

# Nigel Nicholson on the lessons of the Maasai

By Dina Medland



From left: Jo Owen, Peter Dixon, a Maasai tribesman, Nigel Nicholson and Gideon Lepalo



Nigel makes new friends



Nigel speaking to Maasai tribesmen

While the rest of us in the UK were huddled under our duvets in January waiting for the sun to shine and life to resume post-Christmas, Nigel Nicholson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School, was on a trip to one of the less visited parts of northern Kenya, to meet and observe the Loikipia, a Maasai tribe of 30,000 people.

The party was headed by professional explorer Anthony Willoughby, who was born in Africa and knows the continent well. It included Peter Dixon (MSc10), a member of the UK Regional Advisory Board, and Jo Owen (MSc21).

“The plan was to be a bit of an anthropologist, and find out about leadership, culture and the solving of problems. I was interested to see if we could bring back any lessons on the study of organisations. I had two interests really – to look at adaptive solutions in society, and see if there were any applications for my current research in family business,” says Nigel.

Why the Maasai? “They have a preserved way of life and have been pursuing that same way of life for 3,000 years. It is a highly ordered society.”

But, despite extensive research into the Maasai, before making the journey, Nigel found he was very surprised by some of the findings.

“The manner of leadership there is in sharp contrast to the models of leadership we see in Western business. There is little or no emphasis on personal striving and ambition,” he says.

“Leaders are those who can mediate and maintain harmony within the group and are the social healers. They exist within a stratified age-set system, and have multiple leadership roles. It is a team leadership model that we just don’t see in the West, with the possible exception of family firms.”

The strong emphasis on consensus means that an individual is seen as important only as part of the whole tribe. Individual talents – such as the ability to make spears – are only prized as a function of the tribe as a whole, and people subsume their own identity within that of the tribe at large.

“People seem very happy by our standards,” says Nigel. The area reserved for the Maasai by the government is a mixture of wildlife conservation and grazing land. Evidence suggests there is a lot less mental illness and anguish in this society, and the atmosphere spoke of both

confidence and clarity of purpose.

Yet, there is an unnaturally heavy cost for this particular ordered way of life that is borne by women. They do maintenance work, but have no formal influence and an elder will have more than one wife.

It is a society that operates within a set of boundaries, says Nigel, as do all societies. “But in order to function in a society of this kind you need to live a very simple life. These people are not reaching for the moon,” he adds.

## Leaders mediate within the group and are the social healers

Trouble can arise when there is increasing encroachment of both education and the cash economy into the Maasai’s existence. “You can live as a community if you have a boundary, but the interesting thing about the Maasai is that people leave and do come back again with some wealth. It is impressive to see the degree with which they live in harmony,” observes Nigel.

He found it a “strange and uncomfortable experience” however, to see the Maasai on the edges of the territory, in townships where attitudes were very different. They were mistrustful and seemed to suffer from a loss of identity. “It’s as if they have let go with one hand, but not caught onto anything with the other,” says Nigel.

The Maasai’s clarity of vision and the harmony they work on creating for themselves have parallels in family businesses that are working well, says Nigel. He made the trip to see how far his ideas on western business culture, expressed in his book, *Managing The Human Animal*, applied.

Apart from the unpleasant moment when an ostrich in full breeding plumage attacked both Gideon, the interpreter, and the hyenas who entered the camp one night, the party came home unscathed and full of ideas. “The trip was a graphic demonstration of the way human beings are capable of organising and living in very different conditions – working with very different models of leadership, decision-making and problem-solving.”