

Feeling Your Way Enhancing Leadership Through Intuition



Leaders often have to make decisions without access to complete and certain information. Even so, those decisions need to be both correct and timely. Using reflective techniques can help leaders learn to depend on their intuition for help in making good decisions quickly.

Is the ability to use intuition to collect information and anticipate future events a useful tool for leaders? Considering the uncertainties inherent in today's business environment, if intuition can be used to help guide leaders in making tough decisions, spotting potential problems, and sizing up situations quickly, the answer is yes. But is intuition a learnable skill, and if so, how can it best be leveraged?

In the world of work, leaders often find themselves in the position of

having to make decisions without complete information. They're expected to make decisions that are not only correct but also timely. Strategic and tactical choices can't always wait, so effective leaders learn to depend on their intuition as well as the evidence of the moment to reach decisions quickly with minimal information. Without the confidence to trust their intuition, less effective managers may analyze too long, second-guess their decisions, or change course in midstream.

by Talula Cartwright

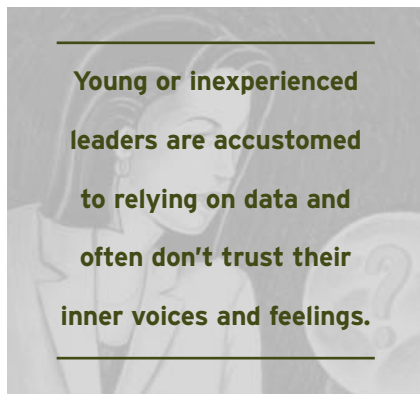
As a rule, Westerners value the ability to make quick decisions but don't put as much stock in processes that are deliberate, slow, and reflective. But there's a paradox in that view. Slowing down and reflecting, deliberately and conscientiously, helps leaders to build their confidence in using intuition—to trust the instincts that enable them to make quick decisions that have a good chance of being on the mark.

Leaders often question their intuition. They wonder whether they use it enough, whether they can trust it, whether they have it at all. After all, they are often rewarded for their analytical skills and rational approaches. Many are hesitant to make important decisions based on what are often dismissed as gut feelings, hunches, or a sixth sense. But there are tools and techniques available to help managers understand that they have alternative ways of thinking about problems. Some of these reflective techniques may be unfamiliar, which may make it hard to practice and finally adopt them. A certain amount of skepticism is to be expected, but a willful resistance to alternative problem-solving methods only reduces the creative resources necessary for innovation and quick action. Leaders who are open-minded about using these reflective practices can boost their confidence in their intuitive thinking. They can learn to trust their instincts when critical situations demand quick decisions and when complex problems defy easy answers.

DUAL MODES

Reflective practices can be described as whole-brain activities. They are different from analytical practices in that they draw on and develop a person's intuition. Analytical activities were once called left-brain activities.

(Magnetic resonance imaging has challenged the assumption that this kind of thinking has a specific location in the brain, so these activities are now sometimes referred to as L-mode thinking.) When leaders mistrust their intuition, it's generally because their analytical approach is rejecting it. Because they can't articulate, touch, count, or name intuition, they don't understand it—so



they don't believe they can depend on it.

Reflective practices are deliberate attempts to access R-mode thinking (formerly called right-brain activities). R-mode thinking emphasizes such nonrational responses as metaphor and imagery. Reflective practices work by connecting the two modes of thinking, providing access to data, facts, values, experiences, hunches, analysis, evaluation, intuition, different perspectives, and feelings. This connecting and accessing are what make reflection a whole-brain activity.

Before diving into activities that aim to connect the rational with the intuitive, it's worthwhile to ask some basic questions. Where does intuition come from? Are there people who have it and people who don't? Intuition has often been described as a person's apprehend-

ing something without having a full understanding of how or why. It's a notion that has become so commonplace that it's almost a cliché: the tough-guy private eye who has a gut feeling about a client, the gifted surgeon who follows her instincts to the heart of a disease, the corporate titan who plays a hunch and crushes the competition. These popular characterizations reinforce what we already know: that in some way and at some times, people make decisions based on vague but powerful feelings. These aren't the kinds of feelings normally associated with emotion. Rather, they are feelings that we know more than we think we do, that we can anticipate an outcome—the feelings commonly regarded as intuition.

