label us as aggressive. Many theorists jump straight from the conclusion that man is a territorial animal to the conclusion that man is an aggressive animal. While we have done our fair share of conclusion jumping, this one is problematic. It is a jump from what we want—territory—to how we get it—through aggression.

The *how* of territoriality is much more diverse than that—just look at the different territorial games. Aggression is only one of our territorial behavior options. Building alliances is another. Taking the position that humans are aggressive limits our view. If forced to choose, I prefer to think of humans as innately greedy—for power, influence, and self-esteem, for whatever we think we need to improve our chances for survival in the corporate environment.

Territory and Self-Esteem Needs

I hope overuse of the term *self-esteem* has not resulted in your wholesale rejection of it. All of us have a picture of what we need to “make it in this world.” Think of your corporate self-esteem criteria. Think about what you “need” to be. Do you need to be powerful, rich, smart, always right?

One of your self-esteem needs probably includes the need to see yourself as not having many self-esteem needs. Your mind tells you that only insecure people have trouble with self-esteem. That’s bull. Everyone has a hidden list of “must bes” and “must haves.” What earns you the right to keep your job? Was it that last report you prepared, the success of the product you launched, your reputation as a troubleshooter, the thoroughness of your records, or perhaps your humility? What symbolizes survival prospects to you?

More important, what actions would you take to protect your “survival” prospects? Consider your reaction if another executive were brought in to write your monthly report for you. What if “your” product were allocated to someone else? What if someone else started to shoot trouble better than you do? How would you feel if the MIS people allowed companywide access to all your business files? Play with any of these scenarios and you will very likely find an invisible boundary that identifies the personal territory you hold as a guarantee to your corporate survival.

Your survival mind/limbic system knows exactly where the boundaries lie. For one manager, knowing that everyone thinks his division is growing and profitable is as satisfying as biting into a big piece of buffalo and knowing that there's more out there is to a caveman. For someone else, being a vice president by the time she is forty, driving a Jaguar, or having access to financial reports in advance represents personal territory worth protecting.

The criteria of self-esteem become an unconscious scoreboard against which individuals measure themselves to determine their psychological survival prospects. And it is the prospect of tomorrow that worries us most, creating a strong motivating force on our behavior. The desire to be a success in our own eyes gets us out of bed in the morning, fuels overtime, wakes us up at night . . . and prompts us to play territorial games like staking our territory, sending out twenty-five copies of a CYA e-mail, and hanging on to information just a little too long.

Territoriality: Nature or Nurture?

At the beginning of the century, theorists on the subject of territoriality started with birds—and how bird songs serve the biological function of marking out territory. You can find an animal to prove just about any theory about territoriality you want. Take our cousins, the primates. Some monkeys are downright friendly while others, like the howling monkey, are very territorial. Howling monkeys routinely scream bloody murder as a group, every morning and every night, to notify neighbors of their position. Unexpected encounters with their neighbors (they are rather nearsighted) get resolved by impromptu screaming matches until presumably each group retires to safe ground to nurse aching eardrums and jangled nerves. (Don't let it be lost on you that this is the sort of thing that happens when you leave it to evolution to choose your survival behaviors for you.) Even gorillas vary widely in their tendencies to be territorial: Some are and some aren't.

Since our purpose here is specific—to identify and change counterproductive territorial behaviors in organizations—we don't need an *ironclad* theory. We need a *useful* theory. Just to cover all the bases, let's build an argument for two theories: territoriality as instinct, and territoriality as a result of cultural programming.

Territoriality as an Instinct

Even if many of the behaviors you categorize as territorial don't seem rational, territoriality makes sense when you think about it as a survival instinct. You see, instincts aren't directed through rational mind. That's why we call them instincts. We needed a word to describe the things we do when we don't think first. Instincts are primitive and survival-based. They are preprogrammed into our behavior like the migratory paths of the brown trout and the Canada goose.

Since “instincts don’t occur as a result of rational thinking, we frequently label them as *irrational*. Actually, we call them irrational only when they don’t work out too well. When our “irrational” impulse works out just fine, or earns us a promotion, then we refer to it as *intuition*. Only the screwups earn the label of “irrational.” Yet these impulses (good or bad) might come from the likely source of our instincts, the limbic system. The limbic system is the part of the brain that can override rational thinking if it deems the situation a survival issue.

