

Right brain

“The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it intuition or what you will, and the solution comes to you. You don’t know how or why.”

Albert Einstein

A profoundly valuable body of thought is emerging today – loosely labeled “intuition” or “intuitive intelligence” – that just may have been the chief executive’s secret weapon all along.

It’s a case of “right brain meets left” as one of the historic hallmarks of business – rational decision-making using carefully analyzed facts – is gradually conjoined by a much more fluid, much less logical “inner voice,” known variously as the gut instinct, sixth sense, immediate cognition, quick and ready insight, or the Eureka effect.

There has been understandable opposition to such a marriage. How does a senior executive recount to the board of directors that the answer to a \$100-million “go:no-go” question came as a hunch while fly-fishing? How does a CEO explain to shareholders that the decision not to pursue a lucrative market was partly due to an uneasy stomach?

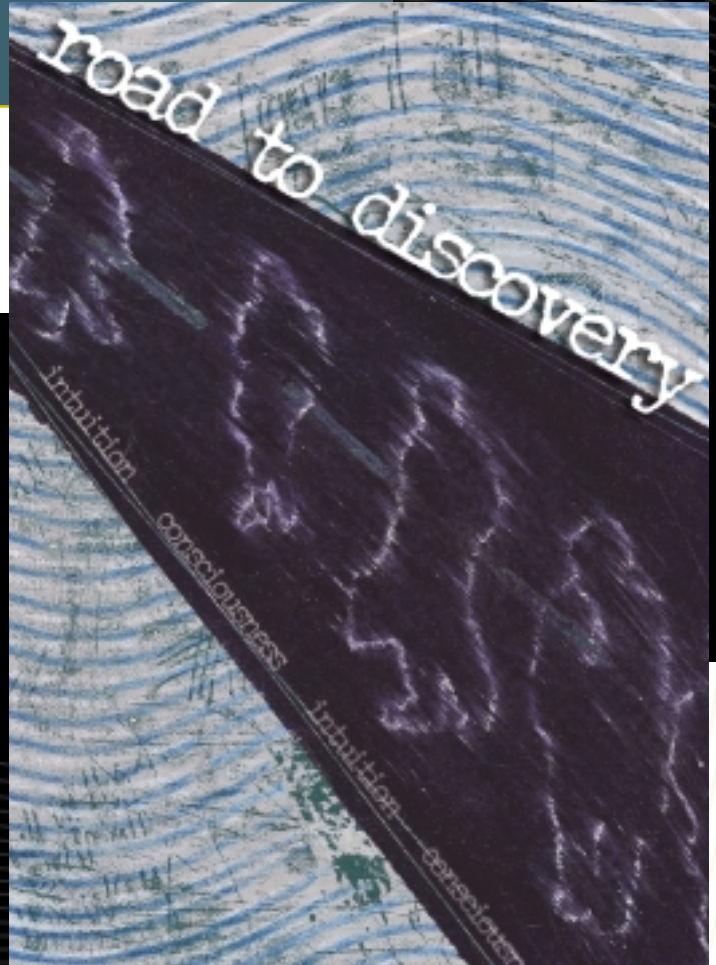
In the latter half of the last century, business decisions were defended with numerical estimates such as net present value, rate of return, and payback period. Plans were

developed using careful due diligence including competitive analysis, customer surveys, variable unit costing, and cost of capital. Results were measured in terms of net income and total shareholder return. It was a clean, linear, neatly reduced world.

Yet, all the while, most successful leaders were leveraging an additional tool. It was a favourite of Albert Einstein; while he didn’t understand it, he relied upon it. Disney’s chief executive, Michael Eisner, called it “the sum total of millions and millions of past experiences that enable you to make reasonable decisions.” It was intuition, a

right-brain phenomenon and anything but linear. And it is increasingly turning up in the toolkits of the business world’s best and brightest.