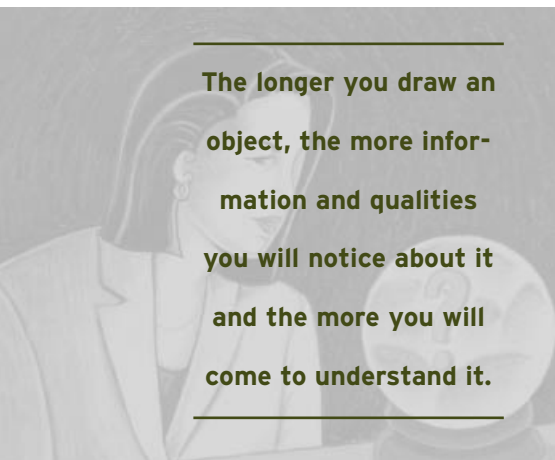
Young or inexperienced leaders are accustomed to relying on data and often don't trust their inner voices and feelings. Business schools train them to be analytical, and early in their careers organizations reward them for their analytical abilities. As they move up in an organization, however, another facet comes into play: experience. Intuition comes from this background of experiences and the lessons learned from them. It develops over years of trying different solutions and achieving results both good and bad. Sometimes a person learns from an experience without

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Talula Cartwright is a senior faculty member at CCL. She holds an Ed.D. degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

being conscious of it or being able to articulate what has been learned. Reflective practices bring that background to the forefront. If a gut feeling is warning you not to do a certain thing but you do it anyway and it turns out badly, reflective practices can help you derive lessons from that experience. These lessons in turn influence future decisions. Likewise, if following a hunch leads to good results, reflective practices will help you process that experi-



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ence so you can draw on its lessons and gain trust in your intuition.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

When a person's brain is working on an intuitive level, it sorts through all kinds of information: emotions, events, data, logic, images, facts, assurances, goals, plans, to-do lists, and anything else that's available to it. The brain goes through this mental processing while the person is not even aware of it. Most people have experienced having a new idea come to them while taking a shower, working in the garden, or driving to work. Suddenly they had an answer to a problem they had been struggling with or remembered the name of

someone they hadn't been able to place. These flashes result from the constant working of the brain, and intuition is the result of all this processing. Reflective practice is a deliberate way to fuel intuition, and the following reflective techniques can help leaders learn to depend on their intuition for help in making good decisions quickly.

Journals

Most people forget most of the new things they are exposed to every day. Even in learning situations in which they are deliberately trying to remember information, they forget about half of it. Keeping a journal greatly improves leaders' chances of remembering the experiences that are important to them and gives them a place to reflect on these experiences. The more that leaders can reflect on how experiences and feelings connect with their values, priorities, and other experiences, the more lessons they can draw from those experiences and feelings. Reflection connects experiences and feelings to the intuitive senses so that these lessons are available when leaders have to make decisions without full information.

In choosing a journal for your reflective practice, it's useful to select one with unlined pages so you can both write and draw in it. Drawing taps into modes of thinking that are intuitive and visual—the areas you want to strengthen and learn to trust as a way to develop intuition. You can also paste in photos and other visual images.

Drawing has another benefit: it forces you to slow down and pay attention. Try drawing the objects and people around you. Don't worry about your skill as an artist. Just draw what you see. Look closely. As you draw, you may see that you haven't represented certain measurements exactly or that depth and detail are missing. Refining your

drawing strengthens your ability to perceive things as they are. The longer you draw an object, the more information and qualities you will notice about it and the more you will come to understand it.

Strengthening your skills of perception will prove useful in solving problems because it's important to look at the whole problem objectively and completely. Before you make an important decision, you need to feel confident that you haven't taken shortcuts to a solution or misled yourself about the nature of the problem. Drawing exercises all your basic perceptual skills—the same skills needed for solving problems and making decisions.

A journal is also useful for recording hunches so you can check and comment on them later. To build your trust in your intuition, it's important not to let your analytical tendencies censor your hunches before you write them down for later review and reflection.

To take fullest advantage of the journal technique, you should carry your journal with you so you can get to it easily.

