



THE POWER AND PERIL OF “THINKING WITHOUT THINKING”

BY JANICE MOLLOY



Blink
Malcolm Gladwell

Without once mentioning the concepts of feedback loops, delays, or behavior over time, best-selling author and frequent contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine Malcolm Gladwell may be the most influential advocate of systems thinking and organizational learning currently in the public eye.

In his first book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown, 2000), Gladwell focused on the forces that set off dramatic changes in fortune—either for better or for worse. Those steeped in the principles of systems thinking know of these dynamics as reinforcing loops—processes that quietly build on themselves over time until they “tip over” into dramatic exponential growth. Examples of what Gladwell refers to as “social epidemics” include the skyrocketing rise in cell phone usage and the precipitous fall in violent crime in New York City during the mid-1990s.

Gladwell’s hot new book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown, 2005), investigates how the human mind makes snap decisions—sometimes with beneficial and sometimes with detrimental results. This process of “rapid cognition” is rooted in what scholars in the fields of organizational learning and psychology refer to as “mental models”—the attitudes and perceptions that influence our thoughts and, in turn, actions. Many factors con-

tribute to the formation of our mental models, including experience and personality.

The ability to “think without thinking” has several important functions: It allows us to cut through information overload to come to good decisions and it lets us respond quickly and decisively in times of crisis. Gladwell says, “The only way that human beings could ever have survived as a species for as long as we have is that we’ve developed another kind of decision-making apparatus that’s capable of making very quick judgments based on very little information.” He continues, “Whenever we meet someone for the first time, whenever we interview someone for a job, whenever we react to a new idea, whenever we’re faced with making a decision quickly and under stress, we use that second part of our brain.”

Through experience and expertise, we can learn to instinctively sort through the barrage of details to identify those that really matter.

Instinct over Intellect

To illustrate this point, Gladwell opens the book with the dramatic example of a controversial acquisition during the mid-1980s by the J. Paul Getty Museum in California. Eager to bolster its collections, the museum spent \$10 million dollars on a rare ancient Greek sculpture called a *kouros*. For 14 months before purchasing the statue, a series of top experts evaluated its authenticity. Based on

scientific tests of the marble and research on its history, they concurred: The piece was authentic.

But throughout the evaluation process, a number of art historians and others steeped in the specifics of ancient Greek art expressed their doubts about the authenticity of the *kouros*. Each based his or her judgment, not on minute analysis of the sculpture’s features, but on an initial, visceral response that something was wrong. These gut reactions were based on internalized, unconscious knowledge—what some might call instinct—developed over years of study of Greek sculpture. In response to this questioning, the museum scrutinized the statue’s documentation more carefully and found that it had been falsified. In this case, and many others that Gladwell offers, instinct prevailed over intellect.

Leaps in Logic

But rapid cognition can also lead us to benign overgeneralizations, unintentional bigotry, or even tragic leaps in logic. The case of Amadou Diallo, in which four New York City police officers shot an unarmed man who was reaching for his wallet, captures the downside of snap judgments. Based on the setting, Diallo’s race, and what they perceived to be suspicious actions on his part, the officers instantly jumped to a series of deadly conclusions. In the chain reaction of events that followed, they fired 41 shots. The entire incident transpired in a matter of moments. Gladwell quotes psychologist Keith Payne as saying, “When we make a split-second decision, we are really vulnerable to being guided by our stereotypes and prejudices, even ones we may not necessarily endorse or believe.”

Life-and-death situations aren't the only times that unconscious stereotypes come into play. Gladwell also shows how tall men are disproportionately represented in the ranks of CEOs in the United States. He refers to this as the "Warren Harding error." According to the official White House website, "An Ohio admirer, Harry Daugherty, began to promote Harding for the 1920 Republican nomination because, he later explained, 'He looked like a President.'" Nevertheless, even though he appeared and sounded as though he would be a wonderful leader, Harding is regarded by many historians as the worst president in the nation's history. In today's world, the unconscious prejudice in favor of large men fails to serve the best interests of organizations and the

people who work in them.

Boundless Wisdom

So, how can we enjoy the benefits of rapid cognition while avoiding its shadow side? *The Fifth Discipline* (now available in a newly released second edition) and other resources for managers offer simple tools, such as the ladder of inference, that can help us recognize how we assign meaning to data, learn to test our assumptions, and reach better conclusions. We can also develop strategies to short-circuit the leap to judgment. For instance, in order to overcome prejudices against female musicians, orchestras now routinely have candidates audition behind screens. The result has been a dramatic rise in the number of women in top orchestras. Police departments now

have policies intended to control the interaction between an officer and a suspect, thereby reducing the chances that either party will jump to an unfortunate conclusion about the other's intentions. Finally, through experience and expertise in our chosen field, we can learn to instinctively sort through the barrage of details to identify those that really matter in making a decision.

All of Gladwell's fascinating anecdotes emphasize one thing: the almost boundless wisdom of the human mind. *Blink* is a powerful contribution toward helping us make the most its hidden capabilities. ■

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