

“This book is truly amazing—actually, a masterpiece. It tells the story of the human condition.”—From Foreword by WARREN BENNIS

# DRIVEN TO LEAD

GOOD, BAD, AND



MISGUIDED LEADERSHIP

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PAUL R. LAWRENCE

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL



“This is an inspiring book, filled with excellent examples, valuable advice, and warnings not to be overlooked. Every executive would be well-served to read this book cover-to-cover.”

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“Paul Lawrence tracks leadership qualities into the deepest recesses of the human brain. Listen up, business! Tapping into this scientific understanding of leadership is key to your company’s success or failure.”

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# DRIVEN TO LEAD

## Good, Bad, and Misguided Leadership

Paul R. Lawrence

*Foreword by Warren Bennis*

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*To Martha, my lifelong partner*



# FOREWORD

*by Warren Bennis*

This book is truly amazing—actually, a masterpiece. It tells the story of the human condition. It tells this story across human history, *deep* human history. Lawrence realizes that our understanding of leadership can be no better than our understanding of what makes humans, all humans, tick—what are the ultimate motivators of our behavior. This is true because leadership is *all* about relationships with others. So that is where he starts—with the basic few motives, the innate drives that have been essential to our survival and development into the dominant species on earth.

To do this, Lawrence had to rediscover Darwin's insights about humans in Darwin's second epic book, *The Descent of Man*, which evolutionary biologists have, strangely, ignored. This reveals a new Darwin that turns the public's assumptions about Darwin upside down. The key is Darwin's revolutionary observation that the *most important* difference between humans and lower species is our innate moral sense, our conscience. What an observation—and now we have evidence that it is a valid observation—except for the very few people who are missing the key mutation in their brain.

But this is enough of the story for me to tell here. Read on and you will find explanations of key turning points in human history, explanations of good, bad, and misguided leaders, and even evil leaders like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Lawrence provides an explanation of the greatness of America's governmental form as well as the nature of its current crisis, and the same is true of the greatness and the current crisis of our vast corporations.

And, finally, *Driven to Lead* offers a path toward a better future for all.



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Especially because this book is pushing on the edges of knowledge in a diverse set of fields, it is by no means perfunctory for me to add that I take full responsibility for any errors and other shortcomings of the text.

Bedford, Massachusetts  
May 2010

PAUL R. LAWRENCE



## THE AUTHOR

Paul R. Lawrence is Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Organizational Behavior at Harvard Business School. He grew up in Michigan, where he did his undergraduate work in sociology and economics at Albion College. After serving in the Navy in World War II he finished his masters and doctoral training in organizational behavior at the Harvard Business School. He was the cofounder of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics. His research, published in twenty-five books and numerous articles, has dealt with the human aspects of management, organizational change, organization design, human nature, and leadership. His best-known titles (with coauthors) are *Organization and Environment*, *The Changing of Organizational Behavior Patterns*, *Renewing American Industry*, and *Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices*.



