

The Genius of Instinct: Tools for Thriving Now and In the Future!

A March 03, 2010 *Management Forum Series* presentation by

Hendrie Weisinger

Synopsis by Rod Cox

“Adaptive problems crop up again and again during the evolutionary history of a species. Their solutions affect the reproduction-perpetuation of an individual or an organization. Solving adaptive problems leads to results that are in the best interest of both.”

Hendrie Weisinger has spent three decades helping individuals and organizations enhance their personal and work effectiveness through innovative applications of clinical, social, and organizational psychology. His most recent work is in the field to evolutionary psychology – the new science of the mind. This has provided *“revolutionary and startling new thoughts and strategies for handling everyday dilemmas that we encounter at work and at home.”*

Weisinger defines the function of a leader: 1) to guard the welfare of the group; 2) to keep harmony in the group by using conflict resolution skills to make people successful; 3) to give direction; and 4) to perpetuate the group and make sure it has a future. *“Whether the group is a family, a country, a social group or a business, the measure of a leader, then, is how well he/she solves adaptive functions:”*

1. *How do I build an environment that empowers me? (Shelter Seeking)*
2. *How do I protect my vulnerabilities? (Care Soliciting)*
3. *How do I develop and support those around me? (Care Giving)*
4. *How do I entice others to desire me and work with me? (Beauty)*
5. *How do I develop fairer, more productive relationships? (Cooperation)*
6. *How do I stay ahead of the pack? (Curiosity)*

In this thought-provoking presentation, Hendrie Weisinger examines the business side of the push-pull relationship between our instincts and our ability to adapt.

Dr. Hendrie Weisinger, a repeat *Management Forum Series* presenter (1997 *Emotional Intelligence at Work*) is a popular and highly regarded executive education professor at NYU, MIT, Penn State, University of Washington, Cornell, and Wharton in addition to his consulting work with organizations such as AT&T, Merck, Nintendo, General Electric, Medtronic, KMPG, Estee Lauder, and Nabisco. He is the author of seven books including *Emotional Intelligence at Work* (considered to be the best book on applying emotional intelligence in a business context), The New York Times bestseller, *Nobody’s Perfect*, and his most recent book, *The Genius of Instinct: Reclaim Mother Nature’s Tools for Enhancing our Health, Happiness, Family and Work*.

Weisinger is a fascinating and ground-breaking thinker, not known for shying away from controversial insights and approaches. This synopsis includes concepts and quotes from his Portland, Oregon *Management Forum Series* presentation, from his *Genius of Instinct* book, and from attendee comments and observations.

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“Giving and taking criticism, motivating oneself and others, resolving conflict, managing emotions, and responding effectively to the feelings and emotions of others are all emotional intelligence skills. These have relevance to business leadership, of course. But they also relate to kids, marriages, careers, and all other facets of life.”

Weisinger began by asking attendees to consider leadership in families, businesses and other groups. *“What, exactly, is leadership?”* Their responses:

- a demonstration of competence that others respect
- giving people opportunity to grow
- not micromanaging
- art of influencing people to action
- recognizing potential in others
- someone who people choose to follow
- having vision, being able to communicate effectively
- providing inspiration to others

“Insightful and appropriate. So who invented leadership?” Without waiting for a reply, he answered his own question: *“It was Mother Nature. Mother Nature allows the fittest to thrive, and the very fittest to lead. Those who instinctively ‘do the right thing’ thrive; those who don’t die off. This is basic evolutionary psychology, and the perspective has broad application.”*

We often hear that man is ruled by reason, and animals are ruled by instinct. The truth is exactly the opposite. It’s a question of surviving or thriving. Reason helps us survive; instinct helps us thrive. Why are some marriages more successful than others? It has more to do with instinct than reason. Reason – using logic to work through the stresses of marriage – may get you in trouble. At best, it promotes survival.”

Studies repeatedly show that humans have more instincts than animals, and that instincts were absolutely necessary for thriving 25 thousand years ago. *“They still are. In that pre-historic age, living was not easy. The blood lines that thrived did so through natural selection. Their instinctive features gave them a survival edge. For example, speed was essential. Fast runners thrived. Those who ran not quite as fast were eaten by predators. So running fast – physical prowess – became an important element in mating. In the sexual selection process, fast runners were instinctively more desirable than slow runners. And if a person couldn’t mate, his/her blood line died off.”*

Weisinger argues that the common notion of human’s, at birth, being “blank slates” is false. *“The brain is filled with tools called instincts. Thousands of them. Our instinct is to survive and thrive. But in fact, most companies, most marriages, are surviving, not thriving.”*

