Listening To Your Inner Voice

How gut instinct is just your intellect on speed

A patient who held an upper-level management position in his company once told me the following story: he was interviewing a candidate for a mid-level management position and thought, on the surface, the candidate was a star: enthusiastic, mature, intelligent, articulate, prepared, experienced, and visionary. After consulting with his other upper-level management peers who also interviewed the candidate, hiring him seemed a no-brainer. And yet, my patient told me, something made him hesitate. Something about the candidate—he still couldn't explain what—just "rubbed him the wrong way." He was confused about feeling this as he'd also liked the candidate. But for some reason, he didn't feel the usual enthusiasm he liked to feel about people he hired. But...the candidate's references were excellent, he was eminently qualified for the position, my patient's colleagues all wanted to hire the candidate for their own divisions, and my patient couldn't explain his own doubts. So he hired him.

Six months later, one of his female employees accused the candidate of sexual harassment, produced damaging emails revealing threats the candidate made to her, sued him and the company, and obtained a hefty settlement. Needless to say, the candidate was fired.

THE BARRIERS TO LISTENING TO OUR INTUITION

My patient told me how disappointed he was in himself failing to listen to his inner voice. I commiserated with him, assuring him I could point to many instances in my own life when I didn't listen to mine. We got to talking about why we so often don't listen to our instincts and compiled the following list:

1. **An instinct is just that:** a hunch, an impression, by definition lacking in concrete evidence. It seems unfair to rely on something so indistinct when making important decisions.

2. **We inherently mistrust ideas without evidence to support them.** We want to be right when making important decisions and we're best able to convince ourselves of our rightness when we can trace our argument from beginning to end without interruption and with a clear understanding of every step.

3. **We're easily swayed by the opinions of others that contradict our instincts,**
especially if concrete evidence exists to contradict it. This, even knowing as most of us do that facts and figures about past performance are often flawed indicators of future performance.

TRUSTING OUR INSTINCTS

My patient agreed his instinct could easily have turned out to be wrong, that the candidate could have been all the good things he appeared to be...but he wasn't. Was my patient's intuition the result of personal countertransference, unrelated to the candidate's pathology, felt as a mere coincidence, or was my patient picking up on subliminally presented evidence of the truth? We agreed that while we couldn't really know which was the case that the latter was certainly possible.

What is intuition except the rapid assimilation of our impressions of a person or situation that yields a reaction or judgment so quickly we're not sure how it arrived? An intuition is not, in most cases, based on nothing as we often allow ourselves to believe—which we do because we so often fail to perceive the complex machinery functioning beneath the surface that brought us to it.

But that machinery does function—in fact, it's only because it functions so quickly and so well that we doubt it functions at all. But if we stop to reflect, to trace back over what was said, what we thought about it, and how felt about what we thought (a surprisingly difficult thing to do well), we find it is often possible to unearth the pathway by which we arrived at our intuitive reaction, to identify the concrete reasons why we hesitated to make a decision that on the surface seemed a good one.

We really are all experts at reading one another, having all practiced it all our lives. This doesn't mean we can't be fooled, by any means. We project our own biases, our own fears, our own pathology onto the intentions of others all the time. But if we become practiced at recognizing when we're doing so in order to distinguish when we're not—when we're more or less objectively responding to the person or situation we're evaluating—our intuition (as others, including most famously Malcolm Gladwell, have argued) can be a powerful tool to help us ferret out the truth.

HOW TO MAKE INTUITIVE DECISIONS

I told my patient we ignore our intuition at our peril and offered the following approach I try to take myself when uncomfortable about a decision I'm about to make:

1. Pause. If you're uncomfortable and don't know the reason, don't presume there isn't one. It may not be a good one, but a reason most assuredly exists. In the heat of the moment, it's often difficult to identify it so we often ignore what we're feeling for the sake of expediency. But most situations don't require immediate decision making. So if you're uncomfortable for any reason, don't try to figure it out in the heat of the
Instead, don't make the decision at all. Say things like, "I need to think about this." Then take the time to do the detective work and go after your own thought process. First, what did you hear or see that made you uncomfortable? Once you've identified that (no easy task), then try to figure out why it made you uncomfortable. Try on different reasons to see if they resonate. Often you'll know you've found the right one because discovering it feels like a eureka moment. Even if you then reject your reasoning, at least you'll understand why you felt uncomfortable and can make your decision with eyes wide open.

2. **Listen**, not just to your mental reservations but to your body as well. Discomfort with a decision often manifests as physical symptoms such as nausea, insomnia, agitation. You may easily miss these as signs that you're uncomfortable with the decision you've made or are about to make, but if you pay attention you'll likely find you have the same physical reactions to ignoring your inner voice time after time.

3. **Hone your instincts.** If we're going to rely on our gut, especially if doing so pits us against the well-reasoned opinions of others, we'd better make sure our inner voice is as accurate as possible as often as possible. The more often you're able to recognize why you have the instinctual reactions you do, the more comfortable you'll become that your instincts can be trusted. The reflective exercise I described above will open your thought process in a way that enables you to validate it. If you find yourself consistently making the same thought error (e.g., you transfer your distrust of your bearded father onto all men with beards), becoming aware of it will free you of its power and improve the accuracy of your inner voice. Learning about your own unconscious biases will weaken their influence over your intuition and make it wiser.

A well-trained intuition is almost always right—though whether or not it is can, of course, only be known in retrospect. When I pointed this out to him, my patient told me he didn't regret not listening to his intuition because it was correct; he regretted not listening because it made him uncomfortable with himself. He thought he'd set a dangerous personal precedent in not trusting himself and that he would rather have followed his instinct even if it ended up being wrong. Mistrusting his inner voice chipped away at his general sense of confidence and that, he thought, "was a worse thing to have happen than being wrong." I told him I agreed.

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Read and discuss this article. Come up with a consensus. How did Buck listen to his instincts in *The Call of the Wild*?