

# Leadership and Monkeys

By Dave Wondra

Several years ago I traveled to Costa Rica with my family. To say that we stayed in a remote part of the country is nearly an understatement. We rented an open air house that is located ½ mile down the beach from Punta Banco, the last village at the end of the last road on the southwestern edge of the country. The house is at the top of a point, nestled in a 265 acre tract of virgin rainforest. Once during our two week stay we saw a man walk by on the beach, otherwise it was just us – and a thriving jungle community teeming with loud animals, large insects and stunning greenery everywhere.

The path from the beach to the house is about 600 feet long, and a steady climb. I made the trip often as I moved about my day. During the first afternoon of walking this well-worn path, I began to notice a pattern. One-third of the way up the trail I would hear birds wildly chirping as I passed by. I tried to spot the birds, though never saw them. I would eventually dismiss my failed effort as a thick foliage problem, and move on.

On the fourth day of passing through this spot to the chorus of raucous chirping, I noticed a branch suddenly move, just above my head. I abruptly stopped, looked straight up, and saw five monkeys loudly scolding me for being so close to their space. I was stunned by what happened next. Once I connected that specific chirping sound with monkeys rather than birds, I saw monkeys everywhere.

Over the next several days I continued to mull over what had happened. It was troubling to know that I had a belief strong enough to physically limit my ability to see reality. I began to wonder if I held beliefs in other parts of my life that were limiting me in a similar fashion. The most unsettling part was that I wasn't even aware that these self-limiting beliefs were present.

When I returned home, I started a quest with my coach, searching for self-limiting beliefs that were blocking my sight. This was an important inquiry for another reason. When I left for Costa Rica, I knew that upon my return I had an important decision to make. The President I worked for made a generous offer to me – I could either become a full time executive (I was a part time employee at the time) or she would help me fully launch my private practice. The choice was mine.

When I left for my trip, I was leaning strongly toward leaving the company. After searching for and examining my self-limiting beliefs, I decided to stay. Ends up I had a few beliefs about myself that were worth changing. I was surprised to discover that I had accepted the following beliefs about myself:

- I lead from the sidelines; not in the spotlight
- My creativity and personality don't fit where I work
- My ideas about the technology of the business aren't important

I stayed so that I could experiment with removing these limits from my belief system. It wasn't easy, though the result was the most rewarding chapter of my leadership career. During the next several years I fulfilled the promise I made to myself to bring all of my talents and creativity to my work, and to take a stand for the people of the company. It actually felt like I found redemption for the times that I made different leadership choices because of my old, outdated set of beliefs.

In the end, I have a band of monkeys to thank for making a leader out of me, and for providing a visceral lesson on the power of self-limiting beliefs.