Why do some thrive and some survive? *“In a great number of cases, they suffer from instinctual disconnection; i.e., distancing themselves from their instincts. For example, man is inherently trustworthy, not deceptive. He is hardwired (i.e. brain motivated) to be successful. And yet many ignore their hard-wiring to become deceptive and unsuccessful, losing touch with their human nature. They’re no longer psychologically green.”*

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Adaptive problems crop up again and again in the evolution of a specie. This is Mother Nature’s way of moving forward. Those that thrive find an environment in which survival is ‘natural’, and where instincts are the basis of solving problems. This permits continuation of the organization. *“If you can’t retain talent, you lose the existence of the tribe. So key to leadership ability is making your business thrive, and knowing how to make people grow. Every organization has to develop its future. If you are not using natural tools of success, you can’t perform and perfect the function of leadership, then your team/company isn’t thriving.”*

1. Shelter Seek . . . so you can create your home

“Getting yourself into an empowering environment is the foundation for enhancing your life, according to Mother Nature. Thousands of studies show the adverse effects that result when an animal or human is in a negative environment.”

Weisinger notes that in most businesses, the individuals, leaders, and teams are closer to surviving than thriving. *“For them, just getting by is as good as it gets.”* Sadly, they often stay in non-flourishing environments because of “extenuating circumstances” or “lack of options” or “the kids.” *“Understanding your evolutionary heritage provides another reason that explains why people tend to be disconnected from the shelter seeking instincts and, thus, remain in anemic settings.”*

The biggest barrier is that we are hardwired to be loss averse. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors survived in part because they held on to things, such as food and water. *“Losing them would spell disaster, so people who held on to things gave themselves an advantage for survival. In doing so, they became more and more loss averse. Thousands of years later, you have it in you to be loss averse. It is hard for all of us to let things go even if it is a bad relationship or an unfulfilling job. We tend to cling because we are loss averse.”*

Shelter seeking allows you to move beyond a self-preservation survival mode by helping you to either find a more empowering environment, or to adjust to the one that surround you. Most people ignore the first. This is unfortunate because this instinctual genius – seeking a better environment – is very powerful.

This is not to say that adapting/adjusting is a poor technique. It isn’t. But it is overused and it causes us to stay when we should flee.”

A recurring concept in our evolutionary heritage is interaction. This means that we respond to our environment by adapting; i.e., either by changing ourselves, or by changing the dynamics of the environment. Because we are hard-wired to be loss-averse, *“unless our interaction with the environment is really bad, most likely, we are not going to leave.”* Using our most basic instinct – self-preservation – we are likely to lower our expectations, or emotionally insulate ourselves. These behaviors are animal-like, and while they do help us survive, they keep us in an environment that prevents us from thriving. As Weisinger emphasized, *“Humans are not meant to survive like animals; they are meant to thrive.”*

Weisinger chides himself for having focused in his early years as a practicing psychologist on teaching people how to adapt, rather than how to thrive. *“Therapy doesn’t solve a bad match. An ugly house remains an ugly house.”* He notes that many of his patients might have been better served by leaving a relationship rather than learning how to adapt to it.

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“When is it time to shelter seek? When your emotions tell you to. We are hard-wired to get ourselves into an environment (anything that is external to us) that helps us grow. The key is finding the right environment. This includes getting the right job. What does it provide you? What are the physical and emotional nutrients? Is it a relationship that helps you grow both personally and in the job? Evolutionary sciences tell us that the function of an emotion is to communicate information. Strategic evolutionary psychology tells us to leverage this function by recognizing and responding to the message of the emotion.”

The evolutionary primary function of emotions is to help us compensate. This concept applies to all aspects of life. Thus, *“we use anger as a way to stop managing our environment. We use disgust as a survival adaptation to protect ourselves from situations that are bad for physical and mental health. We use fear as a gauge to determine whether or not to stay in a situation.”*

How do we tell of an environment or relationship is good or bad? As Weisinger puts it:

“If you are experiencing distress, you’re in a bad environment.”

Again, most people would rather be distressed than change their environment so they adapt – but they don’t thrive. *“If you are distressed, it’s time to consider getting out, especially if the distress is chronic. When distress becomes dominant, you’re ignoring Mother Nature’s advice.”* Said another way, interest pulls us together, lack of interest pushes us away. *“You can stay in a bad environment by managing your emotions, but you’ll assuredly be surviving, not thriving.”*

Leadership challenge:

- **Seek employees that are nurtured by your working environment.**
- **Identify what the staff needs to grow, focusing on interests, not competencies. You get the best results when each staff person follows his/her interests.**
- **Seek a shelter (an organization, a type of work) that is instinctively congruent with who you are, and that nurtures you emotionally.**

2. Care-Solicit . . . so you can protect your vulnerabilities

“I need your help.” Four simple words, so hard to say.

