



Driven

How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices

by Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria
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Take-Aways

- Scientists now believe that many behaviors are genetically influenced.
- Our brains are hardwired with four drives: to acquire, bond, learn and defend.
- The drives affect us all. For example, obesity might stem from the drive to acquire.
- The drive to acquire is insatiable. It will never be satisfied; you will never acquire enough.
- Religion is one result of the human drive to learn.
- The drives to bond and to acquire are not interchangeable. One cannot buy affection or love.
- Our ability to bond with organizations is a key component of social evolution.
- Companies' fates depend on leadership that carefully balances the four innate drives.
- The success of your company may depend on how well you counterbalance the drive to acquire with the drive to bond with others.
- Capitalize on the drive to learn by properly training individuals in your organization.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	8	10	8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract you will learn: 1) How four basic drives influence all human behavior, both individual and organizational; 2) The critical impact of the drive to acquire, the drive to bond, the drive to learn and the drive to defend, and 3) Why and how leaders must harness these four drives to fulfill collective corporate goals.

Recommendation

Leave it to two Harvard business professors — Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria — to break every rule of conventional academic etiquette. Their transgression? Applying their knowledge of companies and individuals to present a unified explanation of human behavior, thereby encroaching on the academic fiefdoms of evolutionary biology, psychology and anthropology, just to name a few. They use the four basic human drives that influence behavior to offer deep insights into corporate and individual actions. *getAbstract.com* strongly recommends this ambitious, far-ranging book to management students, executives searching for understanding and for anyone who delights in tweaking the collective nose of academia.

Abstract

The Four-Drive Theory

Imagine your organization as a great petri dish, where all the discordant strains of human nature are allowed to play out, revealing eternal scientific truths about each member of your company. Like it or not, that's essentially the circumstance that you face every day — and the question then becomes, do you really understand what drives your people to do what they do? Or are you just guessing? The fact is that four basic drives are hardwired into the human organism. You couldn't escape them if you tried. Your success, and the success of your colleagues, depends on how well you balance those four drives, which are:

1. The drive to acquire and control objects in order to improve your status relative to others.
2. The drive to bond with other people in long-term commitments of mutual caring.
3. The drive to learn and understand the world around us.
4. The drive to defend yourself, your loved ones, your values and your resources from harm.

Why does everyone have these four innate drives, these endowed capabilities or tendencies that define human behavior? Genetics holds the answer.

In The Beginning

The modern human gene pool is so small that it makes the concept of different races scientifically meaningless. All modern Homo Sapiens descended from a very small group of perhaps 4,000 to 10,000 people. Some 70,000 to 100,000 years ago, this group of hunter-gatherers diverged from other hominids, left Africa and began to spread its civilization globally. Biologists agree that the same evolutionary process that shaped the other human organs also shaped the human brain, the most complex system ever created by evolution. Strong evidence also indicates that human language and symbolic structure are also hardwired.

Modern human brains contain a hundred billion neurons, and each neuron has up to 1,000 synapses that connect with other neurons. The electrochemical impulses that

“Human brains seem to be built in a way that makes it difficult to displace prior ideas. When others try, it triggers the drive to defend current beliefs more often than the drive to learn new ones.”

“Although human behavior is certainly greatly influenced by culture, our four drives are universal. Their roots lie in humanity's common evolutionary heritage.”

“Any firm that establishes social contracts that provide all participants with good opportunities to fulfill their drives will, in all likelihood, grow to dominate its industry.”

“Once a plausible ideology becomes established in the minds of a community of people, it is very difficult to dislodge.”

“For billions of years evolution was a blind, mindless, trial-and-error process. Now, in the last few steps toward evolving humans, it was being guided by a purposive mind. Hom- inids were, in effect, pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.”

convey information from one cell to the next fire 40 times per second. About 3,200 genes influence the brain’s structure and response — half again as many as affect any other organ in the human body. Genes endow the human brain with a set of hardwired skills. They are:

- Understanding of how objects can be manipulated.
- Intuitive understanding of how plants and animals work on a basic level.
- Basic concepts of quantity and numbers and orientation concepts, like mapping.
- Intuitive understanding of the best territory to support human life.
- Danger signals and things to look out for, including snakes and heights.
- What foods are likely to be good to eat.
- The ability to monitor your own health and well being.
- Understanding of disease and how to avoid contamination.
- Human intuition, the ability to predict others’ responses.
- Recollection of the identities of others and awareness of yourself as a separate person.
- Kinship, an intuitive ability to recognize kinship relationships.
- Mating, a built in preference for certain types of potential mates.

The Drive to Acquire

“I own, therefore I am” seems to be many peoples’ motto today, but the drive to acquire extends far beyond the mere possession of physical objects. Part of what you “own” is your status. Anyone who works in a bureaucracy knows that people will defend their own turf. Consider for example the most elemental human need — hunger. As with the people of other nations, Americans spend billions of dollars on often-futile fad diets and weight-loss programs. While such behavior may seem irrational, it is not, if you view it through the process of evolution. During the era when modern humans evolved, the Pleistocene period, the biggest threat was not heart disease but starvation.

Individuals with a taste for calorie rich foods would presumably have a better chance of survival, and this survival characteristic is more likely to be passed to their children. Now, you might imagine that a superior trait would be cognitive flexibility, that is, the ability to choose to gorge oneself in circumstances of scarcity and, yet, consume scanty portions when food is in abundance. However, a powerful drive that manifests itself in conscious emotions focuses behavior and attention in a precognitive way that does not require cogitation. Your best chance of survival might be to gulp down the big meal first, and worry later about why you sated yourself. On a business level, the drive for immediate acquisition might help explain the short-term thinking predominant among most middle managers. For example, when it comes to organizational change, managers are more inclined to take short-term steps such as downsizing, rather than longer-term adaptive measures such as changing corporate culture.