In a study by Harvard’s Jagdish Parikh involving 13,000 respondents, executives said they relied on left- and right-brain skills about equally – but they credited 80 per cent of their success to intuition. Research co-conducted by Ashley Fields, a senior advisor for Shell, concluded that among *Fortune 500* companies, “intuitive information processing strategies are most often found at the highest levels of an organization and in specific functions like research and development,



By Bill Overend

meets left:

Applying intuition to business

where coming up with new approaches is both expected and rewarded." As the sheer volume of information continues to snowball and the business world grows yet more complex and fast-paced, it can be expected that intuition will permeate the organization.

What is it?

Intuition derives from the Latin word *intueri*, meaning "look within." Webster defines it as the "power or faculty of attaining the direct knowledge or cognition without evident rational thought and inference." In Japan it is known as "stomach art." More prosaically, Fields describes it as non-patterned information processing, cheap and unburdened by standards, leading to a pool of unexpected options. Intuition is evidently less tangible than intellect, and it runs deeper than much ballyhooed emotional intelligence. Writes intuition consultant Arupa Tesolin: intuitive intelligence is "closely aligned with common sense (of which we seem to have a collective deficit)." Intuition, says author and speaker Lynn Robinson, "tells you what you need to know, when you need to know it."

Any time you've felt "in the zone," "firing on all cylinders," or "in synch," you've probably been following your intuition. Connecting may happen at odd hours of the day: just before sleep, in a dream, or while you're out for a jog. Typically, the door opens when brain waves slow to alpha state: seven to 14 Hz. If you're going full-blast with plenty of distractions, your intuition likely has no chance to be heard.

Happily, most intuition experts insist that it is not just a "gift of the gods" conferred upon a chosen few. Intuition resides in all of us as an ancient survival implement – albeit a little rusty and dull.

How can it help today's organizations?

In his *Harvard Business Review* article "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning," McGill's Henry Mintzberg made a compelling case for the use of intuition in strategy development. Mintzberg believes use of intuition in "strategic thinking" can deliver more relevant results than lengthy analytical planning exercises, particularly in the synthesis of information.

Better hiring decisions, staff motivation, increasing sales, assessing partnerships, predicting industry trends, as well as gaining vital and valuable insight into yourself and your associates are all business benefits ascribed to intuition.

Particularly worth examining is intuition's relationship with innovation. Incorporating aspects of intuition into organizational development may help avoid the pitfalls of "data paralysis" in corporate life – and encourage a culture of innovation and calculated risk-taking. Writes Tesolin: "Organizations don't innovate, people do ... the future is all about unleashing innovation and invention capacity to dream and then create ... move a concept from the unimaginable to the conceivable and finally to the created." The "guesses," "hunches," and "gut feelings" of intuition may well be what separates "the innovators from the managers that follow their leaders."

How can it be improved?

Improving intuition is an individual quest that starts beyond the classroom with heightened self-awareness and experiential training: i.e. practice. While much of what is recommended may at first seem "flaky," the payback can be significant (so have faith!):

- Reflection: find a way to regularly step away from the "game" and reduce the noise – through meditation, prayer, solo exercise, a hobby, etc.
- Get in the "here and now": relieve yourself of the heavy burden of past and future. Allow yourself to experience what is directly in front of you.
- Visualization and self-talk: imagine and affirm positive outcomes and then be attentive to what images, words, ideas or feelings occur to you over the coming hours/days.
- Enthusiasm: notice what really gets you excited – and what doesn't.
- Write it down: when you do get a gut feeling or a notion pops into your head, capture it in writing.
- Small steps: instead of agonizing over a big decision, make small decisions progressively until the path is clearer to you.
- Use it: acting on intuition will sharpen it – and will gradually build your confidence in it.

The goal, of course, is not to replace the left brain with the right. If organizations can get logic, rationality and goal orientation working in tandem with intuition, then they will be positioned to generate unexpected solutions and creative yet feasible ideas – potentially opening up a wellspring of human capacity for the 21st century.

Bill Overend is a Certified Management Consultant and the Principal of Overview Business Consulting Inc based in Calgary.

For additional articles, visit our Web site at www.banffleadership.com.

Intuition