What makes it so difficult in a work environment, if you don’t know something, to ask for help from a colleague or client? *“Asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness. We’re afraid of being seen as needy. In society and in business, the mantra is to function autonomously. But all of us are needy, and we are hard-wired to ask for help. From their earliest moments, babies cry to ask for help. Wild animals work in collaborative packs without which each of them might starve. In fact, every creature knows how to solicit others, how to ask for help. And yet we tend to ignore it.”*

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Vulnerabilities are important; they tell us when we are threatened. That’s why being independent automaton’s does not serve us well. High-functioning people ask and thrive. They call upon others, and allow themselves to feel vulnerable. *“The goal is to befriend your feelings. With your partners, be vulnerable to saying ‘this is how I feel and here’s where we’re at risk.’”*

But most people can’t do that. Most people (most leaders) are unwilling to allow vulnerability. But as Weisinger reminds us, *“The risk is low and the potential rewards are high. Being willing to ask for help will help you solve everyday problems as well as business problems. This is foolproof because we are hardwired to respond to requests for help.”* Let’s take for example, weight loss plans. Many can’t lose weight independently because they are not hardwired to do it on their own. Most people benefit by getting a support system in place at work, at home, and when trying to lose weight. Therefore, building a trust network is essential. For many – perhaps you – a structured network might help:

Rank 1-10	Name of Potential Helper	Access- ability 1-10	Topics okay to talk about

“So even though it’s against the American ideal, your life will be better as you become comfortable asking people for help. Can you imagine a CEO hiding his/her vulnerability from the Board? Think of vulnerability as your friend. Vulnerability gets you to the doctor. As soon as you feel at risk, that’s the cue to get help from others. This always works because it triggers the instinctive hardwiring of others to be care deliverers.”

Leadership challenge:

- **Teach your staff to ask for help and reward those who do.**
- **Develop the habit of asking for help yourself.**

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3. Care-Give . . . so you can develop the future

“Care giving is a primary way to develop the future. In hunting parties and other community tasks, clan leaders saw that some members needed more help than others. Rather than ignore them and let them fall behind, the leaders taught them so they could be successful and pull their weight.

“Managers who are attentive and caring toward their team reap many benefits: better relationships, a motivated and productive staff, retention of talented employees, strong bottom line, and greater career success.” (The Genius of Instinct)

Weisinger points out that mentoring, training and constructive evaluations are essential. Is the training effective? That is, does it actually benefit the staff? Is it meaningful? Does it enhance their lives? Is it okay for staff members to talk about their lives outside work? *“Bringing personal issues to work is hardwired into us because our ancestors found it was a way to get help.”* Is work a safe environment emotionally as well as physically?

Leadership challenge:

- **Let your staff know that you are aware of their challenges and that you want to help them.**
- **Give constructive criticism and promote emotional intelligence, life balance, and personal and professional development.**
- **Make time to help your staff deal with personal issues.**

4. Beautify . . . so you can pull people toward you

“Mother Nature has hard-wired each of us for beauty. Even plants are hard-wired the same way. A peach, for instance, propagates itself by being so beautiful and smelling so great that it invites animals to eat it and distribute its seeds.

In business, we might use the word ‘personal best’ instead of ‘beauty’ but the process is the same. In an interview, the goal is to make yourself more desirable than any other candidate. In cut-backs, the goal is to make yourself more indispensable and likeable than anyone else.”

Attractiveness is embedded on an instinctive biological level. Attractive people are more likely to be chosen as mates and as business partners. That’s how Mother Nature has set things up. *“Beauty is not necessarily superficial. There is an evolutionary connection between beauty and the instinct to survive. In Northern European society, blonde hair is a sexual cue of youth and fertility. Hip size is an indicator of child bearing ease, and breast size is an indicator of baby feeding ability.”* Again, the instinct is to preserve the specie.

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Every human culture has a base of long-term relationships that includes keeping one’s self attractive to a mate or potential mate. But not everyone is a movie star. Are we doomed? *“No. Each of us can develop our personal best. When you’re tempted to run to the grocery store Saturday afternoon without showering and brushing your hair, ask yourself: If I bump into a client or business acquaintance, would I like the way I’m perceived?”* In an interesting study, people consistently gave a bum in a business suit more credibility than they gave a Harvard economist in rags. *“Take care of yourself!”*

From an evolutionary point of view, a key leadership essential is to make both yourself and your company likeable. This includes being supportive, and it ties into the evolutionary function of dealing successfully with adversity, of being dependable, of coming through.

