Survive + Thrive

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I have used the undefined term "human nature" for decades now to explain why the sorts of generalizations I make about organizations and managers seem applicable anywhere: in different countries, industries, corporate cultures. That is, the patterns I see which help explain superior or inferior organizational performance, leadership, and management cut across settings because – at some level – people are people. But until recently I have not tried to clarify what this mysterious human nature is, or rather the part of humanness that is related to the topics I care about: superior performance in general and, more specifically, leading complex change.

With the help of inspiration from some of my colleagues (Russell Raath and others at Kotter, Professor Richard Boyatzis from Case Western Reserve University), I have been refining observations I have made over the years about people-as-people. I have been testing my conclusions with some straightforward Darwinian thinking and with help from researchers in brain science. What I have found is that a simple concept of one part of "brain/body hardwiring" appears to have rather profound implications for those trying to run organizations today in an increasingly fast moving world. And the string of CEOs and other executives I have shared this material with seem to agree.

Let me explain.

THE SURVIVE CHANNEL

When something akin to modern humans emerged on Earth 100,000 or 200,000 years ago, they were far from being the biggest, fastest, or in any way most ferocious creatures around. Yet despite predators, famine, poisonous plants, ice ages, and more, they managed to survive – in part because they developed some sort of very powerful mechanism to help them spot threats and act very quickly to eliminate dangers. After many, many millennia, this mechanism seems to have become a part of our brain/body hardwiring and we carry it with us today. You might think of it as a Survive Channel (see diagram below).

The Survive Channel has what is akin to a very powerful radar that operates whenever we are awake, and quite possibly at a reduced level as we sleep (since what we hear or smell or feel does not turn off completely when we sleep). When the radar senses something it perceives as a threat, much happens very quickly. A quick check with the seat of memory reveals if we have past experiences that can disqualify this as a threat. If it's an unknown situation or our experiences reveal it to indeed be a threat, chemical signals shoot out into our bodies to increase blood flow, tighten muscles, and prepare us for "flight or fight". A variety of more or less "negative" emotions are triggered in a nanosecond: fear, anxiety, anger (directed at the source of the threat), perhaps even shame or guilt (that you have been inept enough to get yourself into this situation). These emotions are like a slap in the face. They certainly get our attention. Our minds instantaneously focus on the source of the threat. All other thoughts can literally disappear. And what is fascinating is that we don't have to tell ourselves to do any of this. It just seems to happen. That is the nature of what is often called hardwiring. While this hardwiring

evolved for detecting and responding to physical threats, the response to threats to our egos, our status or our psychological security are biologically identical.

survive channel

THREAT-SEEKING RADAR
Very powerful and sensitive "machine" programmed by genetics and life experiences.

- Sends chemicals to your muscles which make them tighten, ready to move fast in "fight/flight" mode. Heart rate increases along with blood flow.
- Triggers "negative" emotions: fear, anxiety, anger (at source of threat), shame (that you have gotten yourself into this mess).
- Your mind focuses like a laser on perceived threat. Thoughts about other issues can disappear.

Action:
- You tend to go into rapid problem-solving mode.
- With energy level spiking, you will try to climb a tree in record time or work 18-hour days to regain control, eliminate the threat, and get things back on plan.

