T rusting Your Gut?

A student the other day indicated that she wanted to trust her gut more. Yikes!! What exactly does this even mean? Gut instincts are our initial reaction to a situation; it’s the first thought or thoughts that pop into our heads when we are presented with options. Gut instinct is another name for intuition—the ability to understand something immediately without cognitive reasoning. “Without cognitive reasoning” is a dangerous combination of words. Take a moment to rationalize how likely it is that a decision that we make on a whim is the correct one (assuming there is a correct one, of course).

When most people go on their gut feelings, they are not hedging their bets on a 90% success rate, but rather on a 50% success rate; you are either right or wrong—50-50. There seems to be three acceptable explanations for why a person would decide to dominantly rely on their intuition. One, they have gotten lucky with the coin flip several times in the past and are under the illusion that their gut instinct produces decisions of substance.

Two, they believe there is some outside force directing them towards the correct decision—call it a deity, fate, lady luck or some spiritual energy that keeps the world in balance. Or three, they have been making such decisions for years and have mastered the subject matter—they have the experience necessary to make a gut instinct a reliable one. Rationally speaking, unless you have the experience, you should NOT be relying on your intuition as much as many of us currently are. Let me say this again, unless you are truly a veteran in whatever subject matter you are making the decision for, it’s best to use reasoning rather than intuition. Interestingly, Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, gives us a clue to not only be an expert but to also become a phenom; i.e., to be so freakishly awesome, to be such a standout among your peers, that sometimes your first name is enough to tell people who you are: Peyton. Tiger. Kobe. Venus. Oprah. Gladwell talks about the 10,000 rule to give us some idea of what it might take to achieve such levels: “In fact, by the age of twenty, the elite performers (violinists) had each totaled ten thousand hours of practice” (Gladwell, 2008, p. 38); he also indicated that, “The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything,” writes the neurologist Daniel Levitin” (Gladwell, 2008, p. 40); Gladwell (2008) also noted that “To become a chess grandmaster also seems to take about ten years. (Only the legendary Bobby Fisher got to that elite level in less than that amount of time: it took him nine years.) And what’s ten years? Well, it’s roughly how long it takes to put in ten thousand hours of hard practice. Ten thousand hours is the magic number of greatness” (p. 41).

A short-hand version of the rational decision-making/problem solving model is:

1. Define the problem and gather information
2. Generate possible alternatives
3. Evaluate alternatives and select one or some combination
4. Implement and evaluate
This applies model applies to almost every situation that you could possibly find yourself in. When making business decisions and deciding which candidate to hire, which manufacturer to enter into contract with or whether or not to merge with a competitor, etc., rational thinking is the only mode of decision-making that we should be relying on. Rational thinking is what brought the human race to the top of the food chain. However, this is not to say that each one of us has mastered it; it doesn’t come naturally, but must be trained—like a muscle.

I understand that often we are not rational and that sometimes we satisfice (a decision-making strategy or cognitive heuristic that entails searching through the available alternatives until an acceptability threshold is met, not necessarily the best alternative) but the idea of having some sort of systematic protocol beats the alternative.

Of course, that is not to say that rational thought is the end-all to every predicament. There are times when we simply do not have the information necessary to make an informed decision based on reasoning. Nevertheless, rationality still plays a role. If you don’t have all the information then you gamble—you place your bets on what you believe has the best possible outcome, calculating for risk.

Yet, there is some subject matter that rationality tends to fail—matters of the heart. But if we were to do our best to be rational when overwhelmed by emotion—although admittedly difficult—we would still be more likely to come out the other end of that tunnel happier than were we to rely strictly on our intuition, on our gut feeling. Do your best to be rational. It’s the simplest and most important of tools allotted to human beings.

Those of you who believe in intuition may be engaging in magical thinking (http://blog.threestarleadership.com/2007/09/09/magical-thinking-and-management.aspx), similar to those “Pollyanna’s” who believe that positive thinking is the be all and end all. Consider the following story:

Some time ago Oprah Winfrey began holding auditions to give someone their own talk show, which will air on her future network, OWN. According to Oprah’s own promo video, she is looking for someone with “infectious energy, a unique sense of humor and personality galore.” (Weight troubles are apparently optional.)

But when it comes to what Oprah thinks made her the biggest talk show host in the world, she doesn’t mention any of these qualities. Time and again she mainly credits her success to one thing: her gut instincts; her intuition.


That same year she said the very same thing to the graduating class at Stanford University: “Every right decision I’ve made—every right decision I’ve ever made—has come from my gut.”
A year later, in her commencement speech at Duke University, she again drove home the point: “I am who I am because I trust my gut more than anyone else’s opinion, and that is my best advice to you.”