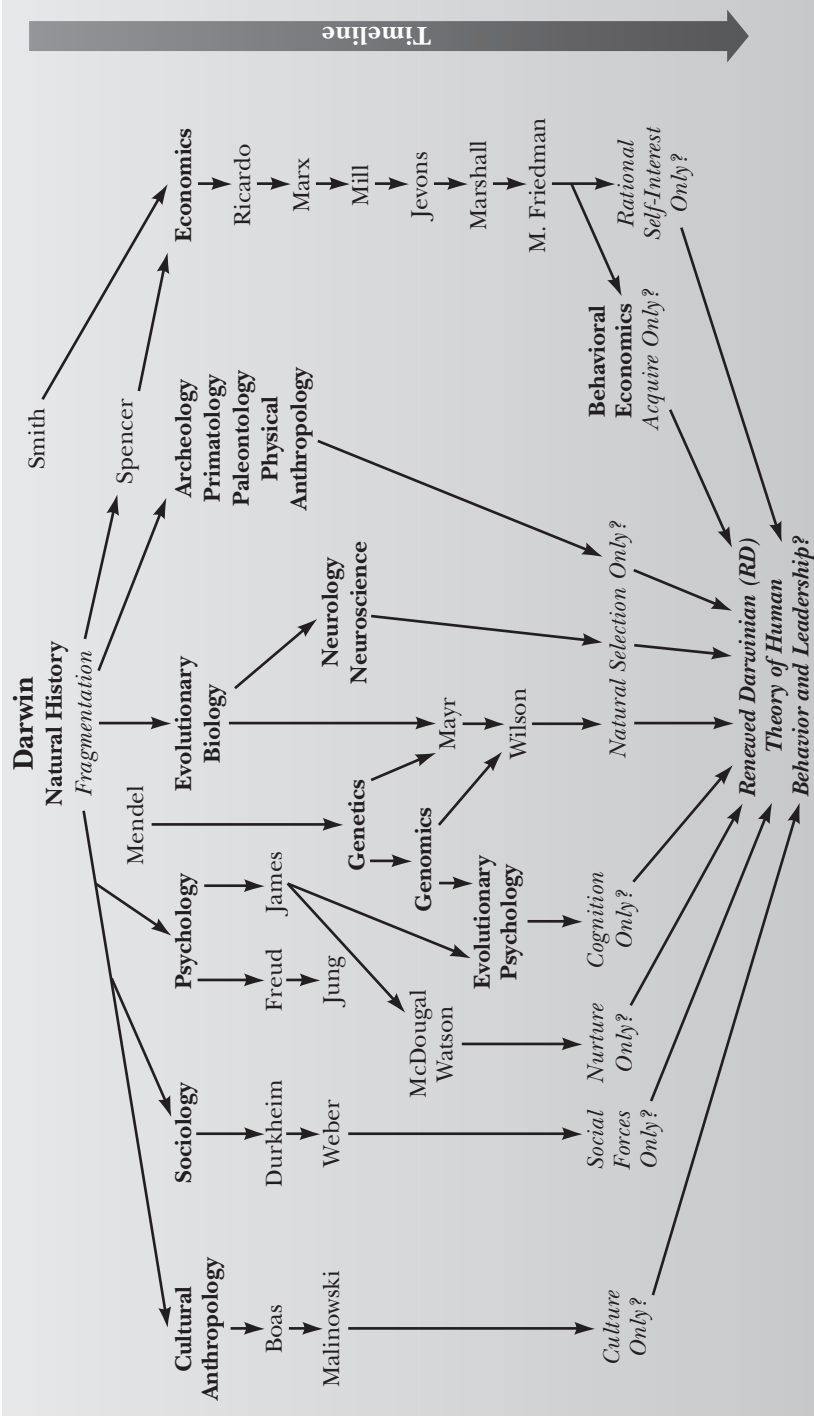
# INTRODUCTION

Humans have studied human behavior and leadership behavior for as long as we've had written records. In the past four centuries or so, the methods of systematic science have been applied to this study, at both the individual and collective levels. But it has been a somewhat messy pursuit.

As this book will show, the truly scientific understanding of human behavior began with the work of Darwin, published some 150 years ago. Since that time, however, the study of human behavior has become a story of fragmentation. Each of the disciplines shown in Figure I.1 was launched and carried forward primarily by the intellectual leadership of the persons named beneath each discipline. The prominent newer fields are also named. Figure I.1 illustrates not only the fragmentation of the effort to understand human behavior scientifically but also the nature of the task of integrating these various fields in order to develop a unified theory of human behavior and leadership. The repetition of the question "only?" at the bottom of the figure indicates the limitations, as I see it, of each discipline's approach to human behavior.

Specialization, as illustrated, is an essential phase in the advancement of knowledge, but it needs to be balanced with continual efforts to integrate and unify our ever-growing understanding. This integration process has been badly neglected in the human sciences, largely, I believe, for institutional and organizational reasons. University departments compete for funding, personnel, and attention. A scholar who hopes to advance within a discipline is expected to make noteworthy specialized contributions for his or her "team." Who can afford to collaborate with the competitive teams? Perhaps a senior professor, such as myself, whose career struggles are over but whose intellectual life is not.

FIGURE I.1. SCHEMATIC OF THEORY FLOW REGARDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR SINCE DARWIN.



In 1991, when I moved to emeritus status at Harvard Business School, I started working full time (on a half-time salary) on the challenge of finding a more accurate model of human behavior and leadership. Although I had been a student of the full spectrum of the disciplines of human behavior since I was a young man, my primary motivation in 1991 was the rapid rise of agency theory, not only at Harvard Business School but also at many other business schools. Agency theory, as proposed by Michael Jensen and others, started with the axiom of economics that rational self-interest motivated all human behavior and built further on Milton Friedman's argument that the sole purpose of business was to maximize shareholder (owner) returns. I deeply believed that this doctrine was seriously flawed and that it was generating many disturbing consequences. But such was the enormous appeal of agency theory that I felt it could only be displaced by a better theory of human behavior and leadership, one which took into account the (to me, obvious) fact that there is much more to human behavior than simply rational self-interest.