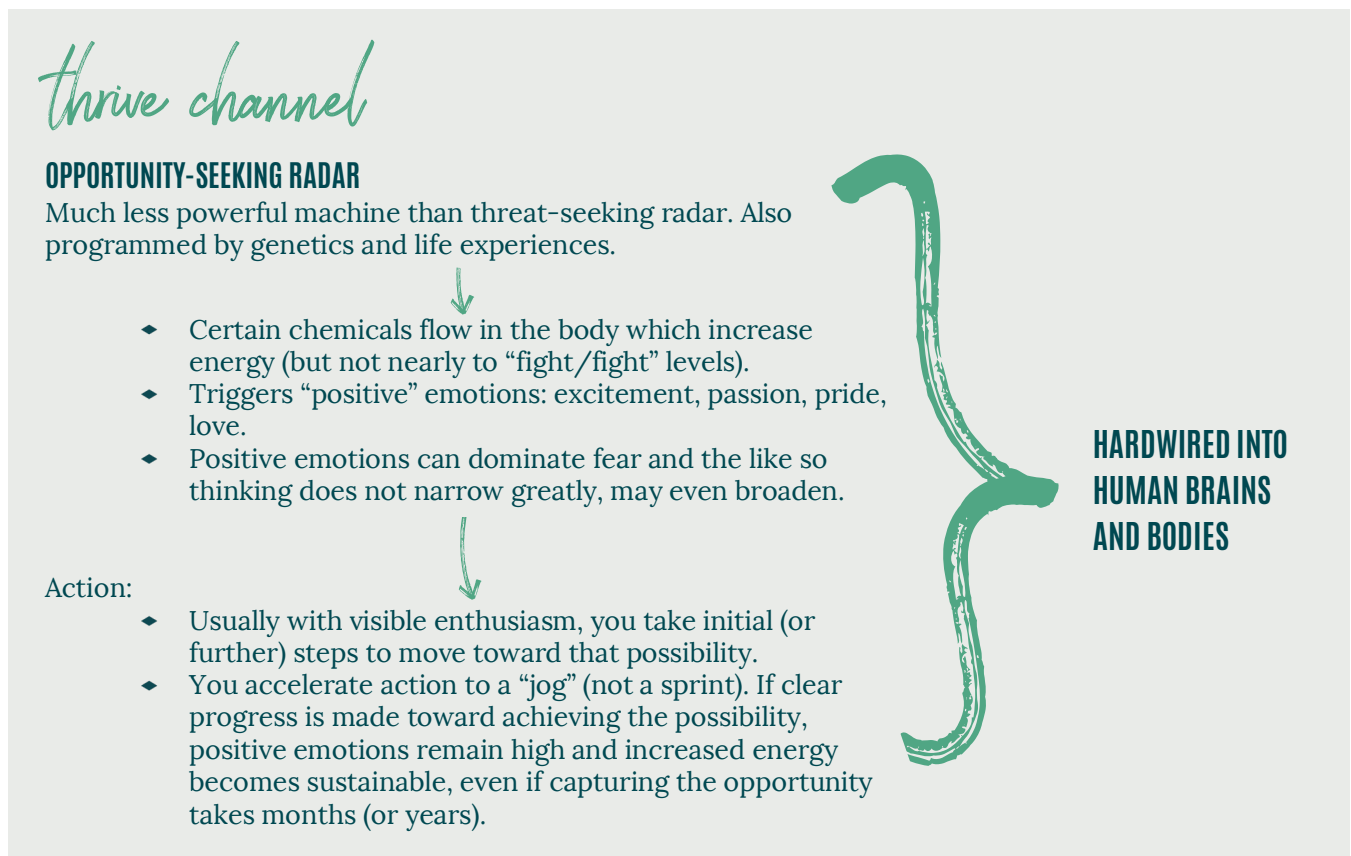### HARDWIRED INTO HUMAN BRAINS AND BODIES

When all is functioning well (it sometimes does not – more on that later), our minds go into rapid problem solving mode. The goal: to figure out how to eliminate the threat. With energy spiking, we then follow through on the first action that seems sensible whether it is to climb a tree better and faster than would be remotely possible under normal conditions, enabling us to avoid the saber toothed tiger. Or, in a more contemporary setting, to work 18-hour days to somehow correct the quality problem on manufacturing line #6 or the service problem with an important customer. We eliminate the threat, the chemicals and muscles and the like eventually go back to normal.

To repeat, this appears to be a very powerful system which has evolved over a very long period of time. It does not work perfectly always: if you cannot find a solution to the problem or are faced with repeated threats, fight and flight impulses may cancel each other leading to a freeze response – despair and demotivation. Or if your radar has never encountered some threat, you may totally miss it and seem exceptionally complacent (which, as I have written about extensively, can be common in organizations with extensive history of success and can be hugely dangerous).

But, in general, without the development of this very powerful survival hardware, we would probably not be around today.

THE THRIVE CHANNEL

While the Survive Channel has been instrumental in ensuring that we were not eliminated as a species, there is a second more intriguing channel that is involved in our desire for innovation, openness to change and opportunity seeking behavior. It has undoubtedly evolved more recently than the first. Perhaps because of its more recent development or perhaps because it's not as essential, it does not seem to be nearly as powerful (or easily activated) as the first. You might call this second mechanism the Thrive Channel.

thrive channel

OPPORTUNITY-SEEKING RADAR
Much less powerful machine than threat-seeking radar. Also programmed by genetics and life experiences.

- Certain chemicals flow in the body which increase energy (but not nearly to "fight/fight" levels).
- Triggers "positive" emotions: excitement, passion, pride, love.
- Positive emotions can dominate fear and the like so thinking does not narrow greatly, may even broaden.

Action:
- Usually with visible enthusiasm, you take initial (or further) steps to move toward that possibility.
- You accelerate action to a "jog" (not a sprint). If clear progress is made toward achieving the possibility, positive emotions remain high and increased energy becomes sustainable, even if capturing the opportunity takes months (or years).

HARDWIRED INTO HUMAN BRAINS AND BODIES

The Thrive Channel may also be thought to have a radar system, but in this case one that looks for opportunities instead of hazards. When it perceives what might be an opportunity, it too appears to trigger emotions and chemicals. However, in this second case, the emotions tend to be what we would generally call "positive" ones: excitement, pride, the joy of winning, the wonderfulness of loving, the sorts of emotions which can "win over our hearts" or lift us off the ground. The chemicals can send more blood to our muscles, but to push energy gradually up instead of producing the huge spike seen in the Survive Channel. The mind seems to broaden instead of narrowing, both because positive emotions do not create the instant and narrow focus that fear does, and because opportunities are so often less clear, forcing you to think and clarify

exactly what they are. We often seem to become more curious. Activating the Thrive channel also results in the release of chemicals (oxytocin and vasopressin) that predispose us to social engagement and result in greater trust and collaboration.

