

Intuition at work

Many leaders believe that their intuition, often described as ‘gut instinct’ is indispensable when making business decisions. Whilst the likes of Bill Gates of Microsoft uses and endorses this approach, harder evidence is needed. What exactly is intuition, how does it work and can it be developed?

The consensus among international researchers is that intuition is:

- Uninvited and instant. It is an automatic, involuntary response to complex problems and decisions.
- Affective. It is accompanied by gut feelings of varying levels of intensity.
- Holistic. It allows us to “parallel process” information quickly and efficiently and to see the bigger picture.
- Non-conscious. We are aware of the outcomes of intuition. The process occurs “backstage” and is therefore non conscious.
- Potentially powerful. Intuition can be powerful way to handle complex problems under time pressure. In the wrong hands, it can be ineffective and even dangerous.

Intuition can be understood in terms of a “two minds” model. We have 2 minds, one analytical and the other is intuitive. This is not the same as the old idea of the split brain, which has intuition and creativity housed in the right hemisphere and analysis and rationality in the left one. Modern neuroscience paints a far more complex picture of the neural geography of human thinking. The dual processing capacity that comes with having two minds gives us the potential to be cognitively ambidextrous. i.e. to solve problems and make decisions using analysis or intuition depending on the situation. Neither mind is intrinsically better than the other. They are good at different sorts of things. Refer to the table one, two minds model.



The Two Minds MODEL

Analytical Mind	Intuitive Mind
Narrow bandwidth (serial processor)	Broad bandwidth (parallel processor)
Controlled	Automatic processing
Step by step	Whole pattern recognition
Conscious	Non-Conscious
Talks in the language of words	Talks in the language of feelings
Fast formation	Slow formation
Slow operation	Fast operation

Source: M.Lieberman "Social Cognitive Neuroscience"

Unfortunately, like management, traditional learning and development practice has been dominated by an analytical model and as a consequence, intuition has tended to be kept firmly in the closet. Even though managers inevitably experience intuition, they sometimes feel uncomfortable in admitting to its existence or in embracing it when it does occur.

But, if you take the perspective of intuition as expertise, gut feeling is the payback for years of learning, practice, performance and of course, mistakes. Complex situations that we have met many times before can become compressed by repeated performance and "automated" i.e. knowledge and skill migrate from the analytical mind

to the intuitive mind. But that is not to say that learning ever stops, even for intuitive experts.

Experienced managers often report simply knowing what to do in complex, fast moving and uncertain situations. If asked to explain their reasoning, they may end up dumfounded, not because they can not decompress that intuition to form an analytical explanation, they know, but they do not know how or why they know. This view of informed intuition reveals gut feeling to be anything but a paranormal sixth sense and it gives some important clues about how it can be developed and the role that the learning and development practitioners can play.

Experts in any field, ranging from management to musical performance have extensive databases of knowledge and skills held in their long term memories that provide patterns and prototypes. These highly complex mental models are built through formal learning, exposure to challenging problems and feedback. Novices' mental models lack complexity. As a result, they tend to stick to the rules and procedures they have taught in a non nuanced way, without taking the contextual subtleties into account.

Intuitive experts, on the other hand, have the enough skill to discriminate among many contextual variables and decide quickly on a viable course of action without considering the full range of possible strategies, especially when they are lacking resources and time. Managers who possess intuitive expertise exhibit a fluidity of performance, which is as easy for them to execute as it is hard for them to articulate.

Informed intuition is born out of many years, consisting of tens of thousands of hours of experience and learning. Intuitive experts are not born, they are made and there are few, if any, shortcuts to becoming one. But there are important ways to facilitate the process of becoming intuitive.

There is an important distinction between simple learning, by doing and the type of learning that is required to become a genuine expert. As well as routinely practising what can be achieved, experts also engage in activities that they cannot perform well in order to stretch themselves. Continuing professional development is vital in managing the process.

It is important for learners to get quickly on to the trajectory of becoming an expert in whatever type or level they are in. This means becoming motivated and taking up the challenge to develop informed intuition in both simulated and real learning environments where there is focussed and deliberate practice outside your comfort zone. The required ongoing precise, relevant and candid feedback from an expert or coach.

The development of intuitive expertise is the cornerstone of informed intuition, but it is important to embrace the more innate and subjective aspects. Recognising gut feelings as a valid source of data means not mixing them up with basic emotions and also learning how to put a brake on the personal prejudices, biases and wishful thinking that can hijack good intuitive judgement.

Intuitions often have to be communicated to other people, but the default mode of expression in business is the precise and literal use of words i.e. the voice of the ana-

lytical mind. The intuitive mind prefers to use modes such as metaphors grounded in feelings e.g. describing a report as “not stacking up” or a situation as one that “stinks”, or visual images e.g. experiencing a mental picture of a potential future state. These channels must be acknowledged and respected as valid means for expressing and interpreting intuitions. It is also vital to develop skills in using them in interpersonal dialogues. After all, it is only by accessing and articulating our gut feelings that we will be able to use them constructively in team working.

Sometimes it is wholly inappropriate to use intuition, especially in quantification environments, where it is better to rely on the analytical mind or a computer. There are of course many situations that are well suited to intuition as highlighted in the table below. We need to remember that successful intuition tends to be highly visible and widely reported, while unsuccessful intuition is more likely to get under reported.

When it is good to use intuition

Sensing when a problem might exist. For example, when someone’s story does not add up

Synthesising the big picture. When faced with several isolated pieces of information, intuition lets us stand back and sense how the pieces might fit together.

If expectations are violated. When we expect a situation to go a certain way but it does not, this can set off intuitive alarm bell

Performing well learned behaviour patterns rapidly. We can often simply go ahead and something in a situation that is familiar, rather than thinking too much about it.

Checking out the results of rational analysis. Sensing when hard data does not feel quite right, intuition allows us to seek more information or look at what data we do have in a different angle



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Both the intuitive and the analytical mind have vital roles to play in thinking, judging, deciding and problem solving. It is important that we are open to both and able to get the best out of them and that we use them as checks and balances on each other.

Intuition is becoming increasingly accepted in management and is relevant to a number of vital aspects of business. For example, there is the entrepreneurial intuition that can spot a potentially viable business opportunity that others miss. Then there is the moral intuition that can alert us to unethical behaviour and there is a social intuition, which can help us to understand and empathise with the motives and intentions of other people.