On Common Sense

Please take the following short quiz (then see answers on the next page to see how you did).

1. How long did the Hundred Years War last?
2. What kind of creatures were the Canary Islands named after?
3. In what season of the year did William Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream take place?
4. Where do Chinese gooseberries come from?
5. Who discovered Haley’s comet?
6. What is the highest temperature in the Arctic?
7. Where does catgut come from?
8. Who invented the automobile?
9. Where did the battle of Bunker Hill take place?
10. Who is buried in Grant’s tomb?

How did you do?
The quiz illustrates how people quickly and easily assume something and take it for fact when it has no factual basis. As you can see, common sense is not a good guide to much. Be careful in simply using common sense in our class. It is merely the product of unanalyzed experience, much of it misleading. Moreover, common sense is often used to explain things using folk wisdom as indicated below. Common sense supporters can explain just about anything as in the following examples:

**Common Sense**

**On the one hand**
- Look before you leap.
- You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.
- Out of sight, out of mind.
- Better safe than sorry.
- Opposites attract.
- Two heads are better than one.

**On the other hand**
- People who hesitate are lost.
- It’s never too late to learn.
- Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
- Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- Birds of a feather flock together.
- If you want something done right; do it yourself.

It is disconcerting to me as a behavioral scientist to see how people use similar, unfounded commonsense analyses in daily human interaction, where the stakes are so high. Behavior based on this type of faulty thinking costs businesses billions of dollars every year and contributes to untold misery in human relationships. It is unfortunate that most people think that effective human relationships are the result of nothing but the use of good old common sense. Yikes!!