In terms of the action which seems to flow from this hardwired instinct, you typically take initial, or further, steps to capitalize on the possibility. You do this having increased your pace to a jog, so to speak, but not a sprint. If progress seems to be made toward the opportunity, positive emotions remain high. And the increased energy level becomes much more sustainable than tree-climbing bursts of activity.

Like Survive, Thrive can work in ways that do not serve us well. We know, for example, that charismatic people can trigger opportunity seeking radars in others where real opportunities do not exist. Those types of people can also be extreme positive emotion machines. Taken together, they can manipulate Thrive Channels and lead a group of people to, as we say, all run off a cliff. Additionally, an overactive Thrive can lead to extreme euphoria that stops people from thinking clearly and creatively, and thus almost always undermines the exploitation of big opportunities.

But, the Thrive Channel, although less dominant than Survive, can be a blessing for us today. When it works well, it offers a way to help us deal with some of the biggest challenges almost all of us face in an increasingly changing world—challenges that require us to adapt, invent, innovate, change, disrupt the competition, and, in general, leap into a different future.

TWO CHANNELS
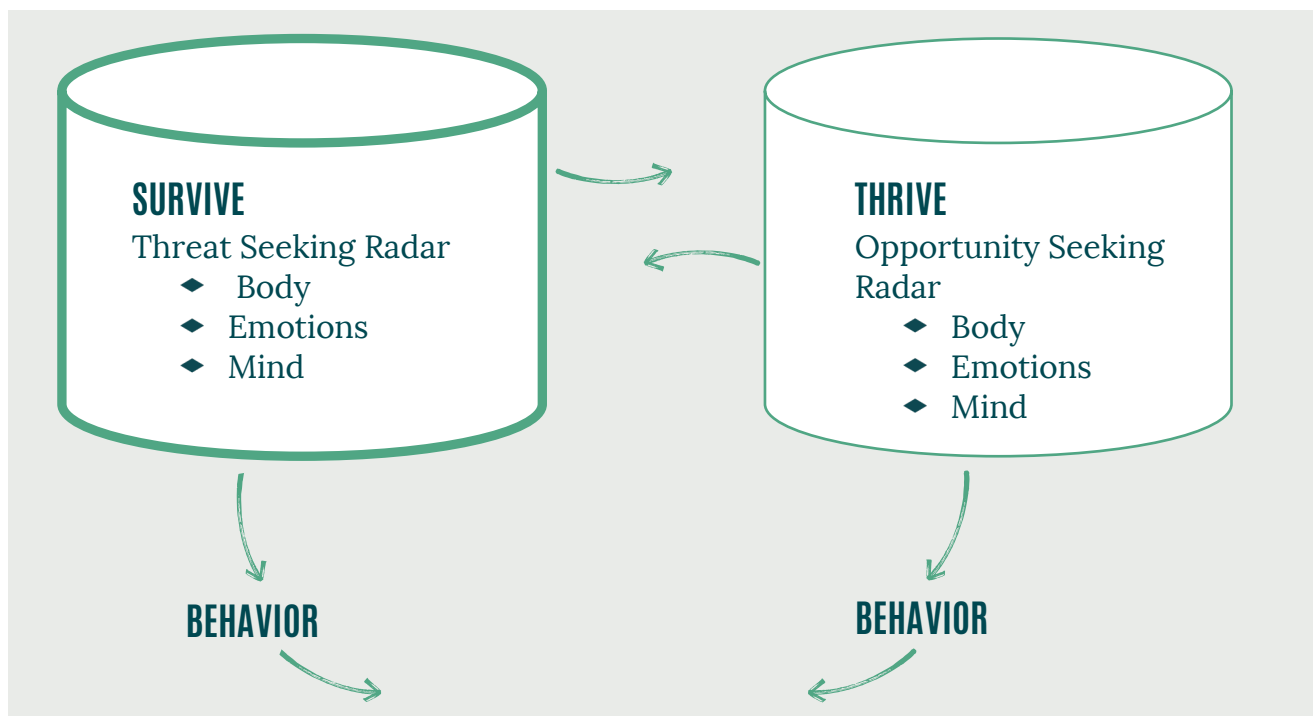
It has been my observation that people in organizations very much behave as if they have these channels. And, I think, it is not unreasonable to assume that all this is hardwired into us.

The channels are probably very dynamic in the sense that both can be operating more or less at the same time, and either effectively or not. The level of activation of each channel can swing up and down over the course of a year—the dominant channel fluctuating even within a one hour meeting as the conversation changes from what is perceived as threats to opportunities.