Imaging

Imaging is seeing with your mind's eye or creating a mental picture. It's another way to develop your intuition and gain confidence in using it. The simple acts of looking out a window or closing your eyes and imagining a scene are examples of moments when you direct your mind to R-mode thinking. Imaging is very different from, say, reading a column of spreadsheet numbers. As a part of your reflective practice, you can also write in your journal about images to stimulate your creative thinking, increase your capability to learn from experience, and give yourself more confidence in your intuitive decisions.

You don't have to write about your imaging activities. There are

other ways to use the power of images to develop intuition. One way is to examine an object or image that stimulates your visual senses and ask yourself how it connects to a challenge you're experiencing. For example, if you examine a tree and link it to a current situation in your work life, you might notice that the tree has strong roots, which indicates that it has been there a long time. Perhaps you might identify it as an oak tree. It has a powerful trunk that holds it steady in the wind. It drops acorns to ensure that more trees will grow. The same acorns feed animals that are separate from the oak tree but depend on it. The tree has uneven bark that looks as if it might crumble, but you know it's strong and snug.

If you take the qualities you see in the tree and apply them to your current situation, you may begin to get new insights. The tree provides shelter, just as you provide shelter for others. Just as the tree has weathered many storms, you have survived many challenging conditions in your life and work and are still standing. The tree's limbs offer many paths to the top, just as you may have many different options for solving your current problem.

Imaging can also help you improve your performance. Athletes routinely use imaging to picture themselves excelling at their sports, a technique that has been shown to have good results. Prisoners of war and hostages have used imaging techniques to survive the conditions of their imprisonment. One of the many ways you can use imaging in the world of work is to create a mental picture of yourself negotiating through a difficult situation, which will prepare you to resolve conflicts.

Dreams

When people are sleeping, analytical thought takes a back seat to the

brain's sorting and sense-making processes, so dreams can be a deep source of reflection. Intuitive thinking rules the sleeping hours with remarkable power and effectiveness. Dreams can present solutions and ideas in the form of metaphors and images. The use of dreams as a source of reflection means using the images experienced in sleep in the same way that real-life images and objects are used—to develop intuition and gain confidence in using it.

Writing dreams down in your journal gives you the opportunity to reflect on them. Remembering and recording dreams as soon as possible after they occur will enhance your ability to recall them. Make it a habit to keep your journal close to your bedside. People generally dream about every ninety minutes. It's not unusual to wake up in the middle of the night with the memory of a dream fresh in your mind, but by morning it's not likely you will remember it.

Some people use their dreams deliberately by prompting themselves to have dreams about problems they are trying to solve. This process is called *seeding* a dream. The goal is to harness intuitive thinking and put it to practical use.

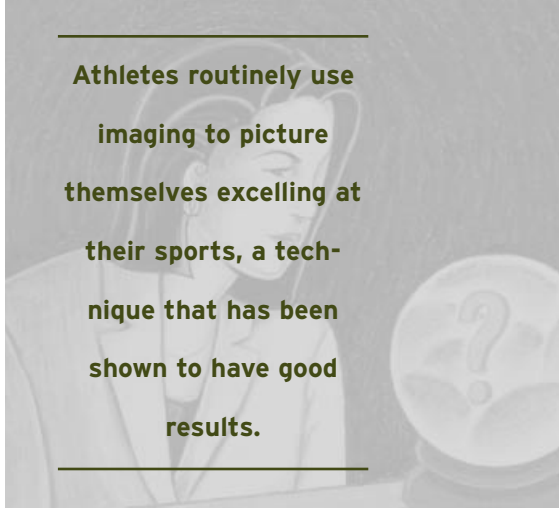
Analysis

Developing intuition as a means of expanding problem-solving skills beyond analytical thinking doesn't mean setting analysis aside altogether. In fact, there are ways to make your analytical skills available to your reflective practice.

Connecting these two modes of thought represents the integration of analysis and synthesis found in individuals' most elegant thinking. Analytical thinking is related to dividing things up, separating them into parts or categories, whereas intuitive thinking tends to pull impressions and experiences together, weaving and combining them in different

and sometimes novel ways. The best thinking is a dance of the two processes. You can collect all the data available but you might also brainstorm about other options. You can analyze the problem but you should also expose the decision to some emotional touchstones to see if it feels right to you. This is a synthesis of the rational and intuitive parts of the brain.

