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## The New Sciences and the Learning Organization Part 2B: Up Close and Personal with Your Genes

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“Understanding the genetic roots of personality will help you find yourself and relate better to others. The knowledge can help you in relationships and at work.”

— Dean Hamer & Peter Copeland,  
**Living with Our Genes: Why They Matter More Than You Think** (1998)

It is the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, full of wonder and hope. What will we discover in this new century? What will we do differently? How will we use the vast pool of knowledge, which we generated in the last century, about what makes us

human? Will we use this knowledge to increase our effectiveness, and ultimately our happiness? Will we make the choice to take charge of our lives, and to not become slaves to our genes? These are profound questions that may not have easy answers. However, when it comes to choices about what we can do about our own personal genetic heritage, there are some answers that are better than others. The most important answer is to understand what our genes tell us about ourselves, and what we can do with that information to improve our quality of life.

According to Hamer and Copeland, “We know that DNA makes unique brains, and each brain develops in a unique environment to form an individual personality. The question is whether the differences in DNA make us different. Searching for the answer is the science of behavior genetics.” Scientists in this field have discovered a genetic link between our behaviours and the genes that we carry in our DNA. These behaviours dictate who we are, and how we behave in certain situations. In this newsletter, we’ll focus on three behaviours that are genetically linked:

- Thrill-seeking
- Harm avoidance
- Anger

Our dispositions to these genetic behaviours have significant implications for an organization’s ability to learn at the speed of change.

Remember that all of these behaviours lie on a continuum. People display these behaviours in varying degrees, from a little to a lot. Also, people display these behaviours in specific situations. For example, you can display a high degree of risk-taking behaviour in your personal life, but a low degree in your work life. Keep these points in mind as you read the descriptions that follow.

### Thrill-Seeking

Thrill-seeking is a genetic predisposition to taking risks, and it can take different forms. For example:

- People who are predisposed to *physical thrill-seeking* are attracted to extreme sports, such as mountain climbing or skydiving.
- People who are predisposed to *experience seeking* look for new ways to stimulate aspects of their lives, such as improving their minds or broadening their circle of friends.
- People who are predisposed to *novelty seeking* look for new perspectives that aren’t necessarily dangerous. These people enjoy lots of change and

variety in their environments.

If you have a high predisposition to risk taking, you seek and create change, challenge, and complexity. You revel in change, and, if it's not there, you'll create it. If you have a low predisposition to risk taking, you seek stability, repetitiveness, and simplicity. You resist change by trying to stabilize it.

What does this mean in times of change? People will find themselves at both ends of the continuum, and everywhere in-between. If you are proposing change, the people who have the genetic predisposition to thrill-seeking will welcome your efforts. These people will appear to be *on board and ready to go*. Others will question your change efforts, and may even inadvertently sabotage them. These people will appear to be *resistant to change*.

### **Harm Avoidance**

Harm avoidance is a genetic predisposition to worry about what may happen, and this worry can take different forms. According to Hamer and Copeland, "Harm avoidance is a blanket trait that includes anxiety, fear, inhibition, shyness, depression, tiredness, and hostility." People with a predisposition to harm avoidance are emotionally sensitive to both punishment and criticism. They tend to see the darker side of life, focusing what can go wrong rather than what can go right. They can be seen as pessimists. Of all of the genetic traits, harm avoidance shows up in humans very early in their lives, and persists throughout life. It can be a difficult trait to overcome. What does this mean in times of change? Some people will be optimistic about what will happen to

them (low predisposition to harm avoidance), and others will be pessimistic (high predisposition to harm avoidance). And, of course, you'll have people everywhere in-between. The optimists act like *Energizer bunnies*, happy and excited about what's going to happen. The pessimists act like the world is coming to an end, or may deny that anything is happening at all, in an attempt to deal with the worry.

### **Anger**

Anger is a genetic predisposition to intense emotions and aggression. Some people are predisposed to more anger than others, but, in the end, all of us experience anger at certain times in our lives. Of all the traits, anger has the greatest effect on your thinking capability, because it decreases your ability to think clearly. Anger puts your body on "high alert, primed for action." People display anger in a variety of ways, ranging from avoidance to rage. According to Hamer and Copeland, "The question is not whether you get angry sometimes — if you didn't you wouldn't be human — but what you do with those feelings."

What is so dangerous about anger is that, at its worst, it causes your intellectual brain to shut down. When this happens, you are operating from the most primitive parts of your brain, and you behave in ways that are inappropriate for the situation. Venting anger usually fuels anger, making the situation worse. What does this mean in times of change? Uncertainty is bound to generate feelings of anger, which, if not addressed, can destroy relationships and social systems that are crucial for change efforts to be successful.

Gaining an understanding of genetics gives us information about why we act

the way we do, and what we can do to act differently and more effectively. In organizations, this knowledge is crucial, because change brings out both the best and the worst in all of us. In times of change, some genetic predispositions are more attractive than others — high predisposition to thrill-seeking, low predisposition to harm avoidance, and high disposition to effective anger management. This focus on what works well in times of change can become prejudicial to people who don't have these genetic traits. If we understand that these behaviours have roots in our genetics, we can understand that people don't resist change intentionally; they do it because it's part of their genetic makeup. Once people understand the origin of their behaviour, they can learn to make choices about which behaviours they wish to display, and work on ways to deal effectively with behaviours that are less appropriate for the situation.

"People are unique from the moment of conception; they do not begin as indistinguishable lumps of stone sculpted by life into individuals. Each of us is born into the world as someone; we spend the rest of our lives trying to find out who."

— Dean Hamer & Peter Copeland, **Living with Our Genes: Why They Matter More Than You Think** (1998)

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