But there was more on my mind than the need to move on from agency theory. I and others had long been frustrated by the fragmentation and dissonance of the various human sciences. It seemed to be an outrageous case of the blind men describing the elephant. For these reasons, I felt strongly that the time to try for a better synthesis had arrived.

We continue to be mystified by much of our own behavior, both as individuals and as nations, races, and faiths. The historian Norman Davies, summing up the period of the two world wars, wrote,

At a time when the instruments of constructive change had outstripped anything previously known, Europeans acquiesced in a string of conflicts, which destroyed more human beings than all past convulsions put together . . . . What is more, in the course of those two war-bloodied generations, the two most populous countries of Europe fell into the hands of murderous political regimes whose internal hatred killed even more tens of millions than their wars did . . . . Future historians, therefore, must surely look back on the three decades between August 1914 and May 1945 as the era when Europe took leave of its senses . . . . In the course of the horrors, Europeans threw away their position of world leadership.<sup>1</sup>

We can ill afford to remain such a deadly mystery to ourselves. The human race now faces more than one danger that (1) could end civilization as we know it and (2) is of our own making. Nuclear war, environmental collapse, and the spread of pandemics such as AIDS readily come to mind. And how can we account for the fact that people such as Hitler can cause so much damage to so many other people? A more adequate theory of human behavior and leadership would generate practical applications and would distinguish the possible from the impossible. Such a theory would surely be worth a mighty effort.

And although the fragmentation of the human sciences was discouraging, the sheer variety of findings was most encouraging. Amongst so many pieces, there might be enough to put together a unified picture. Particularly exciting were recently developed techniques such as brain imaging, which is giving us fantastic new insights into what happens in the brain during various kinds of normal human behavior, such as remembering and deciding. Gene analysis has also made tremendous advances recently and can throw a bright light not only on what makes us uniquely human but also on how we became uniquely human through the processes of evolution. Hard data on the wellsprings of human behavior were starting to accumulate and, to my mind, demanding to be brought together.

But most of all (and most surprising of all), the time was right because a scientific theory which could account for the new findings and provide understanding of the big questions we want to answer—about consciousness, ultimate motives, conscience, morality, the sense of self, emotions, and complex decision making—*had been available for many years*. As we will see in Part One, Darwin's theory of evolution, formulated in 1842 and published in 1859 (*Origin of the Species*) and 1871 (*Descent of Man*), is quite up to the task. For the most part, all I had to do was (1) pay close attention to certain aspects of Darwin's theories about *humans* that had largely been ignored since his time and (2) give Darwin's insights the benefit of contemporary research.

This fortunate discovery came about when I collaborated with my Harvard Business School colleague Nitin Nohria on *Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices*, published in 2002.<sup>2</sup> In that book, we proposed a foundation for a new model of

human behavior, based on four innate drives and a mechanism for keeping them in balance as a choice is made amongst possible actions. That is the one element of this book's theories which is original work. The rest is pure synthesis of the work of others.

When *Driven* was published, our four-drive model of man was highly controversial. It bucked the prevailing paradigms of the major disciplines concerned with human behavior. Economics explained all behavior with the axiom of rational self-interest; sociology explained it all with social forces; psychology with the learning that filled the "blank slate" of the mind; anthropology with the teachings of the local culture; and evolutionary biology with natural selection and our "selfish" genes, as Richard Dawkins memorably called them. Since then, these oversimplified (in my opinion) positions have been rapidly changing. While the struggles over these fundamental assumptions about human nature are by no means over, the tide has turned. There can be no going back.

But neither could I stand still. *Driven* was a success as far as it went, but it was still not an adequate theory of human behavior and certainly not of leadership, my central focus. What was missing was the process by which the prefrontal cortex not only came up with all the options for action but also, by working back and forth with the four drives, made the final action decision that was reasonably balanced as regards to all four drives. This was the impulse/check/balance mechanism that was not addressed in *Driven*. More important, the theory in *Driven* was not yet applied to leadership.

I believe that the Renewed Darwinian theories presented in this book are stronger theories of human behavior and of leadership than any of the current alternatives. They are theories that are universal, testable, and actionable. Now it is up to you, the reader, to decide whether or not this outrageously bold claim is justified.





## CHAPTER ONE

# HOW MUCH CAN WE HOPE FOR?

*It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent. It is the one most adaptable to change.*

— CHARLES DARWIN<sup>1</sup>

Helen's boss, Peter, has just informed her that her unit is going to be eliminated and that, while she and some of her employees will be offered jobs elsewhere in the company (and possibly elsewhere in the country), she will have to lay off the rest of her team. What's more, Peter doesn't want her to let anyone know yet because the company needs her team to finish its current project ahead of schedule. Peter has always looked out for Helen, and now he says he is counting on her to manage this with as little damage to the company as possible. "We're in enough trouble as it is," he confides, "or I wouldn't be asking you to do this." He doesn't say what the trouble is.