At any one time, both channels might be responding to multiple dangers or exciting possibilities. The total activity level can probably go from very light (little anxiety or excitement, few chemicals going out, etc.) to very heavy (a great deal of emotion, a fire hose of chemicals, and so on). And the two channels affect each other, most obviously, when a screamingly loud Survive essentially overwhelms any Thrive (much more on that later). Add up all the combinations and permutations and it can appear that we have more than a dozen channels or mechanisms like them driving our behavior. But the beauty of this perspective is that you can trace so much back to just two, which can best be thought of as working together as one system.

To repeat, the channel designed to find and deal with threats is much older and stronger than the other in the vast majority of the population. The opportunity seeking channel is not *missing*, which is very good news. But in a relative sense, Thrive is easily dominated by Survive. This fact would appear to be enormously important—and for the most part unrecognized as we try to make organizations flourish today.

History has shown us that exceptions are possible for individuals – but they are rare. Our past experiences, probably including genetic differences, shape details of the system (I.e. what the radar is tuned for, what problems the mind has seen before and already knows how to solve, the level of anxiety any specific trigger might produce). Some people, for these and maybe other reasons, seem to have much stronger Thrive Channels. Or, they are much more capable of activating their Thrive channels. These individuals see opportunities the rest of us do not. They may also mobilize others to capitalize on those opportunities. Some of these people not only think of an idea like humans flying, but then mobilize others to build airplanes, build airplane factories, build commercial airline companies, and thus change life on Earth in important ways. These leaders are central actors in stories which have at least helped drive our domination of the planet and the creation of conditions that have made life for everyone much more comfortable and interesting. These individuals have been phenomenally important to our journey – but they have been the very rare exceptions. And there is no reason to expect that will change anytime soon.

FROM HUMAN HARDWIRING TO ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

This sort of brain/body hardwiring means that people in key roles in organizations will tend to be more influenced by inputs that lead to activation of the Survive Channel than the Thrive Channel. And this will be so regardless of education, experiences, intelligence, or managerial sophistication. Yes, all of those factors may help moderate the influence on an overheating

Survive response or may help activate Thrive more easily or appropriately. But, in the final analysis, human nature is human nature.

This means, for example, that the threatening letter from a regulator (or the warning from the decision makers' own lawyers that a letter *may* come) will easily have more impact than the three major strategic initiatives designed to increase innovation. That means managerial minds are more likely to see the threats associated with trying to fight a more monopolistic culture than all the opportunities opened by a more competitive, but also a more wide open marketplace. This means the constant talk of the hazards created by the 90-day financial reporting cycle can literally overwhelm the occasional report from the disruptive innovation committee. In other words, people easily behave in ways that have been called "overly short-term oriented" not just because of seemingly ruthless financial markets or myopic MBA education or poorly structured compensation systems. They slide in that direction because of human nature shaped by many thousands of years of successfully surviving the many perils around them.

Furthermore, when you put a hundred or a thousand or a hundred thousand such people together in a business or government, these tendencies reinforce one another, and you get a group affect. With key decision makers, even first-line managers, it is sometimes most obvious: their behavior flows outward to affect the actions of others, and thus organizational behavior. A manufacturing quality defect, for example, might activate the Survive Channel in the mind of a plant manager whose anxieties, fears and the like are passed on to those below him. This may come through with the manager's threats and pleas. Or it might spread with crisp, professional sounding orders, but with an emotional undertone that others pick up on. As a result, Survive Channels in a few or perhaps hundreds of others in the manager's hierarchy are activated and you get a sort of *organizational* Survive Channel activation. This could be good: many bodies get a spike in activity, many minds focus relentlessly on the quality problem, problem solving kicks into high gear, and the quality issues are solved very quickly. Or it could be bad.

Perhaps there is no short-term fix because the problem is being systemically created by an inhibiting organizational structure, out-of- date policies, skill sets which are missing, and more. Or perhaps the staff is already feeling overwhelmed with other threats coming through rumors of layoffs, or production schedules that are difficult to meet, or a grumpy set of immediate supervisors. In this second case, the organizational Survive Channel might drive stronger and more desperate behavior which muddles thinking, diffuses action in too many directions, and thus does not solve the immediate problem. In addition, the sheer raging emotion and activity can swamp, maybe even crush, the organizational Thrive Channel and, with it, all the more strategic initiatives it has been driving.

When frenzied behavior driven by Survive is draining energy, accomplishing little, and blocking Thrive to engage, it really does seem as if management is myopically thinking only of the short term risks and mostly ignoring the long term opportunities. Or it might seem as if managers are forced to act this way because of poorly functioning financial markets. Both of these perspectives have been written about extensively in the past 30 years, and they are still regularly offered today. But what if the problem is largely due to human nature instead? If the latter were true, which I am now convinced is correct, some of the implications for action are still similar to the short-term perspective but some are very different (more on that later).

When an overwrought Survive is drowning Thrive, it might seem as if the need is simply to quiet the first and amplify the second. But this misses a fundamental point. Both channels serve a purpose. They are just different purposes. The action implication is how do we make them both operate well to serve their essential functions.

