

# DINOSAUR BRAINS

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Dealing With All Those  
Impossible People At Work



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ALBERT J. BERNSTEIN  
Sydney Craft Rozen

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Impossible People at Work

**ALBERT J. BERNSTEIN, Ph.D.**  
and Sydney Craft Rozen



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# *Introduction*

Whenever I start one of my management seminars, I call everybody in the audience a Dinosaur Brain. Why? Because inside each human brain lurks the brain of a dinosaur—irrational, emotional, easily enraged—waiting to take control.

As a psychologist, I have worked with legions of Dinosaur Brains, and I have realized that humans don't always act like humans. One minute they're normal, rational people; the next, they're little better than reptiles. Trouble comes when they use the Reptile Response—their primitive thinking patterns—instead of the rational part of their brain.

Think about your own job. What was the tension level in the office the last time the boss was on a power trip? Or remember the meeting when hot-headed Bill started ranting and you tried to reason with him, but he just got angrier?

How about the headache you get every time you need computer data and have to deal with game-playing Mary, who insists that your secretary fill out every request in triplicate and sometimes makes you wait a week just for a one-page printout?

Think about how much you dread contract time, when negotiations

get bogged down every year by personal vendettas, jurisdictional disputes, imagined slights or out-and-out paranoia.

Who are these Dinosaur Brains? What do they want? How can they not know what they're doing? These are responsible people like you and me, acting out unconscious fantasies of the primeval jungle. Do you stand aside and let them have their way, or do you confront them and risk having your head bitten off?

Why is it that business is business, but when somebody disagrees with you in a meeting, or you get beaten out in a deal, it feels so personal?

Why do people do things to make their jobs so much harder than they need to be? And what can you do when they try to do them to you?

By reading *Dinosaur Brains*, you can learn how to use the wiles of your more highly evolved brain to divert your colleagues from constantly acting out their evolutionary battle and put them back on track. Then everybody can get some work done for a change.

This book deals with irrational thinking and unconscious motivation at the office—because people at work aren't always the rational creatures that other management books talk about. They don't always act in their own best interests, much less in yours.

With practice, it won't be hard for you to stay in control when people around you are overreacting. You can learn the rules and skills for dealing with irrationality in others and gain the self-knowledge to identify and cope with your own Dinosaur Brain behavior.

The secret to dealing with irrational people lies in knowing their rules. Everything people do, no matter how crazy it seems, follows some system of rules. This book is about those rules, which I call Lizard Logic. The rules are primitive and have to do with impulsiveness, survival, dominance, territoriality, sex and aggression. Knowing the rules can make you aware of the warning signs that trigger your own Reptile Response and help you recognize the signals and prevent it or channel it to productive use.

Then I discuss the tactics for getting other people out of their Di-

nosaur Brain patterns and making them easier to work with. The technique involves creativity—looking at things differently. The problem I see professionally over and over is that people who are creative in other areas don't realize they can use the same creativity in dealing with people at work. This book, and a little reflection, can show you how to tap your creativity to solve office problems.

This book is also about job stress. Life in the lizard lane is very demanding. Usually, it's not the job itself but our emotional response to it that can burn us out and bring on stress-related symptoms: high blood pressure, headaches, ulcers or upset stomach, lower back pain, insomnia or excessive smoking or drinking. This book shows how taming your unconscious can lower your stress level and teaches you ways to keep your cool even when everybody around you has lost control. It tells the secrets of success that you aren't likely to learn in management classes.

Anyone can be a Dinosaur Brain at any time. The Reptile Response happens totally outside of the conscious mind. People aren't aware of it, but it has left countless careers dead in the water. This book will help you deal with the Reptile Response, whether you're a Dinosaur Brain yourself or have to work with one.

There were certainly times during our collaboration on this book when my co-author, Sydney Craft Rozen, and I recognized lizard-like behavior in ourselves or each other. Writing this book has helped us to remember to think before we thrash about.

Sydney is a free-lance editor and writer, with a publishing track record that includes a best-selling get-organized book, and earlier careers as a newspaper writer and college English instructor. Besides sharing the writing duties, she contributed many of the realistic examples of Lizard Logic and irrational behavior that help give our book its personal tone. The book also reflects her writing style, as well as my own.