In many organizations, the learned expectation is exactly the reverse. It’s often a battlefield built around eye-for-eye, and tit-for-tat, both of which are counter to the best interests of the organization and the people. How to get out of tit-for-tat? *“Teach tit-tit-tit for tat. Teach ‘nice guys finish first, not last.’ Teach likeability.”*

One of the most important leadership skills is a good sense of humor. It puts people in a good mood. It develops hope and optimism. It pulls people toward you. Further, *“People who are liked are more likely to be kept during down-sizing.”* There’s nothing artificial about this. From a Mother Nature point-of-view, laughter creates hormones that increase productivity. Therefore, a good leader would do well to develop this skill, perhaps just by reaching out to others to tell a joke, or by laughing at idiosyncrasies – including his own – instead of railing at them.

Leadership challenge:

- **Encourage “personal best” in yourself and your staff**
- **Develop the skill to create laughter and goodwill**
- **Develop the ability to be amicable, outreaching, and not take offense.**

5. Cooperate . . . so you can get people working together

“The very nature of the world is cooperative, and everything we do requires cooperation. Because no one can run solo, we instinctively interact with other people to achieve our goals. But countering this is our adoration of The Hardy Individualist Who Leaps Tall Buildings in a Single Bound . . . by himself, of course.

Leaders would do well to encourage interdepartmental mingling on a social level. Knowing the other person promotes cooperation; we won’t willingly give up something unless we know the other person, so get to know people personally. Share. Self-disclosure is your friend.”

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Ostensibly, siblings should have the closest relationship, but often the relationship is competitive instead of cooperative. Parents often exploit this by *“treating every child the same.”* They shouldn’t. Circumstances dictate that some children (and some staff members) require more attention than others. Even within animal packs with strong identity, not every member holds the same position or responsibility. Mother Nature shows us that adversity is more easily and successfully tackled in groups that are diverse yet cooperative.

Some common cooperative threads:

- Interaction. We can’t cooperate without interaction
- Reciprocity means doing things for others, but we actually do it for ourselves. It makes us feel better about ourselves and it obligates the other person for future payback.
- Stimulate the division of labor. Everything in our body is there for a specific reason, yet all parts need to work together. When one organ is down, it sends messages to other organs to pitch in. It works the same in business. Good leaders learn to leverage this dependency by having everyone let other people know what they need to be successful. “I can’t do my job unless you do yours.” This is the essence of co-operation.
- Identity. Studies show that when people are asked about their professional identity, and the organization is mentioned first, the company has a positive identity. The reverse is also true. Good leaders use positive identity to work for them instead of against them.
- Playing fair keeps people in the game. Playing unfair drives them away and makes them ignore the rules. Good leaders may not treat people the same (see above) but they treat them fair procedurally. Does everyone have a say? Are they being listened to?

Leadership challenge:

- **Encourage cooperation by being cooperative yourself.**
- **Hold both yourself and your staff accountable for playing fair.**

6. Curious . . . so you can stay ahead of the pack

“Why has the U.S. lost its edge? A lot of it has to do with a lack of curiosity. Today in the U.S., most parents and businesses kill curiosity. Instead of promoting an interest in new things, if the father likes golf, the kid is expected to like golf. Parents would do well to respond to their kids interests instead of their grades.”

The Mother Nature function of curiosity is to seek new ways to successfully interact with the environment. Consider the role of wheat and corn and rice in feeding the world’s hunger. Each of these came into the food chain via curiosity. Balance, arousal, and stimulus are also fundamental laws of nature’s curiosity. In modern times, we see them as complexities, congruencies, uncertainty and anxiety. When we hear a noise in the night, we instinctively sense imbalance, and we instinctively seek ways to regain balance.

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A good leader can exploit this. Weisinger tells of a recent airplane trip where his assigned seatmate regaled him with a long story about how he had handled a sticky problem. Knowing Weisinger is a psychologist, he then asked, *“What do you think?”* Weisinger sat silent for a long moment. *“Well, that’s one way of handling it,”* he said, creating a conversational imbalance. Quite a few minutes later, he added: *“What’s another way to handle it?”*, and found his seatmate coming up with a much more successful approach.

Leadership challenge:

- **Create pleasurable imbalances so that people will want to explore**
- **Alpha up. Not everyone is a leader,**
- **Respond with “How would you handle it” rather than “This is what you need to do.”**

Wrap up

“Leadership is not so much vision and inspiration as it is creating a powerful environment for the people who report to you. It’s about developing others and about accelerating learning. You just have to use the genius of your instincts.”