But what kind of advice is that, really? Hundreds of wannabe crooners have made public spectacles of themselves on American Idol because their guts insisted their off-key warbling would make them the next Kelly Clarkson. Many people were bilked of their life savings because their guts told them Bernie Madoff was a genius investor.

Perhaps Oprah has a gut made for shrewd life guidance while the rest of our guts are made for nothing but occasional indigestion?

Not so, say Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, authors of the book, The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us. While gut instincts, even Oprah’s, are fine for emotional preferences like deciding which ice cream you might like, or even which coworker you might get along with, they are pretty lousy decision makers for much else.

Chabris and Simons, both psychology professors, define intuition (we might call it a “gut feeling”) as something we intuitively accept and believe, which then influences our decisions automatically and without reflection. For example, we may hire a candidate based on a “feeling” that he or she is right for the job, rather than on more objective measures of performance, such as experience or education.

Indeed, influential mavens like Oprah and popular books like Malcolm Gladwell’s Blink have gone a long way toward cementing the notion that gut instincts are more important deciding factors than deductive reasoning. “It has become fashionable to argue that intuitive methods of thinking and making decisions are superior to analytical methods,” write Chabris and Simons.

However, Simons asserts that this way of thinking is “dangerous.”

For instance, we tend to believe that people who exude confidence are more knowledgeable. In reality, “people who are really lousy at something act as if they know what they are doing,” says Simons. “The least competent are the most overconfident.” This was vividly demonstrated by Justin Kruger and David Dunning in their famous study, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments” aka “Stupid People Don’t Realize They’re Stupid.”

Simons points out that when we choose a doctor, we would normally go for the one who seems to have the answer for everything over one who admits to being baffled by our symptoms. Intuition guides us to believe that confidence equals competence. But that’s completely backward.

“You want a doctor who will give some indication that they don’t know something and will be willing to call someone who might,” says Simons. “You don’t want someone who is so sure of themselves that they are not willing to listen to others.” (Let’s hope that Oprah’s advice about
always listening to your gut over others’ opinions wasn’t taken too seriously by the future physicians in the class at Stanford or Duke.)

Our intuition also tells us that our memories are vivid and accurate, especially when it comes to our recollections of searing events like 9/11. In reality, these remembrances are pretty faulty. Simons says that when we are arguing with someone, we should always be open to the idea that our perception of who said what or did what is way off base. He even goes so far as to suggest that if hubby insists he is doing his share of the housework, we might not believe him, since we are much more inclined to remember our own work than someone else’s. (Obviously, Simons has some wild theories.)

Memory, he adds, also becomes reworked to be consistent with what we find out later. Thus, if you discover your husband is cheating on you, all of those “signs” you think you should have seen suddenly become, in hindsight, crystal clear. Then we excoriate ourselves for not trusting our “gut instincts.” Ever heard of the hindsight bias?

And when things do work out, as Oprah’s career obviously has, then we overly credit our gut for making the right decisions, when many other factors of deductive reasoning, or even pure chance, were likely involved.

Why do we give our gut feeling so much power to influence our decisions when it’s about as reliable as a BP (British Petroleum; remember the Gulf oil spill?) executive’s plan to stop an oil leak? Because, Simons says, for millions of years, trusting our gut wasn’t a bad “default setting” for the human mind.

Our lives used to be a lot simpler. For example, back when we had small, tight social clans and saw the same people every day, whether someone was truly competent or merely confident would soon become apparent.

But our guts aren’t quite advanced enough to guide us through the myriad complex challenges that 2014 throws our way. Like whether a person we’ve only spoken to online is who they say they are or whether someone we hire after meeting for only a few minutes turns out to be the right person.

“Everyone wants a quick fix,” says Simons. “But the license to go with your gut about complicated decisions that would benefit from analysis has been taken too far.”

When it comes to picking the next big talk show host, Oprah may follow the guidelines in her promo video—and choose someone based on their energy, sense of humor and personality. But I’m guessing her gut will have a major say. It’s gotten her this far, after all. I might trust Oprah’s gut but I’m not going to trust MINE or YOURS—and neither should you!
I want to end with this quote from business guru, Peter Lynch, in his text, *The Book of Business Wisdom: Classic Writings by the Legends of Commerce and Industry*: “The trick is not to learn to trust your gut feelings, but rather to discipline yourself to ignore them.”

As a practical application for those of us taking multiple-choice tests, I’d suggest you take a quick review of the following article: “Counterfactual Thinking and the First Instinct Fallacy.” The gist of this paper is that people who believe that they should avoid changing their answer when taking multiple-choice tests (stick with your first instinct) are WRONG! Most answer changes are from incorrect to correct, and people who change their answers usually improve their test scores!

How ‘bouts dem apples?