The concept of Dinosaur Brains and explanations of the psychological principles and self-help techniques that form the basis for the book are mine. Occasional uses of the first person throughout the book refer to me.

*Dinosaur Brains* is the result of a professional collaboration between Sydney and me that works; a personal appreciation of each other's brontosaurian brilliance; and the intelligent and sensitive support of our spouses, Luahna Ude and Lee Rozen.

And now, to the jungle. . . .

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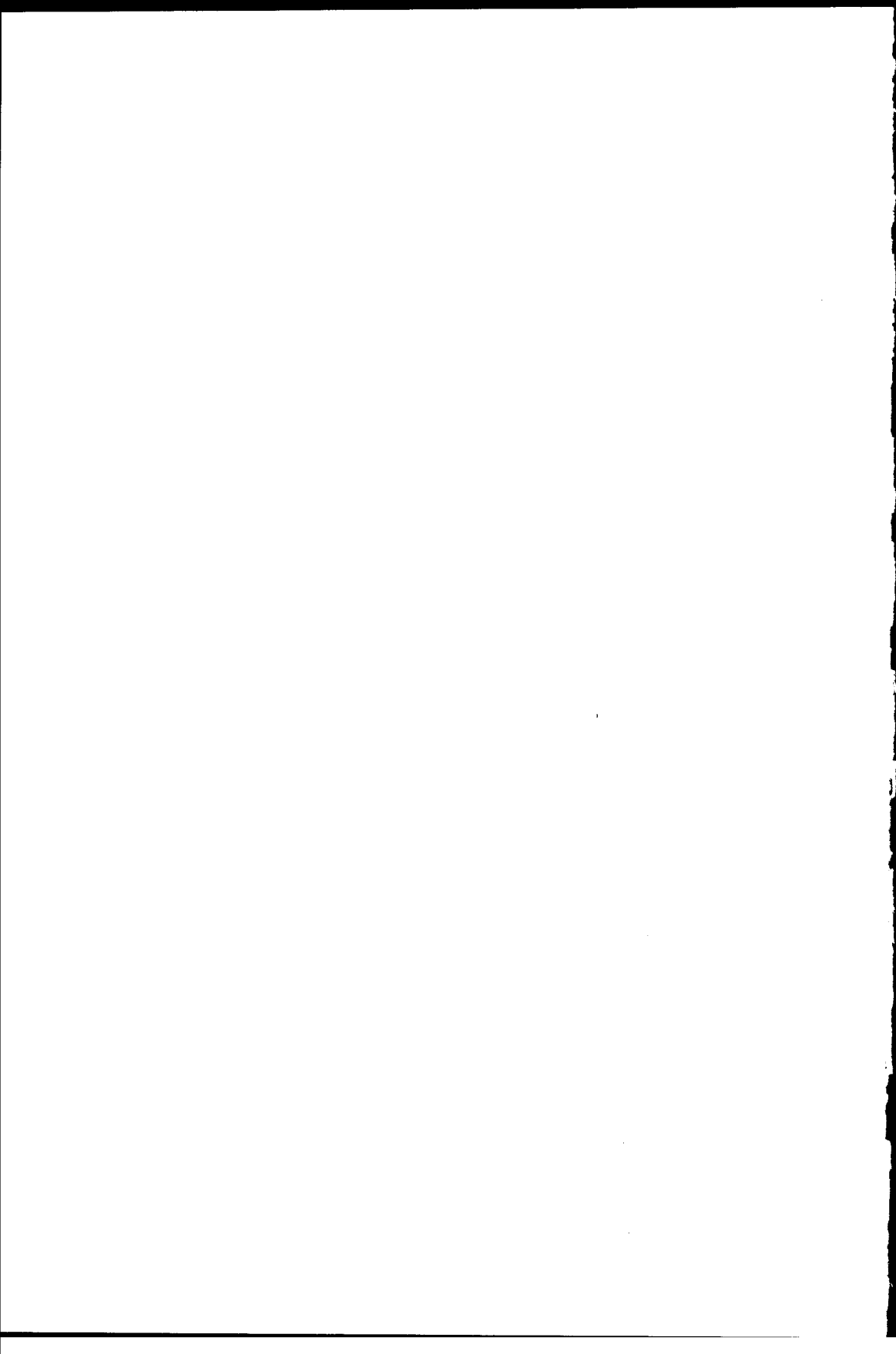
*It's easy—just ignore their Dinosaur Brains. Follow these suggestions and watch the lizards attack.*

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*PART* ***I***

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*What Is the  
Dinosaur Brain?*



# 1

## *The Dinosaur Brain and Lizard Logic*

Consider the dinosaur. It was a masterpiece of design. How could a brain the size of a walnut control a body the size of a tractor-trailer?