What might that mean? First, we need to make sure bosses and management systems are not inadvertently setting off the Survive radar when, in fact, there are no organizationally important problems that need to be solved quickly. Otherwise you can get that frenzy of useless activity that wastes time, resources, burns people out, and creates a noise level that can overwhelm any Thrive activity. Second, and maybe even more fundamental, we have to learn to much more aggressively and competently activate our Thrive Channels despite the superior genetic power of Survive. And despite the fact that modern, large bureaucracies – and to a lesser extent, dynamic, entrepreneurial startups – all too easily overstimulate Survive and under-activate Thrive.

And what is fascinating here is that actions which quite logically follow from this brief description of human hardwiring are totally consistent with what I have been finding in my studies of what pioneering organizations are actually doing today to deal with an accelerating world.

STOPPING OVER-ACTIVATION OR MISDIRECTION OF THE SURVIVE CHANNEL

Organizational systems and processes, bosses, and even cultures can help activate the Survive Channel in ways that help enterprises cope well with serious immediate problems. Or they can set off Survive in ways that exhaust us, kill Thrive, and don't even guarantee that we will focus on and solve the critical short term issues. For the most part, it does not take a thick book to help people diagnose the latter and correctly deduce the implications. All you need is the Two Channel perspective and, from that, the obvious questions arise.

Is there in the organization (or even within one particular person of special interest) simply too much angst, anxiety, useless activity, burnout? If yes, could this be the result of an overactive Survive Channel? If yes, what is setting it off in a destructive way? Certain policies or procedures, or just too many policies and procedures? Specific metrics, or a flood of too many metrics? Something about how you communicate (or over-communicate) about budget shortfalls? Or something in the operating plan or how it is being executed? The behavior of one or more key executives? Something more fundamental about the organization's culture? Whatever the trigger, should it be eliminated? Could it be changed in some way?

An Example. Much of middle management in a global consumer products company receives data at least once a week in the form of dashboards on various projects, budget updates, client complaint letters, and more. There is at least one piece of "bad" news (usually more) highlighted in virtually all communications, and most lead to a follow up conference call driven by someone higher in the hierarchy. A very frustrated CEO also sees much of this information because he has learned that not staying on top of these "problems" can lead to surprises with sometimes serious consequences. His frustration shows in his interactions constantly (often in very small, 30

second interactions), even though he is not consciously trying to beat up on his people. As a result, the Survive Channels in the brains of thousands of middle managers are in a constantly heightened state. The middle managers pass on their anxieties to *their* people in a variety of ways. The net result is an organization often chasing its tail and accomplishing too little on the key short term issues, leading to more problems, a more frustrated CEO, and on and on. In the relatively rare, extreme case, this begins to look like a death spiral.

Conventional solutions in a situation like this include: the CEO spends even more time on these issues in executive committee meetings. Some middle managers send out reports with new goals and metrics to solve the problems. The reports come more often given the pressures involved. Loyal/good managers begin to hold meetings to protect their departments against unfair sanctions. Some people are fired or moved. Some areas are suddenly reorganized. Senior managers, their staff, and their consultants talk to each other, with great frustration, about the middle management problem, where messages from the top seem to go and die. The most likely outcome with all of these common responses: the organizational Survive Channel becomes *more* overheated and nothing particularly good results.

A Survive/Thrive Channel perspective would suggest a whole different approach. First, you recognize the problem for what it is: a very over-activated Survive Channel. Second, you look for ways to calm the Survive Channel - you search through all the reports and dashboards and eliminate data that is not of great immediate importance. You stop follow-up meetings unless dealing with real/critical problems. You stop firing and reorganizing unless there is absolutely compelling evidence that the action is needed, and even then you go out of your way to explain why you have done what you've done. You ask the Executive Committee to develop a new habit: before raining all over people, pause and ask yourself is this a useful communication or just an expression of your own anxiety or anger that will not help achieve what is currently needed.

In general, you sooth and focus Survive with metrics and the like so that it can do what it was designed to do – solve key, immediate, real threats. And with a soothed Survive, you have at least opened up the possibility that the Thrive Channel will not be drowned out and can be activated to drive behavior that can help an organization adapt, transform, and in general *change* to take advantage of new opportunities in an ever changing world.

The effective and ineffective solutions become largely visible simply by viewing the situation through a Survive/Thrive lens. Yes, the analysis can become more complex when you get into the details of what specific action in a specific situation will best help soothe and focus an over-activated Survive. But in my experience this remarkably simple framework will point you in the right direction and even answer many detailed questions.

ACTIVATING THE THRIVE CHANNEL

Aggressively activated Thrive Channels have the potential to drive behavior which can execute innovative strategic initiatives (which always have elements of some risk) despite regulatory requirements (which demand risk mitigation). These channels can help find and execute new competitive initiatives despite cultures shaped to believe they do not have to compete much or

even think in terms of competition. They can keep strategic attention on disruptive possibilities despite the 90-day financial reporting cycle. And they can even help drive big changes in a dysfunctional management system which constantly activates Survive instincts in a way that achieve little of use, getting in the way of Thrive activation or its initiatives.

