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Sharpening Intuition Skills for Use in Project Management

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Abstract

As Project Management becomes a recognized science and a highly demanded skill set, a wide variety of commercial tools have been developed to assist in managing projects. Intuition is a free Project Management tool that is largely untapped. When used in combination with existing experience and knowledge, intuition can produce a unique and powerful strategic decision making Project Management tool.

Intuition has been defined as 'understanding without apparent effort'. This study will examine various methods for recognizing and building on one's existing intuition. Mental exercises to produce intuitive output will be suggested. Techniques used to evaluate 'gut' reactions will be investigated as a stylistic skill. Means for validating and incorporating insights into a wide range of Project Management activities will be presented.

What is Intuition?

The definition of intuition, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is the ability to understand or know something immediately, without conscious reasoning. [1] In other words, research to find an answer is not necessary; the answer simply comes to you.

Intuition is different from extra sensory perception (ESP) in that intuition is based on accumulated knowledge gathered by the senses for use by the subconscious mind. ESP is a perception, knowledge, or communication that has not been gained through the senses.

The five senses include sight, feel, touch, taste, and hearing. Our perception of the world around us comes from using all the senses available to us. The phenomenon of 'lose one sense and the others become more powerful' is due to the subconscious focusing and relying on the remaining senses when one or more have been lost. If you were to lose your sight, your

hearing would not become more acute, but rather, the subconscious would focus more attention on the sounds being heard.

Anybody I Know Use Intuition?

Albert Einstein won the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect. His contributions to the world of science include the theories of relativity, the quantum theory of atomic motion in solids, as well as numerous others. Einstein said, "The real valuable thing is intuition" [2] when referring to the process of developing his theories. Einstein relied heavily on his intuitive gifts and believed that the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. He said, "We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." [3]

Dr. Daniel Cappon, noted psychiatrist, wrote *Intuition and Management* [4] specifically for the decision making professions. He believed that humans owed their very survival to intuition which is based on accumulated knowledge and personal experience. According to Dr. Cappon, "The largest function of intuition necessarily rests with social intelligence rather than techno-intelligence, because humans are far more variable and their actions are far less scientifically predictable than the world of things. To wit, it took less intelligence to land a man on the moon than it does to resolve the conflict of a married couple." [5] Dr. Cappon believed that 'intu-creativity' (the co-mingling of intuition and creativity) should be the measurement of human success.

In 1955 Dr. Jonas Salk announced his cure for polio, a deadly strain of influenza. Dr. Salk was not a trained virologist or immunologist; he believed he was guided by his intuition as to where to look next for the answers in developing the vaccination against polio. He said "The intuitive mind will tell the thinking mind where to look next." [6] He often called himself a humanist and naturalist, and strongly believed in the repeatable process. "It's the sensitivity to pattern recognition that seems to me to be of great importance." [7] Dr. Salk wrote *The Anatomy of Reality; the Merging of Intuition and Reason* [8] which centers on intuition and reason as the determining factors of human evolution.

Even the United States Marine Corps advocates using intuition. The following quote is taken from the USMC Planning Process: "When time is critical, the commander uses intuition, judgment, and experience to guide his staff and subordinate commanders." [9] Military leaders know that when confronted with unfamiliar environments and rapidly changing circumstances, 'the best plans are great – right up until the first contact with the enemy' according to Army General George Patton. It is at the point of confrontation when intuition, gut instinct, pattern recognition, past experiences, and training all kick in.

According to a business strategy survey [10], 62% of CEOs surveyed disclosed that they depend on their intuition when making strategic decisions. They believed their business success directly related to their ability to listen to their gut feelings and intuition. Ed McCracken, former VP at Hewlett Packard, and former CEO of Silicon Graphics noted “The mind, when it is quiet, delivers up phenomenal intuition”. [11] Mike O’Neill, former Managing Director of Whirlpool Australia states “CEOs have an intuition about them, they have an instinctive nature, they are watching, listening, gathering all of the time.” [12] Billionaire business woman, Gerry Leybourne, says “eighty percent of business decisions get made on intuition.” [13]

Where’s My Intuition?