You can make simple connections by recording lists, data, and



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other information in your journal, then reflecting on that information and writing down the ideas that occur to you. Good reflective practice sprinkles elements of analytical thinking among the intuitive elements. Mixing the two approaches plays them against each other, which can spark new perspectives and possible solutions.

Examples of analytical thinking that can be included in a journal are lists of pros and cons, analyses of needs and wants compared with trade-offs, scripts for upcoming difficult conversations, blueprints or sketches of problems you want to

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Leaders Can Learn to Trust in Intuition

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visualize, plans and itineraries, schedules and budgets, to-do lists, lists of evidence, proposals, organizational classifications, diagrams and graphs, questions, and reminders.

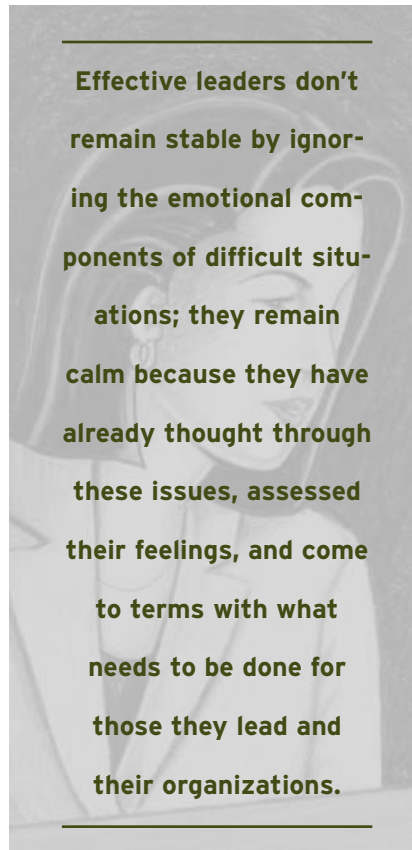
Emotions

The decisions leaders make often have an emotional component. For example, leaders must deal with their own feelings when it becomes necessary to fire employees. Or a leader who has been offered a promotion that requires relocating may have deep concerns about the effects on his or her family. There can also be emotional fallout when there is a conflict between a leader's personal values and organizational strategy.

Leaders are seen as strong—able to make decisions and solve problems effectively—if they avoid displaying confusion and inner turmoil when a situation stirs up emotions. However, effective leaders don't remain stable by ignoring the emotional components of difficult situations; they remain calm because they have already thought through these issues, assessed their feelings, and come to terms with what needs to be done for those they lead and their organizations. Reflective practice gives managers an opportunity to prepare themselves for difficult decisions.

For example, if you develop a habit of reviewing and reflecting on your personal values and the possible scenarios that would bring your practice of leadership into conflict with

those values, you will be able to make tough decisions more quickly because you know where you stand on important issues. Think about a



difficult situation that one of your managerial colleagues is facing. Consider how that situation would affect you if you were faced with the same challenge. What aspects of the situation would you find most difficult? Reflecting on situations that aren't personally affecting you is a good way to become emotionally

prepared and to add to your ability to face tough situations and make timely decisions.

Writing about and making drawings related to the problems you confront at work and elsewhere may bring up some emotional responses that can also be used to develop your intuitive thinking. One interesting way to capture some of your emotional awareness related to a specific challenge is to write short poems about it. This is a good way to create some distance between your emotions and your reflection. Your intuitive thinking can work and grow stronger in that space.

PARADOXICAL PAYBACK

Reflection may not seem like the right approach for leaders who are accustomed to taking action, but it is. It's a useful—even an essential—tool for those who want to be well-rounded, creative leaders. The paradox that leaders realize as they grow accustomed to using reflective practices is that even though the processes seem time consuming at the beginning, they ultimately enable the savvy, seasoned leader to make decisions more quickly. When making decisions and solving problems, such a leader is able to draw on intuition, which is a quicker strategy than analyzing. The time that leaders put in on the front end to strengthen their confidence in their hunches and gut feelings is well worth the investment, paying them back in the quality and quickness of their decisions and the effectiveness with which they solve problems. ✍