So what does aggressively activating Thrive mean? And how do you do it?

Aggressively activating Thrive means filling an organization with a lot more talk about opportunities. It means filling an organization with much more positive emotion, activity, and communication that touches the heart not just the mind, that leads people to *want to engage* not just *have to* do their jobs.

Thinking/Talking/Discussing Opportunity (Not Just Threats and Problems)

Aggressively activating our built-in Thrive Channels is impossible in a modern organizational setting without vastly increasing the emphasis on, and the discussion of, opportunities. And all the evidence I have says that "vastly" is not an overstatement, especially in older and bigger bureaucratic organizations.

A massive increase is needed because so little of the current conversation outside of fast moving and young entrepreneurial settings is about opportunity. Organizations inadvertently send off messages constantly that our Survive Channels read as potentially serious personal threats and that overwhelm the Thrive radar and the discussion of opportunity it activates. We have all seen these sometimes subtle messages:

- break one of the seemingly endless real or imagined policies and get into who knows how much trouble
- don't do exactly what the boss, or the boss's boss, or anyone higher in the hierarchy wants and face small or very large sanctions
- miss this metric for sales, inventory control, cash flow, budget limits, etc. etc. and get...
- be late for meetings, don't dress appropriately, or violate anything in the culture and watch out.

Step one in creating more opportunity-centric talk is seeing clearly what is driving it out and taking steps to reduce those drivers. This challenge and solution is not just applicable in stodgy, old, poorly managed environments. Even incredibly sensible management systems and cultures can bring some bad news daily which our brains can see (sometimes correctly) as personal threats. Political environments inside even pretty good organizations can feel like a constant competitive struggle, with all the "watch-out, watch-out" sense of threat present. Organizations with good reputations can still have some poorly crafted metrics (maybe once appropriate but no longer sensible in a changed world) that can make you feel as if you are between a rock and a hard place: you perform well but look bad on the numbers (dangerous) or you take actions to meet your numbers which, in reality, leads you to create problems for your organization (may be very dangerous).

Big organizations, even with talented top management, can face all of these problems and more simply because of size and accompanying bureaucracy. What can often look from the executive

conference room like a lot of emphasis on opportunity becomes, in fact, a very small force that is overwhelmed by this noise, all associated, ultimately, with the Survive Channel. And one more report given to management about a strategic plan, or one more speech at the annual management meeting about vision, does little to change this. More pressure – holding people "accountable" for executing plans based on an analysis of opportunities – often does nothing except *increase* activity driven by the Survive side without doing anything useful to activate the Thrive side. Yet organizations do this regularly.

Ultimately, the only solution, even with a relatively soothed Survive Channel, is a much louder voice that can awaken the Thrive radar. And that means a radical departure from the norm in the amount of thinking about, communication about, and discussion of opportunity, especially any big opportunity that senior management thinks is sensible, given all the available facts. It is role-modeled from the top with dozens or hundreds of people playing an active role in igniting discussions and spreading rational and emotionally compelling messages about an opportunity. This is possible—I have seen it. But to figure this out and make it happen, as before, it helps enormously to have an accurate view of the problem, the cause of the problem, the action needed, and why that action will help. A Survive/Thrive perspective can launch all of this.

Arousing Positive Emotions (Not Just Anxiety and Frustration)

Aggressively activating the Thrive Channel also means increasing, sometimes very significantly, how often people feel what most of us would call positive emotions associated with seizing and exploiting organizationally-relevant opportunities – feeling excited, happy, filled with pride, passionate, a sense of camaraderie, even joy.

Two Channel human nature makes us emotional creatures in both our Survive and Thrive channels, certainly more so than one might ever expect after an education in business, law, medicine, engineering, economics/finance, or pretty much anything else based on modern science and analytical thinking. On the Thrive side, the role that positive emotions play is easy to see in virtually all the great leadership stories. Again, and again one finds in those stories Thrive behavior, where people are mobilized to build something of significance, despite barriers, that takes a group into a better future. Also, again and again one finds the central figure in these stories is a force that builds opportunity-related positive emotion in other people, some of whom then go and do the same for additional people until you find an accelerating organizational momentum building.

These stories can be breathtaking. On the government side, one finds in the last half century Nelson Mandela becoming President in a country filled with hate and anxiety. Study his actions and one sees a highly visible beacon of hope, joy, and determination to build the first truly modern African country that was black lead and governed. This positive emotional attitude, almost totally missing before his election, grew and grew. And what many experts predicted would inevitably turn to horrific civil war, with enormous loss of life, did not happen. People took a different path. It's a story usually told as an example of the possibilities when you have a larger-than-life leader. But there is another story here, one about behavior that plays off the reality of human hardwiring that helped a group lift itself from what many saw as a crash landing and into the exceptionally challenging, but so-much-better flight path that they are on today.