Every dinosaur was hatched fully programmed. It knew everything it needed to know: how to stake out a territory, how to handle danger, how to get ahead in the herd, how to find a mate. Being a Mesozoic success was literally all instinct.

Dinosaurs died sixty-five million years ago, but they are still with us—not just in museums and on T-shirts, but on the boards of the Fortune 500. Their bodies might be gone, but their brains, complete with instincts, are the foundations on which our own brains are built.

What is the Dinosaur Brain? Where is it? How does it work? Can it still help us get ahead?

Picture the human brain as an evolutionary sandwich: a cortex (the center of thinking and logic) stacked on top of a dinosaur's brain (instincts and emotions), with a layer called the limbic system in between.

The Dinosaur Brain is our source of instructions for handling instincts and emotions as old as the dinosaurs: aggression and anger, mating and sexual attraction, territoriality and fear, social hierarchy and loyalty.

The cortex is the part of our brain that makes us human. It is the area in which thinking, associating, reasoning and logic occur. When the Dinosaur Brain gets in the way of rational, organized, businesslike thinking, the result can be like trying to reason with a lizard.

The patterns in the Dinosaur Brain can be divided into seven specific rules that I call Lizard Logic. To the dinosaur, they cover all events and contingencies. We look at each principle in depth in later chapters, but here is a short course in reptilian rationalizing.

### *Get It Now! Impulsiveness*

More than anything else, reptiles can't wait. All Lizard Logic patterns are immediate. Dinosaur Brain thinking is short term, with high emotional involvement. Dinosaur Brain managers are always putting out brushfires and never finding time for long-term planning. Their arousal systems are going full time, producing chaos for co-workers, not to mention stress-related symptoms such as ulcers, headaches, upset stomach, insomnia and maybe excessive smoking or drinking.

*Bill is a high-energy guy. He thinks fast and gets people motivated, but he's a little slow on follow-through. Unless his subordinates pick up the ball, nothing gets done. Bill is happiest when he's running around, making contacts and putting out fires. He's always starting new systems, but he doesn't stay around long enough to see that they run. His subordinates wish he would give them more guidance and support.*

*At meetings Bill tends to cut people off because he already knows what they're going to say. He tends to jump to conclusions and often has to eat his words. Bill is obviously bright, and upper management likes his energy and enthusiasm. But he won't get promoted until he learns to control his impulsiveness.*



***Fight, Run or Freeze***

Dinosaurs have three ways of responding to threat or aggression. They fight back; they run away; or sometimes the arousal gets so high that they become completely immobile, unable to think or function. When people are "stressed out," we can see the three Dinosaur Brain patterns most clearly.

*Fred is used to getting the highest rating on his job reviews. But this time he is rated "Fair" on a particular trait and considers it an attack. He yells at his boss and threatens a lawsuit if his rating isn't changed to "Excellent."*

Fred's Dinosaur Brain is screaming, "Fight!" and he doesn't see that his raving will damage his career more than a whole page of "Fair" ratings.

*Stress builds up in Carolyn's department; she calls in and takes a "mental health day." She hopes if she stays away, somebody else will handle it. It's not that she's irresponsible, just overwhelmed.*

Carolyn's Dinosaur Brain tells her that flight is a solution. She doesn't see that the problems will compound while she's gone.

*George is in a meeting, presenting his plan, when he's asked a couple of on-target questions. When he opens his mouth to answer, no sound comes out. He's lost his voice and his mind is blank.*

Stage fright is a good example of the immobilizing power of the Dinosaur Brain.

***Be Dominant! Hierarchies, Dominance and Power Struggles***

Reptiles love social hierarchies, and they always seem to be trying to demonstrate that they are the top dinosaur, no matter what the organizational chart says. They often get into trouble by getting involved in power struggles with anyone and everyone. Consider this exchange: