

Business Intuition

By Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D.

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Think back over your career. How many times have you had a strong feeling (positive or negative) about a job, a co-worker, a potential business deal? How often were your instincts correct? We all have flashes of intuition, but many of us ignore or distrust them as irrational and useless distractions. We may need to reconsider . . .

I've just finished reading Malcolm Gladwell's new book ("Blink") about the power of first impressions. It opens with the story of an ancient Greek statue that came on the art market and was about to be purchased by the Getty Museum. The asking price was just under \$10 million.

The Getty did all the normal background checks to establish authenticity. A geologist determined that the marble came from the ancient Cape Vathy quarry. It was covered with a thin layer of calcite, a substance that accumulates on statues over hundreds or perhaps thousands of years. After 14 months of investigation, the Getty staff concluded the thing was genuine, and went ahead with the purchase.

But an art historian named Federico Zeri was taken to see the statue, and in an instant he decided it was fake. Another art historian took a glimpse and sensed that while the form was correct, the work somehow lacked spirit. A third felt a wave of "intuitive repulsion" when he first laid eyes on it.

Further investigations were made, and finally it was discovered that the statue had been sculpted by forgers in Rome. The teams of analysts who did the 14 months of research turned out to be wrong. The historians who relied on their initial hunches were right.

I especially like this story because it aligns so strongly with my research in organizational creativity. Whether they call it a hunch, a gut feeling, or a flash of insight, thousands of successful managers and executives make business decisions using their intuition. Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Conrad Hilton are famous examples of executives who relied heavily on intuitive business decisions. A story about Conrad Hilton highlights the value of what was referred to as "one of Connie's hunches." There was to be a sealed bid on a New York property. Hilton evaluated its worth at \$159,000 and prepared a bid in that amount. He slept that night and upon awakening, the figure \$174,000 stood out in his mind. He changed the bid and submitted the higher figure. It won. The next highest bid was \$173,000. He subsequently sold the property for several million dollars.

At the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Douglas Dean studied the relationship between intuition and business success. He found that 80 percent of executives whose companies' profits had more than doubled in the past five years had above average precognitive powers. Management professor Weston Agor of the University of Texas in El Paso found that of the 2,000 managers he tested, higher-level managers had the top scores in intuition. Most of these executives first digested all the relevant information and data available, but when the data was conflicting or incomplete, they relied on intuitive approaches to come to a conclusion.

Computer whiz Allan Huang had puzzled for months over a recurring dream in which two opposing armies of sorcerers' apprentices carried pails filled with data. Most nights, the two armies marched toward each other but stopped just short of confrontation. Other times they collided, tying themselves into a big red knot. Then one night, something different happened - the armies marched right into each other, but with no collision. Instead, they passed harmlessly through each other like light passing through light. Huang had been wrestling for years with the challenge of creating an optical computer. Such a computer would transmit data by means of

tiny laser beams passing through prisms, mirrors, and fiber-optic threads. But until the dream opened Huang's eyes to the solution, all the designs he could think of were too cumbersome to build.

Then Huang understood: just like the opposing armies in his dream, laser beams could pass through one another unchanged. It wasn't necessary to give each laser its own discrete pathway. With this new insight, Huang went on to create the first working optical computer.

As the rate of change and volume of information accelerates, analysis alone is often too slow a process to be effective. Many times it is the hunch that defies logic, the gut feeling or flash of subconscious insight that brings the best solution. Those professionals who are both highly cognitive and highly intuitive have a distinct advantage in meeting challenges and solving problems.

To develop your business intuition, begin by keeping a journal. Use it to capture your ideas, observations, and perceptions. Write down your dreams, feelings and hunches. If you are going into a business meeting with people you haven't met, guess how they'll look and how they'll approach the business they plan to conduct. Record flashes of insight and keep a record of decisions you make on that basis. Check back occasionally to see which of your hunches were correct. By keeping score you will be able to evaluate (and increase) your accuracy.

In all of our brains, there is a powerful subconscious process, which works to sift huge amounts of information, blend data, isolate telling details, and come to astonishingly rapid conclusions. Our job is to better understand that process so we can nurture it, trust it, and use it!

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