In business, one of the greatest stories of the 20th century has at its center a person with a very different personality than Mandela's, yet with a behavioral dynamic that was much the same. Thomas Watson took three small, unknown businesses and helped people build the first truly global high tech firm, IBM. He did so, in part, through creating highly positive emotions associated with pride in winning, camaraderie, and, increasingly over time, a belief that employees were working for something special: helping customers, helping the government in WWII, helping create educational opportunities, being in a firm where people were actually encouraged to THINK.

As with opportunity by itself, a high level of positive emotion around possibilities does not naturally develop and sustain itself in organizations, any more than it naturally happens in virtually any single brain. The Survive Channel in the employee and management population so easily drives it out. Frustrated employees do not generate, by themselves, much joy. Anxious managers, who have learned that if they lose control they may not be able to do their jobs, do not automatically or easily feel great pride. Yet I know, most conclusively in the stories of great leaders, positive emotion and the Thrive Channel can be activated. Some organizations without larger-than-life leaders have dreamed up all sorts of tactics. The key, if there is one, is for senior executives to engage as many others as possible to help with this task. But it does take concentrated effort, probably always starting at the top of organizations, where people are usually most visible and have the most credibility or power or both.

More Leadership (Not Just More Management)

Which brings us to the topic of leadership.

We use the term leadership here in a way that we have found through decades of organizational research to be most useful and most consistent with the historical record. It is not just another way to say management, nor to designate what those on the top of hierarchies always do, nor to offer a better alternative as to how to run organizations (that is, to replace management, which is limiting, with leadership, which is better). Leadership is about mobilizing people to create a force that can leap into a better future with speed and agility, despite formidable barriers. Management, in contrast, is about running an existing system well – reliably and efficiently – no matter how large or complex that system is. Seen this way, a well designed management system can be especially helpful in guiding our strong Survive Channel to quickly find and eliminate real threats to an organization's reliability and efficiency. Leadership, by contrast, can be particularly helpful in awakening our Thrive Channels and, in the process, both find and capitalize on new opportunities with remarkable speed despite the pushback from a management system (which wants efficient and reliable stability) and the strong Survive instinct in our brains which can crush Thrive.

Far more often than not these days, mature organizations try to stop short term pressures from killing efforts to jump into a strategically smart future by setting up more and more strategic initiatives. This is potentially very smart, only these initiatives are driven pretty much only by managerial processes – generally not smart. The initiatives are carefully organized from above. They are staffed with small groups of people perceived to have the right skill sets. Massive data analysis often drives the exercise. For execution of any decisions made, someone creates metrics and dashboards and reporting requirements. Senior management holds (or at least tries to hold)

people accountable for results. You have Tiger teams, quality groups, innovation committees, workstreams, strategy implementation groups, and PMO organizations. Under just the right circumstances, any of these can make a difference. Having a very strong person heading the effort or being the executive sponsor can help. Not expecting too much or too quickly can help. Dealing in arenas where you already have much experience and can pretty much predict the barriers, the solutions, and the keys to success can make a big difference. In general, the more that activating the Thrive Channel in many people is not needed, the higher the probability that this management-driven approach will work.

But there is the problem. Coping well with the challenges in a faster moving and more unpredictable world where you have to innovate, increase competitiveness, see and deal with totally new business models, and still meet many immediate needs associated with financial markets, regulation, reliable quality of products and services – well, such a world needs more. Management alone tends to be more likely to activate Survive than Thrive. To generate enough of the right behavior from enough people demands a powerful activation of Thrive, and that means leadership. And in the absence of that rare larger-than-life person, leadership from the many, not the few.

As I use the term here, "leadership from many" does not mean hundreds or thousands of people somehow acting like a superb executive committee member. It is often more like the actions we see when we say that "a 23-year-old engineer has provided terrific leadership on the X-12 product development task force". Or "factory worker Harry has helped provide excellent leadership on the quality efforts on assembly line 14". It really is leadership – which is why we talk that way – but not remotely of the magnitude of what we would expect of a CEO. And in the example of the young engineer or the factory worker, this leadership is possible, at least in part, because of the Thrive mechanism in the brain. And once it activates, it can help activate Thrive in others.

Nothing is more important than a clear understanding of what you need and why. And here, once again, the Survive/Thrive perspective can make all the difference.

SURVIVE/THRIVE AS A DECISION MAKING LENS

Once you start looking at the world through the Two Channel lens, all sorts of insights present themselves and all sorts of interesting questions emerge.

In a world where so many organizations are overwhelmed with initiatives, projects, meetings, and email, a question we often hear from CEOs and their colleagues is: what should I stop doing, and where should I focus my time. A Survive/Thrive perspective offers an interesting answer. If Survive is being overstimulated, stop doing anything that is contributing to this unless you are absolutely convinced it is addressing a true threat of some magnitude. If Thrive is attempting to generate action with 23 initiatives, stop supporting any that do not focus clearly on the biggest opportunity the organization has. If it is unclear what currently is absorbing your time, look at your calendar for the last month. And reflect honestly.

