

Trust your gut and make better decisions

How often has someone said to you ‘Trust your gut’? Do you? Or do you go through a logical analysis of the pros and cons of every major decision you make?

Being urged to trust your gut is the same as being urged to listen to your inner voice, act on your hunch, let your intuition decide, and follow your sixth sense. These interchangeable colloquialisms refer to allowing your heart to rule your head in making decisions. I often advise my clients to do just this. Here’s why.

Authors ranging from US organisational theorist Warren Bennis in [On Becoming a Leader](#) to German neuroscientist Gerd Gigerenzer in [Gut Feelings](#), have written about the scientific evidence that shows trusting your gut is more often than not the right thing to do – and a complement to the rational process of systematic analysis prior to making a decision.

Trust your gut Susan!

Susan trusted her gut. And she has never looked back.

On the fast track to the top echelons of management in the inner government department where she had worked for nine years, Susan faced a big career decision. She could continue to wait for a long-serving colleague to be moved on which would pave the way for her promotion into the department’s executive suite. Or she could accept an offer to be deputy chief executive of a small government agency – and be a contender for its top job within a year.



A trained mathematician, Susan meticulously built decision-trees and applied game theory to the decision she faced. Whichever way she looked at the options, or her friends advised her, staying put and waiting had the lower short-term risk and greater certainty of ultimate success. Yet Susan felt uncomfortable. She tested herself by writing a letter declining the offer, and as soon as the last line was complete, doubt set in. Her head was saying, stay. Her gut was gnawing at her to go for the new and different challenge.

On the phone one Sunday morning, I urged her to be true to herself: ‘Trust your gut Susan’. On Monday she did, and within a year she was chief executive with a mandate from the Minister to merge two smaller agencies into hers. Susan’s inner voice had been right.

Gut feeling works

Both experts and lay people who rely on gut feeling make good decisions almost all of the time.

A gut feeling or hunch is a judgement that is made quickly, the underlying reasons for which we are not fully aware, and which is sufficiently strong to be acted on. Gut decisions are based on simple rules of thumb and the evolved capacity of our brains. Gerd Gigerenzer explains ‘evolved capacity’ as the subconscious ability to recognise patterns of information. The medical specialist with years of experience who spends just a few minutes with a patient and reaches a diagnosis that, after further examination, numerous laboratory tests, and a second opinion, is shown to be correct, is a classic example of pattern recognition.

Research evidence shows that in the final stages of a decision gut is right more often than detailed analysis and logic. One of the important reasons for this finding is that gut feelings ignore a great deal of the available information. The brain subconsciously screens out most of the surrounding data, searches for a pattern it recognises, applies the resulting rule of thumb, and a decision emerges as a gut feeling. If you want to learn more

about the science that informs this conclusion I commend Gerd Gigerenzer's [book](#), especially chapter 3, to you. After reading his pithy, provocative little book, I hope like me you will be even more confident that you can take short cuts in making better decisions.

How often have you said this?

"I wish I had listened to my inner voice". We all have said this in one way or another many times in our lives. Not listening to what your body is telling you deprives you of vital information, more often than not just prior to making a decision. Hours, days, even weeks later with regret you say to yourself "I wish I had trusted my intuition".

Logic and reasoning all too often drown out your inner voice. Your rational tendency to gather and analyse facts and listen to others consumes your attention. And you, like all of us, are at risk of confirmation bias, paying attention to only those facts that point to what you think you want.

Being aware – in the moment – of how you are feeling is a skill that can be learned and improved with conscious practice. Stop, ask yourself 'How am I feeling right now? What is my body telling me?' As a leader in dealing with others, especially when there is stress or pressure to make a decision, stopping to listen to yourself is, often *the best*, way to make come to a conclusion. In the final moments when all options are analysed and on the table, follow your instinct. You won't regret it. The probability of your judgement being flawed is slim.

Analysis and logic do have a place, but not on their own

With a doctorate in marketing science I need no persuading of the power and value of analysis and logic. But as a practising psychologist who works with executives every day and as an observer of myself, I also know that listening to my inner voice has stood me in good stead when difficult trade-offs have to be made.

In other words, our gut feelings are a complement to logic and reasoning, and more often than not the final arbiter in making good decisions.

In conclusion

Warren Bennis wrote: *"A part of whole-brain thinking includes learning to trust what's been...called the 'blessed impulse', the hunch, the vision that shows you in a flash the absolutely right thing to do. Everyone has these visions; leaders learn to trust them."*

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