It is thought that humans (as well as other living things) are born with a certain amount of intuition. In Western civilizations as the human progresses from baby to adulthood, intuition is bypassed in favor of formal education. Western culture does not emphasize sensory perception, or intuition, so we must learn how to cultivate our own power based on awareness of sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing. Both men and women have intuition, but men will most likely refer to an intuitive event as having had a ‘gut reaction’, while women prefer a milder reference, e.g., ‘I knew in my heart it was the right answer’.

Below are 5 steps to help recognize and nurture your intuitive skills:

1. Breathe! Breathe deeply, exhale slowly. Feed your body with oxygen so that your senses can work at optimal levels. Breathing properly feeds every cell in the body; it is one of the most important factors in raising sensory levels. Take in breaths that are long and slow to allow the body to absorb more oxygen. Breathe in slowly through your nose, and exhale through pursed lips just as slowly. Focus on breathing with your diaphragm so that the stomach is expanding, not the rib cage. One way to determine if the diaphragm is being used is to stand with your stomach touching the counter or the back of a chair. If you are breathing through the diaphragm, your stomach will push you backwards. Learning a new method of breathing may take some time in getting used to, but do not give up the effort. See step # 5.
2. Clear the mind, but do not try to force clarity. Due to the over stimulated world we live in (instant messaging, texting, e mail, wireless cellular devices, and 24-hour access to everything imaginable) clearing the mind is fairly difficult, but a perspicacious state is attainable. Relaxation is a key factor, and a clear mind leads to relaxation. Set aside about five minutes a day in a quiet place where you can relax either sitting or lying down. Focus on thinking only positive thoughts, and try to eliminate the brain’s babble (the run-on sentences and fragmented thoughts that race through the brain). The goal is to allow your brain to ‘drift’, to ‘zone out’, to allow the subconscious to take over and wander to wherever it wants. Working on a hobby can sometimes help clear the mind. See step # 5.

3. Cultivate self-awareness. Being aware of your senses will help lead to a higher level of understanding yourself, and to trusting your intuitive impulses. This exercise can be performed almost anytime, almost anywhere. Focus on your senses. Consciously ask what your feelings are then note your response. Try to go beyond the basic responses such as 'hot', 'cold', 'happy', or 'sad'. Reach deep within yourself for meaningful insights like 'I feel uneasy', or 'I feel confident'. Continue polling the rest of your senses, and noting the responses. Determine how (or if) the five answers relate to your current situation or to a situation that has been occupying your thoughts. As you become accustomed to performing this exercise, the questions and responses will eventually occur automatically in the background (if it is allowed to do so). The subconscious collects and categorizes this information. With increased information available to the subconscious intuition, insights, and gut reactions are set to become more accurate and frequent. See step # 5.
4. Focus on listening to others. Observing a person's behavior, body language, and emotional state will provide insights that words may not. Use your senses to gather as much information as possible to help fully understand what they are conveying both verbally and non-verbally. Looking directly into the speaker's eyes will convey to them that they have your full attention. The speaker will generally begin to relax and communicate on a deeper level. Paraphrasing the information back to the speaker verifies that their idea is understood, and therefore, may help avoid miscommunications. See step # 5.
5. Practice. Practice. Practice. Practicing some of the steps will provide instant feedback such as in step 1 (breathing). Other steps, such as in step 2 (clearing the mind), may take many attempts to even partially achieve. Practicing the exercises will help develop focus and concentration, will exercise the brain, increase self-awareness, and will increase communication skills. Above all, do not give up!

Experiment with these exercises to monitor the progression of your intuitive state:

- Relax in a quiet place. Focus on an event or problem you are dealing with that requires more knowledge than is currently available to fully understand. Think about every possible aspect of the issue. After a few minutes of this intense focusing, stop thinking about the issue, and do not return to it until the next day. You may find that information begins to flow to you whether from your own knowledge repositories, or from another source.

