

Observations on Leadership

Intuitive Intelligence in Leadership



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In developing the strategic skills of senior management in the corporate universities of several of the world's largest corporations, (e.g. Telefónica, BASF, METRO AG), the Oxford Leadership™ rates 'intuitive intelligence' as one of the most important areas of leadership development.

Brian Bacon, Chairman and Founder of Oxford Leadership, discusses how they develop the intuitive intelligence of leaders and why it is a critical factor in leadership development.

Can you think of an occasion where you've had a gut feeling that something wasn't right about a significant business issue but didn't listen to your intuition and later regretted it? Do you often doubt your intuition in favour of hard evidence to support your business decisions? If so, you may be underutilising one of the most powerful leadership tools, your intuitive intelligence.

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

Albert Einstein

Do you trust your gut when it comes to the big stuff? Instincts and hunches may have a comforting influence on day-to-day decisions, but when it comes to major strategic choices and matters of great complexity, intuition doesn't often get a seat in the C-Suite.

Leaders are more likely to rely on hard evidence and data, logic and rational analysis to support their biggest and most important decisions. However, recent insights and discoveries in the field of neuroscience have given new importance and credibility to the role of intuition in leadership, especially when it comes to decision making.

We use our instinct and intuition in many facets of our lives. It may be one thing to do so in your personal life, but is it quite another to use intuition at work?

Many people may feel that intuition has little or no place in business, and that decisions should be based on empirical evidence rather than on trusting your gut feeling. But there is increasing evidence that intuition is more than merely a feeling. Many scientists now believe that it is, in fact, the result of our brains piecing together information and experiences to come to different, and less obvious, solutions and conclusions. Publications such as 'Intelligent Memory: Improve the Memory That Makes You Smarter,' by neuroscientist Barry Gordon, show that decision making and intuition are inextricably linked.

Leadership experts and those working in organisational development give a lot of credence to IQ and EQ (emotional intelligence) but, in fact, 'intuitive intelligence' is perhaps the greatest weapon for business decision making. Some people think that if they're not creative they don't have much propensity for intuitive thinking. They assume that intuition, like creative thinking is a right brain function. However, whereas many skills and capabilities are relegated to the 'left' brain or 'right' brain, intuition is a 'whole' brain function.

I've spent much of my career working with some of the world's largest corporations, and some of the best managers and strategists used their intuition first before looking to back it up with facts; almost as if the intuitive approach was the starting point and the measurement came afterwards. Intuition needs to be trained. It's a learned skill and the more you use it, the more reliable it becomes.



The Oxford Dictionaries define intuition as “the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning. We sometimes think of it as something magical, quixotic, and somewhat unreliable because often, what passes for intuition can't be trusted. Freud introduced us to the idea that what we think we know about ourselves may have nothing to do with what is actually going on in our psyches. More than a century of research clearly demonstrates that some of our behaviour is directed by unconscious wishes or beliefs that are the exact opposite of what we think we want or believe to be true.



Intuition is nothing more and nothing less than pattern recognition, they come from our experiences. As Herbert Simon said: "Intuition is analyses frozen into habits and into the capacity for rapid response through recognition."

What goes for cocktail parties also goes for the voices in our heads. Somewhere in there among the worries, doubts, questions, advice, and roar of the crowd, lives your intuition, your 'inner voice.' You can hear it to the extent that you have honed your intuitive intelligence well enough to give it your undivided attention - and know yourself well enough to distinguish valid intuition from wishful thinking, ego or unwarranted attachment to an idea.

Intuitive intelligence can be trained.

We can learn to use intuition in trustworthy ways to address issues large and small, to create opportunities, develop plans, solve pressing problems, open up new possibilities, resolve dilemmas, etc.

Those who are training to sharpen their cognitive sensors are encouraged to use their intuitive senses when they are making decisions. This is especially beneficial when you are taking some tough decisions which have far-reaching implications in your work life. Your intuition can reveal some aspects of your situation which your ability to reason cannot. In fact, your internal radar works perfectly. It is the operator who is in question. There are things your gut knows long before your intellect catches on. Every day, all day, an intelligent agent is sending you messages. The best leaders have learned not only to trust their instincts,

but to obey them. Obeying your instincts requires that you listen to your own internal voice, and acknowledge your internal reference point, rather than rush to embrace the myriad references and voices of others. Your instincts are readily available 24/7.

Your mind is continually in overdrive. You spend a lot of time in an internal dialogue - in other words, you're busy having a conversation with yourself. If you were to speak out loud the dialogue that goes on inside your head, you would be labeled, well... a bit crazy. And often, the self-talk is negative rather than positive and constructive. You can change that. Developing the 'intuitive intelligence' of leaders is at the heart of what we do here at Oxford Leadership™. The basis for 'intuition intelligence' is a powerful new science of the mind known as 'Intelligent Memory' - a convergence of insights from behavioural psychology, cognitive psychology, neuroscience and molecular biology.

