

Work Space

For feedback on Work Space, email editor Fiona Smith, workspace@afr.com.au

BOSS

Daredevils get a jump ahead

Thrill-seeking personality tendencies can be harnessed to produce business high-flyers, writes **Fiona Smith**.

There is a certain sort of person who chooses to work in the emergency department of a hospital — where the only thing you can be certain of is that the unexpected will happen. The same type will be in the thick of the bear pit at the stock exchange, loving every minute of it, or negotiating high-risk business deals in boardrooms across the world.

These are sensation seekers: people who are genetically hard-wired to seek out new and exciting experiences. They are the high-wire walkers of corporate life; the risk takers addicted to the rush of adrenalin, who seek to confront and conquer fears that the rest of us would rather spend the rest of our lives avoiding.

Think Oracle chief executive Larry Ellison with his passion for ocean racing, Virgin chief Richard Branson and his stunts.

Closer to home Westfield Group managing director David Lowy, an aerobatic flying champion, loves his sport so much he has opened a flying museum in Temora in rural NSW, while the wild rides of Sydney nightclub owner Justin Hemmes created headlines as he flipped his Wellcraft Scarab speedboat, rolled his Subaru WRX and talked of plans to race V8 touring cars.

These are men — very rich men — but sensation-seeking personalities are spread across genders and bank balances.

A prime example is Glenn Singleman, a doctor who works in the emergency and critical care units at Sydney Adventist Hospital. One would think Singleman would see enough blood and gore in his day job to steer him away from thrill-seeking but, in his spare time, he and wife Heather Swan (a former management and marketing executive) go BASE jumping.

BASE jumping generally makes news when some young dreadlocked daredevil flings himself from a tall tower and hits the footpath before the parachute opens.

Singleman and Swan take the sport one step further, casting aside parachutes to free-fall with winged suits, looking a little like sugar gliders. They set a new world record in 2006 for altitude BASE jumping and wingsuit BASE jumping.

Singleman says thrill seekers are genetically programmed that way. The greater your desire to take risks, the more of the D4DR gene you are likely to have. Extreme thrill seekers may have 11 copies of the gene, the risk-averse only one or two.

This gene is resistant to the "feel good" transmitter dopamine, which means the more you have, the greater the risks you need to take to experience the thrill that some of us get from jaywalking.

About 10 per cent of people are low sensation seekers (they like rules, so a lot of them are in law enforcement), while 15 per cent at the other end of the spectrum are addicted to the rush.

Unsurprisingly, he says he and Swan have had their genes analysed and have 11 of the "thrill-seeking" genes each.

Perfectly matched for adventure, they are now in central Australia,



Glenn Singleman says thrill seekers are genetically programmed that way.

Thrills and skills for Leighton chief

Every now and then, a couple of directors on the board of Leighton Holdings attempt to put the brakes on chief executive Wal King's adventurous spirit.

"They say to me: 'You don't have approval to do these things you are doing.' And I say 'Is that right?' I don't create a storm about it or anything, but then I go ahead and do it anyway," he says, unrepentant.

King, who turns 64 in August, is one of corporate Australia's long-standing thrill seekers.

He is well-known for his enthusiasm for hell-skiing, but has also raced motorbikes and cars (as an amateur) and enjoys high-altitude trekking.

He has his holidays planned out to 2010, with trekking in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, hell-skiing in the northern corner of Turkey and in

Argentina, and boating in Papua New Guinea.

But the board of construction company Leighton can be reassured that King is not about to be a Steve Fossett (the US multimillionaire adventurer who disappeared while flying solo over the Nevada desert in 2007). "I lead a big company and I have to bear in mind my responsibilities," he says.

King says that most successful business people require a reasonable amount of courage in their work life, and this spills over into their involvement in sports and other active pursuits.

"I see characteristics in some business guys, who sit in an organisation hoping and praying that if they stay there long enough, they will get noticed," King says.

"They never push the boundaries

and, like the Peter principle, if they have an average performance they will get the top job one day."

But these people generally struggle to rise above the second or third in command roles because they don't have the stuff of leadership.