Another issue. Anyone who has been involved in a significant transformation effort in an organization knows about the "middle management" problem. Launched from the top, a complex change process seems to run into more resistance two or three levels down than at many lower parts of an enterprise. Frustrated individuals refer to the "rock in the middle", or use even less flattering terms such as "control freaks who lack vision". These upper-to-middle managers may even, sometimes, be literally demonized.

But what if these people are not much different than those above or below them (except perhaps years of experience or potential to take on greater responsibilities)? What if they are simply in a perpetual state of Survive-agitation created by management systems, bosses, and external pressures that seem to scream "problem here" on a daily basis, by metrics that bring an ongoing stream of bad news, by lawyers, quality staff, or HR compliance people? What if they are also caught in the middle of silo politics? What if their bosses end meetings often with comments only about the downside consequences of problems or speeches about burning platforms? If the answer to some or all of these questions is yes, you approach the problem very differently than if your diagnosis is that they are control freaks.

Another very interesting question. Millennials, one of today's four identified age-related cohort groups, are also often described in less than flattering terms. They are lazy. They have entitlement attitudes. This is seen as a consequence of the conditions in which they were raised, conditions radically different than the Depression context in which today's oldest cohort was raised. What if there is some truth to the Millennial descriptions because, indeed, they were raised in a very different world from their parents and grandparents. But what if the story here was more like the following:

What if, because of the conditions under which they were raised, Millennial Survive radar was not programmed to be as highly tuned? The power ratio of the Survive to Thrive radars would then be less extreme than for earlier cohorts. Activating their Survive side may seem more difficult, leaving them less inclined to work long days to solve every little problem. But activating their Thrive channel might be easier because it is less likely to be swamped by Survive. If true, could it also be true that this group of young people is a potential asset in a faster moving world that needs more Thrive behaviors? From what I have seen, they are.

One more set of interesting questions. What if great leaders have Thrive channels that are stronger than the rest of us? That is, what if they become significant leaders not because they have overpowering charisma but because they have a Thrive channel that simply can become activated much easier and faster and stronger than the human norm? Or what if somewhere they learned how to activate the Thrive side much more easily and powerfully than is the norm? If this were true, doesn't that mean nearly everyone has some potential to help provide leadership if something is aggressively done to help them better activate their Thrive Channels? In another way this assertion has been made many times before – that leaders are at least to some degree made and not just born – but not with this hard-wiring causal logic. Is it possible?

GOOD NEWS AND BAD

To put this all in perspective in terms of the dangers and possibilities today, consider what may be the most critical challenge facing most organizations.

For some time now there have been growing tensions in organizations between meeting both immediate demands with higher stakes and maneuvering strategically into a future that comes at you ever faster. We mean, for example, dealing with regulation that has been growing, off and on, for decades now, regulation that leads to bureaucracies, a focus on risk mitigation, saying no, and slowing action down – yet at the same time you have to somehow move faster, change, and innovate more in order to win in an accelerating world. Or dealing with the tension between having to make big strategic shifts to cope with forces that are opening you up to competition after being protected for years – yet, because of your history, somehow also dealing each day with serious push back from cultures that do not change easily and are much more suited for monopoly than real competition. Or constantly looking into an often unpredictable future for how a business could be disrupted, and what you should do about it – yet somehow at the same time coping with the demands that you obsessively focus on 90 days or less and the next earnings call. Making important strategic moves to meet the high requirements from the investment community for growth – yet coping with equally high demands for quarterly numbers that can limit the very money needed for investment to create that growth.

The theme in all these challenges is not new, but the pressures, complications, and time demands they are creating for people are new. The basic theme is related to the often discussed clash between meeting both short term and long term needs simultaneously – the problem of avoiding the wrath of investors, regulators, or your own people (and their culture) today and yet somehow also taking action to more quickly innovate, better compete, or not be made obsolete by a new technology tomorrow. In a faster and faster moving world, wrath – and the stakes associated with it – and the need to change more and faster have both increased. As a result, the clash between the two sets of needs has now grown to the point where even highly accomplished organizations can struggle greatly.

Brain/body hardwiring offers us both good news and bad news in light of these realities. The bad is simply how easily Survive can be over-activated in today's organizations, how that can shut down Thrive, and, as a result, how we can end up not doing a good job of either handling the short-term pressures or innovating/jumping/accelerating into the future.

The good news is that we have hard-wired systems for handling both of the pressures that we face. It's a matter of calming and focusing overheated Survive and better activating Thrive. That will require any number of adjustments to the business norms today. But these adjustments are possible. I've seen it happen. We have much more to learn, but we have in hand today a new way of thinking about the problem—which offers us many exciting possibilities.