As Barry Gordon states in his book 'Intelligent Memory: Improve the Memory That Makes You Smarter', "Since birth our brains compartmentalise experiences and information akin to an elaborate closet organisation system. The brain warehouses existing knowledge into separate files and, when new data is received, it searches the stored files looking for similar information. Upon finding a match, the new information is combined with the existing knowledge to create a fresh thought.

This process, called intelligent memory, is the basis for producing creative breakthrough ideas."

Looking at this further, the breaking down and storing process is analysis. The searching and combining is intuition. Both are necessary for all kinds of thought. Even a mathematical calculation requires the intuition part, for example, to recall the symbols and formula previously learned in order to apply them to the problem. When the pieces come off the shelf smoothly, in familiar patterns, you don't even realise it has happened. When lots of different pieces combine into a new pattern, you feel it as a flash of insight, the famous "aha!" moment.

The situations in which leaders most consistently rely on their intuitive intelligence in business include:

- **In a crisis:**
When rapid response is required and there is no time to go through a complete rational process of analysis
- **In high-speed change:**
When the factors upon which decisions are made change rapidly, without warning
- **In a messy situation:**
When a problem or challenge is poorly constructed
- **In an ambiguous situation:**
When the factors to be considered are hard to articulate without sounding contradictory

In helping leaders expand their intuitive intelligence and develop greater trust in their 'flashes of insight' we train them in the following 5 step process:

01.

Be Present: become mentally quiet and develop an 'eye of the storm' mental posture. As you may have seen a martial arts master do - centre yourself mentally, disconnect from the emotions of the situation. Detach from all noise and voices, just be still and observe. Be inside. Listen. Look. Suspend judgment. Don't analyse or try to understand. Just quietly observe. In a crisis, this can be done in just a matter of seconds. It's the starting point to engagement of the whole brain.

02.

See the Whole Picture: interrogate the context. Become a detached observer of the situation and embrace the big picture. Get off the dance floor, stand on the balcony and look at the situation from a different, elevated perspective. See what has gone on before. Recall lessons from history, things you've read and may have forgotten. Actually it's all stored there in your intelligent memory. Engage other players. Talk with them, not at them. Be curious. Take in all different perspectives and data points. This engages your intelligent memory, and theirs as well. Such conversations stimulate creative collaboration. One person's observation sparks off another and a chain reaction of insights emerge. Now the whole brain is engaged.

03.

Clarify Your Intention: Be clear on your purpose. Bring this into the front of your mind. Your intention becomes the filter through which you observe a situation. This provides focus and helps you zoom in on the few things that are most important. The clearer and more resolute your intention, the faster and more reliable the 'flash of insight' that follows will be. In leadership training we place a lot of intention on developing clarity of purpose. This requires deep reflection on your own truth about yourself, where you're headed and why.

04.

Engage your values: Either consciously or unconsciously, all choices and decisions are driven by what you value most. The clearer you are about the values and principles which guide you, the faster and more reliable your decision making and choice selection will be. Where you end up in any situation in life will ultimately be determined by the choices you make, so close examination of values is about the most important work a leader can do to prepare for making good choices. When observing and examining any situation, your purpose and values engage together to provoke a flash of insight that 'feels right'. This is when your intuition can be trusted.

05.

Fierce Resolve: Total and absolute commitment follows when there is a feeling of certainty about the things you 'feel are right'. The power of discrimination and judgment lies at the heart of leadership wisdom and character. Your ability to trust and execute your choices, based on that 'flash of insight', requires consistent alignment of intention, words and actions. A decision is worthless unless it is brought into action and followed through without second-guessing or procrastination. In great leaders, this is seen as their fierce resolve to stay the course and do what needs to be done.



The intuitive mind can become your greatest weapon in business if you learn how to use it right.



This five-step process to develop intuitive intelligence takes place at a subconscious level, even if you use your conscious mind to formulate or rationalise the final results. Information is processed in parallel, not sequentially.

Instead of going through the logical sequence one by one, the leader sees the situation more as a whole, with different fragments emerging simultaneously in parallel. Your brain can be trained to work as an advanced pattern recognition device. Your subconscious mind finds links between your new situation and various patterns of your past experiences. In a team setting this becomes even more powerful, as you replicate what happens in the brain in a group setting. This is how high-performing teams develop creative solutions and collaborative action, based on collective insights and wisdom.

Intuitive intelligence helps you navigate faster through vast amounts of unstructured data and can work around gaps and conflicts in the information. Yet, even the most highly developed intuition can be misled if too many of the facts are wrong or missing, so don't neglect the rational mind or need for diligence in fact gathering and analysis. Just get the balance right.



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Oxford Leadership™ is a global leadership consultancy specialising in the people and cultural side of organisational transformation in very large enterprises.

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We are C-suite consultants and facilitators, coaches and mentors.

We transform leaders, align teams and create fierce resolve and passion to win. Typical interventions are to accelerate performance, execute strategy and embed capability and change.

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