



Intuition

December 2011
Volume 10 Issue 12



William E. Caswell

Bill Caswell is an experienced coach of CEOs and senior executives and the author of *The Respect Revolution*, a 12-book series written by a CEO for CEOs as a guide to getting companies to *Excellence*



The Respect Revolution

This 12-volume book series guides a business to *Excellence* and keeps it there.

Get your copy now, available at your local bookstore or at www.respectrevolution.com

Do you have topic ideas? Comments or questions?

Contact Upkar Bilkhu
CCCC

99 Fifth Ave. Suite 420
Ottawa, ON K1S 5P5
Tel: (613) 232-1243

Email:
ubilkhu@caswellccc.com

www.caswellccc.com

Studies on intuition have been led by world-famous psychologist, author and Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Daniel Kahneman¹. We will quote some of his findings.

To begin describing these concepts, let us advise you that it is now realized that most impressions and thoughts arise in your conscious without your knowing how they got there. You cannot trace how you came to the belief that there is a page in front of you that you are now reading or how you detected a hint of irritation of your friend in the last phone call you had with him or how you quickly swerved on the road to avoid an accident. The mental work that produces such impressions or intuitions goes on in silence in our minds.

Most of our judgments and actions so motivated are appropriate most of the time. This allows us to develop confidence in our intuitive beliefs and, so, our preference to follow them is usually justified.

But this is not always the case.

We are often confident when we are wrong. What is worse, we are usually blind to that error possibility. For example when we meet a new person, we allow our intuition to guide us about the goodness or badness of such a person and we are totally confident about that judgment.

This decision making may occur when we are hiring a person or falling in love. In either example, especially prevalent in the hiring domain, this can lead to the wrong choice – although at the point of our intuitive decision we are adamant about the ‘rightness’ of this choice. An objective observer – not carrying our mental history that forms this particular intuitive conclusion – is more likely to detect our error than we are. That is why at least two people should be involved in hiring decisions.²

People are good intuitive processors for what they know. This expert knowledge based intuition serves the contractor well in his trade. His experience tells him intuitively when concrete has not yet dried. But people are not good intuitive processors for what they don’t know. When you meet a new person, you pick up on all the clues that you see and compare them with the incredible wealth of the information you know. However, you cannot possibly pick up on the aspects of that new person that you do not see.

¹ Kahneman, D., *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Doubleday Canada, Toronto ON, 2011

² It is also why CCCC advocates a hiring process where you do NOT interview the prospect but instead, test the prospect, first.



Experiments have illustrated the tendency of humans to take the easy route – the one offered by intuition – while completely ignoring simple statistics or facts. Such facts would be available if humans had just taken a second more (spending time with their logical processor rather than solely with their emotional processor) to investigate such facts. Let us give one of Dr. Kahneman's example experiments:

“Steve is very shy and withdrawn, invariably helpful but with little interest in people or in the world of reality. A meek and tidy soul, he has a need for order and structure, and a passion for detail.

Is Steve more likely to be a librarian or a farmer?”

For most people in the experiment, all college students, their intuition associated all the seen information above with their own personal history about the population and quickly concluded with the illogical answer that Steve is more likely to be a librarian. The fact is that there are more than 20 farmers for each librarian in North America so Steve's likelihood of being a farmer is much greater. What people do, is to ignore the relevant statistical facts they would have to think about and rely exclusively on the quick intuitive answer. We will always take the shorter route if we think it is right. While not all people know that there are 20 farmers for each librarian, most educated people with a bit of logical thinking can realize that the farmer population is much greater than the librarian population. A clue is that farmers are in the news, or mentioned on TV, much more often than librarians. If there are substantially more farmers, the odds favor Steve being a farmer. If you are still wrestling with this conclusion, don't be surprised. Your intuition thinks you are 'right'.

The studies by Dr Kahneman centre on the 'biases' of intuitive thinking. One conclusion is that people tend to assess the importance of issues with the relative ease with which they are retrieved from memory.

At last, in the social science community, the idea is generally accepted that our minds are susceptible to systematic errors. We now understand the marvels as well as the flaws of intuitive thought. The marvel of intuition is that, with the smallest possible clue from a situation, a person who is experienced in that type of situation is given access to information stored in the brain's memory which quickly provides the right answer. The error comes when other significant factors are at play which we have not bothered to consider because of the unjustified confidence we have, even when the intuition has limited information. Since, as we have stated in our paper, *Emotions trump Logic*³, the intuitive part of the brain operates so much more quickly⁴, it would take an added effort by us to explore the logical options.

It behooves us all to consult the logical brain more often.

Good luck

Bill Caswell

³ The paper explains how and why the Emotional processor in the brain operates up to 100 times faster than the Logic processor in the brain.

⁴ Hence Dr. Kahneman's title: *Thinking, Fast and Slow*