We can imagine that Helen has many conflicting motives. She wants to do her best for the company, or at least to live up to Peter's expectations and to repay his past generosity. She wants to come out of this looking good, to protect her own career. There are a few of her people she could afford to be rid of, but she is anxious to be fair. She'd very much like to know what has made this layoff necessary, but she is reluctant to ask Peter for more information than he chose to give. She doesn't feel right keeping the impending layoff secret from her team, yet she thinks that if

she lets the cat out of the bag now, it would be very difficult to finish the current project, never mind speeding it up. Not that her team would deliberately sabotage the project, but keeping them extra motivated while waiting to be laid off would take some very skillful management on her part, and she's not sure she's up to that.

Clearly, some of her impulses are contradictory. She can't let people know *and* keep it a secret at the same time—but there are good reasons for both. She can't lay off a long-time-but-not-very-useful employee *and* keep a new-but-harder-working employee while appearing completely fair—but there are good reasons for both. It ought to be a mental train wreck, and yet somehow she will come to a decision of an acceptable course of action. She will not go crazy. Her head will not explode.

## GOOD LEADERSHIP IS A NATURAL HUMAN BEHAVIOR

The poet John Donne noted that many everyday occurrences would seem miraculous if they happened only once.<sup>2</sup> I think we can look at Helen's eventual decision as just such an occurrence. Forming a decision out of such a tangle of motivations would seem miraculous if it weren't something we all do regularly. In this book we will examine what makes human beings capable of this everyday miracle of leadership and how we can all make better and more consistent use of it.

If we saw a cow flying through the air, we would wonder how the cow did it. We don't usually wonder how a bird does it; we know a bird is designed to fly. What I want to show you in this book is that human beings are designed to feel simultaneous conflicting motivations and to arrive at an acceptable decision—not *in spite of* the conflicting motivations but *because of* them. It is the very tangle of Helen's motivations, we might say, that will enable her to solve them satisfactorily.

How can that be? All living things react to certain aspects of their environments, but no living thing can react in as many different ways to as many things as a human being can. There are several reasons for this, but the most important is the fact that

more things strike us as *significant* or worth reacting to. You might say that more things can push our buttons because we have more buttons to push. Four, to be precise—the four basic drives that I will discuss fully in Chapter Two. Other animals have a basic drive to get what they need—food, shelter, a mate, and so on—and a basic drive to defend themselves against whatever threats they can recognize. Humans of course have these two drives, but we have two others equally important to us—a basic drive to bond, to trust and care for others and to be trusted and cared for by others, and a basic drive to make some sense of our lives. While these two drives sound “fuzzier” than the other two, we will see in the next chapter that they are just as real. It is because we have four drives—four buttons to be pushed—rather than two that we are so much more responsive to our environment. As far as we know, no other creature could have so many different and conflicting things on its mind as Helen has on her mind in the story after hearing Peter’s request.

But how does this responsiveness result in decisions and leadership rather than confusion and stalemate? It happens because our brains have evolved a way to let all four drives “have their say” and then to use our knowledge and experience to arrive at a solution that is acceptable to all four. This is not a metaphor; this is really what happens in the brain, as we will see in Chapter Two. And it is the need to accommodate such a variety of motivations—Helen’s predicament—that brings forth such a variety of responses. To put it crudely, for most creatures, the only problems are to feed and mate and to fight or flee enemies. There are only so many ways they can do those few things, amazing as some of those ways may seem to us. (We are amazed that a spider can make a web, but that’s about the only thing a spider can make.) Helen, though, has so many different impulses to take into account—so many more things that matter to her—that her solution cannot be the same thing that has already been done a million times.

She cannot just spin another web. She has to come up with a unique solution to an immediate situation. That is what humans are uniquely able to do, and that is a pretty good description of leadership. It is obvious from everyday life and from history that

this decision-making process is not perfect, but it is also obvious from everyday life and from history that it does work pretty well much of the time.

Often our motivations are conflicting because various people are involved who have different—even conflicting—needs and desires. (This is what Helen faces—the needs and desires of her team differ from the needs and desires of Peter and his superiors; her own needs and desires are yet another variable.) But human beings are designed to take other people’s differing and conflicting needs and desires into account.