Instinct, Impulses, and Emotions

We depend on behavior that is impulse-driven. From extreme situations like lunging to save a child in the path of an automobile, all the way to mindlessly driving an automobile, we act without thinking. Thinking takes too much time. Edward de Bono, in *I Am Right, You Are Wrong*, proposed that if our mind processed all available options, it would take us two days to get dress in the morning and a week to decide what to eat for breakfast. Instead, our mind operates on automatic, doing basically the same thing over and over again until a threat or an opportunity pops up. Survival threats and opportunities activate the limbic system and emotions, which activate automatic programs prewritten for immediate application. Thinking is usually saved for when we have lots of time.

Survival-based instincts cause us to react automatically to protect what we feel is valuable and to grab more of what we see as valuable, if we can. If this is too abstract, why not try your own little experiment? Go to a co-worker’s desk (preferably someone who is not overly fond of you) and start picking up items from his desk and putting them into a brown paper bag. Observe carefully the facial expressions of your co-worker. Facial expressions are the best reference point for reading emotions. If he does not yet register emotion, try to simulate an invasion of territory by standing nose to nose with this person. Now, evaluate the emotion he is experiencing and note the automatic program that emotion seems to activate. Note how the individual does not seem to call upon his rational mind as he punches you in the nose; it is as if he is reacting *instinctively*.

You may not want to try this experiment too often, but it can provide you with useful data about emotion, instincts, and territoriality of the physical sort. A more detailed discussion of emotion is presented in Chapter 2.

Since we don’t have enough information to say conclusively that territoriality is an instinct, let’s look at it through the lens of social conditioning.

Territoriality as an Evolution of Culture

Exploring territorial behaviors as socially learned reactions helps us see the role that groups serve in acquiring and protecting territory. This group aspect is important to understanding territorial behaviors in organizations.

The clichés “united we stand, divided we fall” refer to the survival function of groups in our evolutionary history. There are certain advantages to being in a group. Cooperating by sharing resources is more efficient than trying to survive alone. If we weren’t born knowing this (i.e., did not have instinct), then very early on there was an innovative caveperson who figured this out and taught everyone else.

Group Survival, Group Territory

This behavioral tendency to group ourselves and to throw all our resources together into one shared territory has contributed to our survival as a species. As with successful physical characteristics (like the opposable thumb improvement), behavior has evolved and continues to do so. Some behaviors no doubt became extinct through natural selection. Behaviors like glaring everyone you meet in the eye were probably short-lived. Other behaviors, say washing food, were rewarded for their survival benefits.

At some point, we must have developed the urge to group ourselves into collectives, sharing the responsibilities for food gathering, constructing shelters, protecting the babies. Those collectives initially focused on two major issues: safety and food. Wandering groups were bound to notice that some places were safer and had more food than others. In fact, there was probably one place that, for them, was the safest and offered the best food supply of all. Because there was food and shelter they didn’t need to stray too far away, and over a period of time they kept falling asleep in the same general area. For whatever reason, the group decided to hang around. The place came to be regarded as “theirs.”

Eventually, their focus moved from today to tomorrow. They discovered that with planning, tomorrow could be easier than today. All they needed to do was to store a little extra food and keep it safe. Possessiveness evolved as a behavior strategy to meet future needs. Hoarding food and shelter was rewarded by the evolutionary selection process. Sharing everything with everyone wasn’t.

Mine, Yours, and Ours

Hungry bands of protohominids finding a roots-and-berries-full, saber-toothed-tiger-free version of utopia liked their utopia and stayed there. Then it began to feel like home (the word *home* is the very essence of territoriality). Strange cavemen and women wandering into it were asked to leave. The caveperson equivalent of “this mine—you go find your own” was probably delivered at varying levels of enthusiasm ranging from a grunt to jumping up and down yelling

and screaming. Scaring others with displays of aggression worked, too. Behaviors that worked were repeated and taught to the young.