On the other hand, people who have a "swashbuckling, devil-may-care attitude" — rather than taking measured risks — find themselves coming unstuck both in business and in their adventures outside, he says.

"When I go heli-skiing, I take guides and back-up and avalanche equipment," King says. "The picture that I am painting is that successful people do take measured risks in their personal lives and in whatever they do... a lot of this comes with money. With more money, you can do a wider range of things."

Fiona Smith

preparing to be filmed by *60 Minutes* in an attempt to break another world record by jumping from a hot-air balloon 12,000 metres up, in wingsuits, to fly 30 kilometres in seven minutes.

When they are not terrifying the daylighters out of onlookers, the pair go on the speaking circuit to talk to corporate groups about their experiences. Their message is not that everyone should turn to extreme sports — but that they should not allow their lives and their careers to be ruled by fear.

"Doing adventure sports builds my level of control — you can overcome your fears," says Singleman.

He says that experiences he would once have found difficult, such as public speaking or dealing with unusual situations, no longer hold any terrors for him, thanks to his experience of challenging fear.

Singleman says fear is an element of the "emotional brain", which was really useful for assessing risks when life was lived thousands of years ago on savannah plains, but it is not so good for decision making in today's complex environment.

An investor who is not ruled by fear will not rush into a panicked decision to sell when the stockmarket falls and an executive will not fall prey to knee-jerk reactions when things appear to spiral out of control, he says.

"A lot of my doctor friends in emergency and intensive care are like this. They play the stockmarket and love the adrenalin. It attracts high sensation seekers," he says.

A patient is wheeled in and the doctor has to make a split-second decision on treatment that might preserve or end a life. "That kind of stuff doesn't happen in dermatology," he says with a laugh.

Singleman says there are online questionnaires to help people identify their level of sensation seeking. "Elements of the high sensation-seeking profile include being socially extroverted; trying new things; preferring spicy, sour and crunchy foods.

"They love complex music, like the classics or loud rock, rather than bland pop; they appreciate abstract art rather than representational art," he says.

At The Australian School of Business at the University of NSW, professor of business psychology Chris Jackson has been undertaking research on risk-taking behaviour.

Previously, such behaviour was thought of as destructive and likely to lead to crime and drug addiction but, says Jackson, if it is properly directed it can also be the personality factor that can create the Richard Bransons and Bill Gates of the business world.

Bill Gates? We might not be able to imagine him donning his cardigan to go gumball racing (he shares a passion for bridge with US billionaire investor Warren Buffett), but he certainly showed an appetite for corporate risk in his creation of the Microsoft empire.

Jackson, with Peter O'Connor from the School of Psychology at the University of Queensland, has found people with high levels of sensation seeking — who also have strong cognitive skills in goal orientation — do better in performance tests.

This means if people with a tendency to seek out risks are taught how to set and achieve goals — rather than drop everything for a quick thrill — they could have the ingredients to become successful entrepreneurs.

The academics say have come up with a personality model that will be a stronger predictor of performance in the workplace than previous tests.

"Entrepreneurs are more likely to be sensation seekers; they have more energy, get up and go, and they want to go out and do wonderful and great things.

"Successful entrepreneurs control and redirect their sensations towards positive outcomes; they take calculated risks," says Jackson.

Research on this personality type shows they are also more likely to wander off into the dark side and develop antisocial tendencies. High sensation seekers are more likely to be in jails, to be drug takers or problem gamblers.

"There are plenty of people who crash and burn," he says.

Jackson's point is that sensation-seeking is a double-edged sword. If adventure seeking is all you have, you could be in for a hard life. But, if it is expressed in a positive way and moderated by goal setting, you have a powerful ability to achieve.

By trying to understand what makes some people so successful, it is possible to design

"interventions" for those heading down the wrong path, or training programs for those with potential.

He says that, while Richard Branson often seems to be pushing the boundaries with his publicity seeking, his stunts are carefully managed to make sure he arrives back safely.

Larry Ellison reached his barrier after the 1998 Sydney to Hobart race, when a vicious storm took the lives of six sailors on other boats — he announced he would henceforth leave sport to others, no doubt to the relief of his shareholders.