By Robert W. Gunn and Betsy Raskin Gullickson

Mr. Markwell's Wild Ride

Research in neuroscience, as explored in recent books, underscores our understanding of how human functioning plays out in effective leadership.

British surfer Martin Markwell has an amazing story to tell. He'd taken his wife Vicki and son Jake to a white-sand beach resort to escape winter's dreariness. On a beautiful Sunday morning, he paddled out on his surfboard. A wave came along. A really, really big wave. Bigger than the "perfect wave" Markwell, like every surfer, had always dreamt of.

The resort was on Sri Lanka's southern coast. The date was Dec. 26, 2004. And Markwell's wave was a tsunami. "As an experienced surfer, when I saw the wave come I realized something was wrong," Markwell was quoted, "but I couldn't escape because my surfboard was tied to my ankle." So, he says, he got up on his board and rode atop the tsunami until he reached a restaurant on the second story of a hotel, jumped off and waded to safety. Skeptics may raise their eyebrows. But the Reuters news service believed the story. And principles of mental functioning explain how it's possible.

In every situation, humans may draw upon two sets of resources. One we call earned capabilities. These are the skills, tools, methods we've developed through learning and experience. We may acquire them with great effort and even suffering. We've begun with certain talents, but we've invested a lot of sweat equity to develop -- to earn -- our capabilities.

At the same time, we all are born with another pool of resources -- such things as insight, intuition, common sense, Mother Wit, creativity. These can't be taught in school; they don't have steps we can memorize. Sometimes muted but universally present, these resources stem from what we call innate capacity.

Without earned capabilities, our innate capacity is stuck in neutral; insights surface, but we have no way to put them into action. But without innate capacity, we too often spin our wheels in a game of "ready, fire, aim."

We've talked about earned capabilities and innate capacity previously in this column (January 2004). Since that time, popular books have come out that consider how thinking translates into action by drawing on current scientific research. Each of these books has a different approach, and none uses the exact terminology we've adopted. But they point to the dynamic we're describing.

In *On Intelligence* (Times Books, 2004), author Jeff Hawkins (a founder of Palm Computing and Handspring) shares his passion for understanding the neocortex -- "the seat of intelligence," that part of the brain which really sets man apart form other animals. The neocortex receives sensory information and channels it through a hierarchical system into patterns. From those patterns, Hawkins contends, the brain "predicts" experience; that is the primary function of the neocortex and the very foundation of intelligence.

"Your brain has made a model of the world," Hawkins says, "and is constantly checking that model against reality."

The better ingrained a pattern is, the less mental energy the brain needs to put into it. For example, when we were learning to drive a car, we sweated over every twist and turn; now that driving is well "patterned," we may find ourselves miles down the highway without conscious recall of exactly what we've passed. Of course, if a squirrel darts across the road, our attention snaps back. Habituation frees the neocortex to call attention to anything that is different from the pattern, anything that defies "predictability."

The pieces of patterns that are collected in the neocortex as memory can be thought of as earned capabilities. Innate capacity transcends those pieces, sees the whole, opens to what Hawkins describes as the "sensation of sudden comprehension, the 'aha!" moment." He writes: "Experts and geniuses have brains that see structure of structure and patterns of patterns beyond what others do. You can become expert by practice, but there certainly is a genetic component to talent and genius too."

That inborn, non-analytical component is also noted in *Presence* (by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers, published March 2004 by The Society for Organizational Learning). The authors interviewed cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, who cites research identifying three major neural networks in the body: the brain, of course, is the largest; but there are also major clusters of neurons in the intestinal tract and the cardial sac. Rosch is quoted: "It seems that there is really a physiological basis for 'gut knowing' and 'knowing of the heart,'" Or, in the terminology we are using here, for innate capacity.

The phenomenon of "gut instinct" is at the center of *Blink*, by journalist Malcolm Gladwell (Little, Brown and Co., January 2005). He cities numerous examples of individuals who earned expertise in an area through experience and study; but they succeed in the flow of events not by analysis, but with "snap judgments." For example, Gladwell quotes Paul Van Rider, a now-retired Marine who came back from the Vietnam War to make a career of understanding the art of war. "When we talk about analytic versus intuitive decision making," Van Rider summarizes, "neither is good or bad. What is bad is if you use either of them in an inappropriate circumstance. If you get too caught up in the production of information, you drown in the data."

Gladwell also spent time with two women who run a company that tests food and beverage products for major manufacturers. They "don't just taste food. They dream about food. Having lunch with them is like going cello shopping with Yo-Yo Ma, or dropping in on Giorgio Armani one morning as he is deciding what to wear." As a result, these two women can instantly distinguish subtleties in a bite of food or a sip of cola that almost all of us would miss. "The gift of their expertise is that it allows them to have a much better understanding of what goes on behind the locked door of their unconscious," Gladwell observes, adding: "The first impressions of experts are different. When we become expert in something, our tastes grow more esoteric and complex. What I mean is that it is really only experts who are able to reliably account for their reactions. Knowledge gives their first impressions resiliency."

He concludes: "This is the gift of training and expertise -- the ability to extract an enormous amount of meaningful information from the very thinnest slice of experience."

In other words: the more we have developed our earned capabilities, the more secure we can be in relying on our innate capacity. When Markwell saw that monster wave coming at him, he didn't have time to analyze angles, to recall techniques or to worry about proper form. He had to stay calm, focused, present -- drawing on his innate capacity. Of course, that wouldn't have been enough. Markwell was an "experienced surfer;" he'd put a lot of time and effort into his chosen sport. Countless hours, countless waves. His earned capabilities were ready to answer the direction of his innate capacity.

In short, as neuroscience indicates, the seamless integration of earned capabilities and innate capacity allows miracles like Mr. Markwell's wild ride.

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