Some bright member of the group discovered that marking the boundaries saved a lot of time and energy. If the markers were scary enough (skulls on sticks probably worked well) or flamboyant enough, then wandering invaders would back off without so much as a growl. No fights, no screaming—very efficient. This was a big discovery. It was no less important to the survival of the species than the invention of metal tools or the wheel. Marking boundaries greatly improved the reliable supply of good and water. It was another behavior that made the evolutionary cut.

Kin relationships were the criteria for group selection. The size of the group was very important. It could never become so large that the members outstripped the food supply. Even larger groups would subdivide themselves into more manageable units. There were limits.

Sharing with the group served the purpose of being a group in the first place. Sharing outside the group was not encouraged. Children had to be taught who was in- and who was out-group. Members of the group developed a thousand subtle and not-so-subtle indicators to keep everyone clear on membership. Eye contact, body language, identification markings, even identifying habits could clearly communicate an invader in a second. Once an invader was spotted, the entire group could spring into action to expel the invader. No strategies were discussed. The group didn't sit around talking about how each individual felt. They just called upon their stored social rules for response to an invader and acted. The group developed a bunch of prepackaged automatic responses that accelerated response time to threats and thus survival prospects. These prepackaged automatic responses became a part of the culture. They still are. They constitute the origins of the territorial games we play today.

Survival Training for the Organization

How much of your social training can be traced to territorial programming? You learned that valuable things are either yours, mine, ours, or theirs. Much of the social fabric can be traced to the acquisition, marking, and protection, of valuable property. Entire occupations are devoted to the issue of possession. Lawyers, for instance. Natural selection probably favored groups that carved out “more than enough” territory over groups that were to get by with “just enough” (whatever that means). So, in survival terms, everyone has probably learned that a certain level of greediness is good.

So if everything valuable ends up as someone's territory, and we are preprogrammed to want more than we really need, how does that translate to today's corporate environment?

First you need to consider the concept of value. What is valuable to us today? Back in prehistoric days *valuable* was probably limited to food, shelter, sex partners, and the patch of ground they occupied. *Valuable* was directly linked to the things that helped us survive and thrive.

Corporate survival is a much more complex issue. We may not face life-or-death situations, but we still want to “survive.” Whatever helps you survive is of value to you and will inevitably be tied to territorial preprogramming. Whether it is a budget allocation, control over a project, or access to the best and the brightest staff, that which is valuable to you will generate a territorial urge.

A New Environment

Whether through instinct or a deeply ingrained cultural habit, territorial strategies are played out in the corporate drama. We are marching to the ceaseless beat of a drive to acquire and protect what we need or think we need. Farther and farther removed from any evidence that confirms or denies the value of our efforts, we seek substitute measures.

Physical evidence of success, like the big office, isn't as relevant in cubicle-land. The evidence we use to confirm our value and to ensure our survival has evolved to reflect the information age. In the agrarian age, owning land gave us that warm cozy feelings. In the industrial age, money and equipment moved our attention a step away from land. In the information age, the increase in complexity has shifted our attention even farther away. In order to survive and to feel valuable in the information age you need information—to have access to it, to know a friend who does, or to have authority over someone who has information.

Fewer and fewer study the science of farming corn and wheat, because our survival now depends on our skills in farming information. Groups form to plant information, harvest new information, and process it for market. To a large extent, farming information means planting and tending relationships. Good relationships can ensure a good crop of information. Bad relationships at the very least require more energy to produce the same return. Survival now demands the psychological skills of self-management and relationship management.

Corporate survival requires psychological survival. And threats to our psychological survival are everywhere. As organizations continue to reorganize we need someone to tell our limbic systems that everything is going to be OK. Because up to now survival depended on knowing where you belonged and what belonged to you. No one knows anymore. Ego needs easily met through the trappings of titles, perks, and clear lines of authority are now left to find

other sources of satisfaction. A preoccupation with psychological survival has replaced physical survival as the underlying force motivating much of our behavior at work.

