



## The New Sciences and the Learning Organization Part 3A: Old Brains at Work

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“Understanding evolutionary psychology is useful to managers because it provides a new and provocative way to think about human nature; it also offers a framework for understanding why people tend to act as they do in organizational settings. Put another way, evolutionary psychology, in identifying the aspects of human behaviour that are inborn and universal, can explain familiar patterns.”

— Nigel Nicholson, *How Hardwired Is Human Behaviour?*, **Harvard Business Review**, (July-August 1998)

Evolutionary psychology focuses on the idea that we have evolved in a specific way, based on natural selection. From an evolutionary perspective, we're still hunter-gatherers, living in a world quite

different from the one from which we evolved. Evolution is exceedingly slow; it has taken millions of years for humans to evolve. Even though we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, surrounded by incredible technological progress, we still act as if we were the hunter-gatherers living on the Savannah Plain of 30,000 years ago. We may be experiencing the fastest technological progress ever known to humankind, but we are doing this with brains that evolved under very different conditions — conditions that did not include living in large cities and working in large organizations.

In the last *InfoMine*, we talked about genes. When we talk about genes, we're talking at the level of the individual. When we talk about evolutionary psychology, we're talking about patterns of behaviours for groups. These patterns are universal as well; they can be found in all human groups in all human systems throughout the world. For example, a smile is universal; it appears in all people, in all cultures, including babies who are born blind. It is inborn or innate. Humans are *hardwired* to smile — we are born with a *smiling gene*. What's even more astonishing is that a smile means the same thing in all cultures. Whether you smile in China, India, or Canada, the people who receive your smile recognize that symbol as friendly and non-threatening. Then, they react to that symbol by smiling

back. In fact, it's hard not to smile back. Try it for yourself: try not to smile back at someone who has smiled at you. What we're really talking about here is *human nature*, and the power that human nature has over our behaviours. That's what evolutionary psychology attempts to explain — human nature.

What do evolutionary psychology, universal patterns, and human nature have to do with organizations? From an evolutionary perspective, we're not designed to live in large cities and work in large organizations. We're designed to live and work in small, connected communities in which we know everybody by name and reputation. This creates a level of stability, and we're hardwired to work best in this kind of environment. And this is precisely the type of environment that most people don't encounter in organizations.

No wonder that, today, managers in organizations have one overwhelming issue: how to help themselves and their people to manage change in destabilized environments. Although most people in organizations know that change is a constant, this knowledge doesn't help them to deal with it well. Even with the best of intentions, managers often encounter resistance to change, despite the necessity for people and work to change. If managers don't know why people resist change, they may be inclined to believe that these *resistors* are acting in an irrational or malicious

manner. In fact, resistance to change, which is really *resistance to loss*, is innate. Humans are hardwired to resist losing control over their environments. This shows up as increased complaints, dissatisfaction, stress-related illnesses (e.g., depression), anxiety, and a lack of motivation.

For example, let's say that Manager X wants to increase the collaborative nature of her team, because she believes that it will increase productivity. Currently, the team works in individual offices with closed doors. Manager X's solution is to remove physical barriers, such as walls and doors. She decides that the offices will be dismantled, and new open spaces will be created for the team to work in. When Manager X announces this to the team, she encounters a revolt from most of the team members. Is this resistance to change? According to evolutionary psychology, the short answer is no. The long answer is that humans resist losing what they know, and are reluctant to buy into a future that they don't know. If Manager X knows this, she will understand the reason for the behaviour, and will deal with it in an effective way. She can work with the team, helping them to understand why collaboration will actually benefit the team in its work, and invite the team's suggestions for building collaboration. These solutions may not involve removing physical barriers such as doors and walls. The key is that the team has some *control* in informing the solution. When the team feels *control*, the team might be more willing to change. Presto — resistance to change is no longer an issue.

However, if Manager X doesn't understand why the team is behaving in a resistant manner, she may punish the team, and even force the team to comply. This sends the revolt underground, connecting to other hardwired behaviours: gossip and rumour, all built on the fear and anger that is being suppressed by the manager's actions.

If humans are hardwired to resist loss, why do some people thrive in ambiguous and changing conditions? These people don't seem to have the same hardwiring — but they do. What they also have is something working in their favour. Some of this ability could be genetically based, such as the thrill-seeking gene (see *InfoMine*, Vol. 7, No. 1). However, in most cases this ability is learned. In their past experiences, these people encountered ambiguous and changing conditions that tested their resistance to loss. They tried strategies that produced positive results. Where they got the strategies is irrelevant. The key here is their ability to understand how they learn, and to transfer the knowledge and strategies they learned in the past to new and seemingly different conditions.

You have examples of these people all around you. What do they look like? They look like they're open to change and what it might bring. These people have learned that being open to change actually produces positive results. It's not that these people aren't afraid of the future; it's what they do with their fears. They divert the energy from their fears to dealing with the fears head-on, instead of giving in to them. For example, this type of person might say, "Yes, I'm scared, but that's not a good enough reason to stop here." Here, fear does

not justify the lack of action. Fear is one piece of evidence to be considered, not the whole story. By contrast, a person who does not deal well with his or her fears might say, "Yes, I'm scared, and there's no point in trying." In this case, fear justifies the lack of action, and is the whole story.

What do you do with your fears when you encounter a changing situation? We believe that if you understand what drives you, then you can make better choices about the strategies you want to use. After all, you're making choices all the time. The question is: Are they choices that will produce the results you desire? Knowing what makes you do the things you do allows you to optimize your choices, thus increasing your ability to deal with changing situations. That's why evolutionary psychology is so helpful.

"Effective managers need to be adept at the very difficult task of framing challenges in a way that neither threatens nor tranquilizes employees."

— Nigel Nicholson, *How Hardwired Is Human Behaviour?*, **Harvard Business Review**, (July-August 1998)

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