In short, we are designed to accomplish things in groups—to lead and follow (which, we will see, are not simple opposites), to learn from each other, to trust and protect and care for each other, to acquire what we need collectively even if we then enjoy it individually. We have evolved this way because it turned out to be a very successful means of survival.

And it still is. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a surprising transformation took place on two offshore oil rigs. Thanks to a deliberate management effort, an extremely macho culture that rewarded intimidation, recklessness, and a cocksure attitude, even when this resulted in injuries and deaths (not to mention inefficient oil drilling), changed into a culture in which these same tough men took their own and each other’s safety seriously, asked for and accepted help from each other, and would even admit out loud in front of visiting women professors that they were afraid or unsure. As one worker put it, “We went from living in one world to living in a good world.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the drilling was accomplished more efficiently and more profitably.

Here, leadership took the role formerly played by evolution. In fact, leadership has become our primary means of *adapting* to changing circumstances, which Darwin cited earlier as the key to our survival. Since circumstances are always changing, we all have to lead ourselves. In addition, many of us lead others or would like to. This is not a glib comparison; we will see in Part One that the leadership most fit for a group is an extension of the self-leadership that is built into a normal individual’s brain. And as we will see in detail in Chapter Four, this was exactly the kind of leadership that altered the crews of the oil rigs.

## IS BAD LEADERSHIP PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION?

This book about good leadership will have a lot to say about bad leadership. Because humans survive and accomplish things in groups, and because groups always have leaders (often multiple leaders), a bad leader is a serious problem. Although bad leadership has always plagued mankind, we seem particularly aware now of political, business, and organizational failures all over the world—the financial meltdown on Wall Street, Bernie Madoff, the tolerance of child abuse in religious institutions, Osama bin Laden, the awful governments of Zimbabwe, North Korea, Sudan, Burma (Myanmar), and so on. Not only do we know much more about what leaders do and how they fail than would have been possible in previous times, we also expect better of them—a legacy of the Enlightenment. That is why it is so frustrating to see these bad leaders causing so much pain and suffering in so many people’s lives.

Many people are understandably skeptical that leadership as a whole can be improved. Although it has been studied and written about for centuries, has there been any improvement in leadership comparable to the improvements in our material well-being brought about by science, engineering, and medicine? You may expect me to say “no,” but actually my answer is, “Yes, but the advancements are too easily reversed.” The U.S. Constitution, for example, can be seen as a social technology that has been as beneficial since its invention as inoculation or the electric light. (This is discussed at length in Chapter Five.) But we have not been able to nail down our advancements in leadership so that they stay put, the way the advances made by Jenner or Edison seem irreversible. There are always big steps backward.

Is bad leadership an inescapable part of the human condition? My response is that once we understand what makes for good leadership, we can see that the *potential* for bad leadership is indeed part of the human condition, but not the necessity of enduring it. Consider pneumonia: it used to be a deadly disease, but today it is rare for anyone in the developed world to die of pneumonia unless he or she is already weakened by age or chronic illness. Our “human condition” has not changed; we

have the same potential to die of pneumonia as ever. But it is no longer necessary for us to die of pneumonia because we finally understand it and know what to do about it. I think we are now on the verge of understanding bad leadership and what to do about it.

## LEADERSHIP IS DECISION MAKING, AND WE ARE DECISION MAKERS

Leadership is always associated with action. But to understand leadership and to practice better leadership, we will need to take a closer look at inaction. Think of all the things we don't do—all the things we want but don't buy (or steal), all the things we think but don't say, all the people we don't like but don't attack, all the choices we consider but don't take.

One way of looking at this is that, more than any other species, human beings are decision makers. Other animals make choices, but they do not choose from the infinite possibilities from which humans must choose. (At least, we don't see the variety in animal activity that we see in human activity.) How is it that, in any particular circumstance, we are capable of so many different responses and yet manage to choose one—usually a workable one? It is possible because we make our decisions in a unique way. We are certainly not the machines of “rational self-interest” that leading economic theories imagine we are (which should be obvious by the frequency with which we undermine ourselves). But there is a logic at work. While in some ways it is non-negotiable, it is fantastically flexible. As I said earlier, it is designed to arrive at good decisions because of—not in spite of—conflicting motivations. The process is certainly not foolproof, but it is well-designed for self-correction and improvement.

This decision-making process—so familiar yet so surprising when we really examine it—is the basis of good self-leadership and good leadership of groups. We will learn about it in Part One; that will be the first step in learning to lead with your whole brain.

This book is organized into three parts:

Part One, “The Leadership Brain,” presents the biological underpinnings of leadership behavior.