Psychological survival always reflects our internal criteria for a successful self-image. What happens when we come up short or someone else thinks we've come up short? When our psychological survival is in danger, all rational thought ceases and the limbic system steps in with an "I'll handle this" attitude. Fight and flight strategies translate to arguing, defensiveness, or worse. A simple wrong answer to a CEO can result in a coverup that makes Watergate look reasonable. Survival programming takes over our brain and we go "territorial"—but over what?

A New Definition of Territory

What is the psychological equivalent of food and shelter? Resources, rewards, budgets, compensation, perks, and status are the loot involved corporate territorial battles. If that is what you win, what are the pieces on the game board? Information, relationships, and decision-making authority.

To access resources, you need information and you need to be liked by the right people. Or simply have the power to decide who gets what (or who hears what, who sees what). It's the same for rewards. Try to think of a territorial battle that couldn't be won using information, relationships, or decision-making power.

Consider this example: The implementation of a new sales tracking system at Apex Company would seem to be a straight forward affair. Straightforward except that the design of the new tracking system was not submitted by Gary, the current manager of the sales department. Gary's design was rejected in favor of the one designed by the "new guy," Mitchell, ex-sales manager of the Valley Company, which had recently been merged into Apex. Mitchell's design was superior for a variety of reasons, and everyone agreed it would improve organizational productivity.

Therefore, Gary was ecstatic about implementing the new system, right? (See, you know this stuff already.) No; if it succeeded, it would constitute a direct hit to his ego. So with his psychological survival in danger, Gary used information, relationships, and decision-making power to win this turf war.

He probably called it the "new *Valley System*" and rolled his eyes every time it was mentioned. He professed to be "very open to new ideas," and would be "behind it 100 percent, *if I think it can work*. But you've got to understand that [insert some rational-sounding criticism here]." He held private conversations with his salespeople about how he was "genuinely worried" about the new system. He joked with the MIS staff about going slow,

“since it will probably disappear anyway.” He set up limited training time in a noisy environment and ran informational meeting at 6:30 A.M. Through the manipulation of information, relationships, and decision-making authority, he created his desired outcome: failure.

The currency of Information, Relationships, and Authority

There are three kinds of territory in the corporate survival game. The first and most valuable is information. Information is power. All the way from the latest marketing statistics to know who skipped the company picnic (and why they skipped it), information is the currency that will ensure our survival. Information is often more valuable than tangible goods. Which would you rather own—a new computer or the patent for its design?

The words *intellectual capital* indicate the spiraling market value of information. As it becomes more and more valuable, information is treated just like anything else of value. It is hoarded, protected, even stolen. Following the primitive drives in our nature, we operate as if the one with the most information wins.

Likewise, there are two other corporate “territories” that are so powerful in gaining access to information that they are coveted by anyone focused on winning the corporate game. Relationships and authority constitute direct access to information. Controlling or influencing the control of information is almost as good as owning it.

Relationships, as corporate territory, are relentlessly pursued through the practice of networking. Instinctively, corporate players dedicate large amounts of time to the establishment, development, and protection of “contacts.” “I have lots of contacts in that area” is tantamount to saying “I have power.” You have seen people with questionable competence hired for their contacts. Good relationships with important people are valuable territories worth protecting. Not everyone actively constructs a “network” of contacts, but all successful corporate staff develop and nurture important relationships.

Less clear as formal authority diminishes, but of great value to our survival prospects, is the authority to make decisions. Authority is, by definition, power. Authority is the ability to make budget decisions, initiate research or a new project, and also to kill a new project. Authority has a direct link to self-esteem needs and psychological survival. Jockeying for positions of authority is nothing new. There are just new rules. New organizational structures and their reliance on informal authority leave this valuable territory up for grabs. The battles waged today are no less passionate for their lack of clarity. They are simply fought with new weapons technology. The manner in which authority is won today depends more on image and interpersonal relationships and this is more susceptible to territorial tangling. The present

unregulated negotiations for authority have evolved into wheeling and dealing of a kind more appropriate to the black market.

Vying for information relationships, or authority is the objective of a territorial game. And half the time that we are playing these games, we are so focused on our ego's definition of survival that we are screwing up the very organization on which we depend. In Chapter 2 we will explore the internal dynamics that operate to compel us to wrangle for information, relationships, or formal authority in ways that can contradict our own best interests.