The unhappy reality is that for most people, the drive to acquire is insatiable. Successful acquisition may quell one’s passion to acquire for a brief period, but the urge almost always returns full-force. To the extent that this drive dominates the other human drives, most people will probably never be completely satisfied. Moreover, the drive to acquire appears to be relative. When test subjects are asked to choose between earning \$90,000 a year in a world where their neighbors earn \$100,000; or \$110,000 in a neighborhood where everyone is pulling down \$200,000, they are more likely to choose the former than the latter. Two of the most powerful, negative, human passions stem from acquisitiveness: ambition and envy.

“Organizations as well as individuals easily drift into an overemphasis on one drive. This leads in time to the frustration of all drives.”

“In the last analysis, the story behind the ups and downs of organizational life is one of leadership.”

“In relation to the drive to defend, work groups must be provided with the means to fend off external attacks.”

The Urge To Merge

Another powerful drive that motivates us, however, is the drive to bond with others. All humans share a powerful, innate drive to bond with others. People need to build relationships. Theory says that those without a strong urge to bond have less chance of passing down their genes. Men who fail to demonstrate these bonds are less likely to be chosen as good mates.

Of course, the drive to acquire does not assure success in bonding, because bonding is essentially different from acquiring. Bonding can only be fulfilled with another person acting in a harmonious or cooperative way. Threats of violence or intimidation will not facilitate bonding. The bond must be mutual and involve some commitment. Every human relationship involves a mix of acquisitive (or competitive) and bonding (or cooperative) elements. Naturally, these two drives sometimes conflict, but other times they can be complementary, such as on a sports team. Marriage ceremonies, the most obvious example of human bonding, take place, in some form, in all cultures as a public declaration of a lasting commitment.

One important application of the urge to bond is people’s inherent tendency to bond with the organizations for which they work. Without this, employers would have no reason to believe that employees would do more work than they absolutely had to do to keep their jobs.

The Drive to Learn

Strong evidence indicates that the human drive to learn is also genetically inspired. The universality of religion as a way to explain the world is a strong piece of supporting evidence. Art, also, could be viewed as part of the human drive to understand a greater reality. Darwin himself observed, “The belief in unseen or spiritual agencies... seems to be universal. Nor is it difficult to comprehend how it arose. As soon as the important faculties of the imagination, wonder and curiosity, together with some power of reasoning, had become partially developed, man would naturally crave to understand what was passing around him, and would have vaguely speculated on his own existence.”

Learning can occur on an organizational as well as an individual level, so one of the most important functions of any organization is constructively focusing the drive to learn. As new members join an organization, they are socialized and indoctrinated with the organization’s collective knowledge, including how its members contribute to its pool of knowledge. This process can have a critical impact on the ongoing success of any organization. As science discovers more about how to facilitate learning, the workplace is likely to be affected. Industrial theorists have long studied the importance of creating working conditions conducive to satisfying the intrinsic human desire to learn.

The Drive to Defend

The drive to defend is one of the most powerful human drives. When a loved one is threatened, your initial sensation of alarm quickly gives way to either fear or anger. Scientists now believe that the human mind is preconditioned to adopt various defensive responses based on specific threats, a skill set that can be enhanced with socialization and training.

The drive to defend is always reactive — though the other drives are arguably proactive, in that they involve searching for a desired object or condition — yet defense is often

“Human genes do not determine behavior, they actually require the exercise of free will, albeit as constrained by environmental conditions.”

“All four of the drives of our human nature at work in our everyday lives can, when in balance, help us find the right road forward.”

coordinated with other drives. The drive to acquire results in ownership of property that must be defended. The drive to bond results in relationships that, if threatened, stimulate the drive to defend. The drive to learn can result in a willingness to defend threatened values or beliefs. Because you may bond with your organization, your drive to defend can swing into action if you perceive that your organization or its values are under attack.

Applied Dynamics of the Four Drives

The four drives apply to modern business and corporate life. For example, consider the drive to defend. Often departments or task forces take on a life of their own, defending themselves from outside threats. Companies defend themselves against competition. Corporations accumulate war chests of reserve funds to fight hostile takeovers. Anyone who ever cheered at a football game understands it as a symbolic battle to defend a city’s honor.

The four-drive theory implies that every employee in an organization, from the CEO to a temporary intern, brings a predictable set of responses to work. Thus, an organization’s leaders need to align employees’ innate drives to facilitate the achievement of collective goals. This calls for a delicate balancing of the drive to form bonds with the drive to acquire. The goal is to develop the constructive tension of respectful competition among all the groups involved. Yet, organizational changes and reforms must always be undertaken with careful consideration of the four basic drives that motivate each employee.

Current literature thus emphasizes two tasks incumbent upon corporate leaders. First, leaders can facilitate the acquisitive drives of others. Second, leaders can facilitate their employees’ bonding needs. Four-drive theory leaders must also facilitate learning and defensive drives. Some leaders use the drive to defend to motivate employees to work, seeking to motivate people with threats and intimidation. While this may work, it only elicits minimal rote compliance. Leaders must rise to the challenge of understanding how to balance the drives of individuals within an organization to maximize its effectiveness. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, “Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good.”

About The Author

Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria teach at Harvard Business School, where Lawrence completed his master’s and doctorate. His research has been published in some 24 books and articles. His work focuses on the human aspects of organization design, organization change and human management. Nohria received his Ph.D., from the Sloan School of Management at M.I.T., and his bachelor’s from the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay. The seven books he has co-authored or edited include the award-winning *The Differentiated Network*. He has written more than 75 professional articles.

Buzz-Words

Drive to acquire / Drive to bond / Drive to defend / Drive to learn / Four-drive theory