- The next time a song pops into your head listen to the words and music carefully. Ask yourself if there is a special meaning for you attached to the song. If the meaning is related to a person or place, investigate what is currently happening with that person or in that place. Or, investigate whether the song may be interpreted in a way to help answer a question you currently have. Keeping a log of the events and how they are resolved is helpful in determining how often and how accurate your intuition is becoming.

Individual abilities and interests will guide how weak or strong the sensory perceptions become, and, as a result, how weak or strong the intuitive feedback is. As individuals we react differently to the stimuli around us, therefore, the methods that are successful for you may not work for someone else. As the understanding of your intuition grows, you may find that you have developed a particular stylistic skill [14] set to nurture sensory input and intensify intuitive output. No matter what your style, when intuition arrives it is both clear and direct, without confusion or emotional conflict.

Intuition? In Project Management?

Project Management is traditionally a decision science (the practice of making decisions by using mathematical methods and tools for solving problems relating to the allocation of scarce resources). There are times when a mathematical equation will not solve the issue at hand, or there might not be enough time to consult formulas and charts for a plausible answer. It is under these circumstances that the Project Manager (PM) must rely on previous experiences and accumulated knowledge for a quick answer or solution. This is the requirement that necessitates developing intuition. The goal of developing intuition is to expand the innate intuitive ability into a refined and workable skill.

To have an immediate answer to a problem without consulting formulas and charts would benefit any project. Having *every* answer *every* time is not within the realm of intuition (since intuition is based on previous experiences, accumulated knowledge and adding them together for optimal output), but being able to trust and rely upon your intuition is certainly attainable.

When working with a clear mind, intuitive PMs realize facts beyond what is presented. They may often have additional insights regardless of their experience level. They work with outside influences knowing that there will be an opportunity for observing and learning. Recognizing that influences beyond their control will affect project outcomes, they plan creative and inventive methods to keep their projects on track. Intuitive PMs will identify unexpected sources of assistance and will not hesitate to use them. They readily embrace imagination, whether their own or that of their team mates, and work to surround themselves with creativity so that the project has many avenues to success. Intuition is a tool that can allow

PMs to be become more adaptive and agile by helping them take advantage of their environments, no matter how ambiguous.

One of the tenets of Project Management is that a successful process should be repeatable. To repeat a process involves a measure of pattern recognition. Pattern recognition is our link to intelligence, and forms the basis of intuition. Without pattern recognition, it is likely the human race would have never learned how to read. Neurobiologists have discovered that the subconscious mind automatically recognizes patterns via neural combinatorial coding. [15] While the conscious intellect may not recognize every pattern, the subconscious mind is a master at recognizing and holding on to patterns, and storing the information for use at a later time.

Relying on intuition and gut reactions can bring success, but explaining to management the method surrounding the accomplishment may not be an easy task. When asked about her experiences with intuition in the work place, Courtney Richards, a seasoned technology professional who routinely relies on her intuition, said, "If one realizes that intuition is a powerful force, it can be used to one's advantage. The tough part is overcoming the business imperative to support one's statements with facts. It's understandable but frustrating. Saying "I have a bad feeling about this" doesn't fly." [16]

One method to prove how effective your intuitive decision is becoming is to record the gut reaction and then compare it to the decision that was made and the ramifications of that decision. Recording the outcome is important, whether positive or negative, to prove the effectiveness and reliability of your intuition.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of leaders in business and the sciences have found that cultivating their intuition has provided them with an edge in today's competitive environment. With practice and focus intuition can be developed into a tool that will serve and assist in both the personal and business facets of life. Gut reactions can become a trusted guide for decision making, and in helping to determine what the next steps should be. Intuition is like a muscle: the more it is exercised, the stronger it becomes.

Einstein could have been looking into the future when he made the statement about the intuitive mind being a sacred gift and the rational mind being a faithful servant. Our society does, indeed, honor the servant but has long forgotten the gift. In the future, instead of having to say 'I should have listened to my intuition', open the gift and say 'The answer came to me in a flash'.

Twenty Questions for Assessing the Intuitive State [17]

Answer yes or no to the following questions by placing a Y or N beside the number of each question. Trust your first impression when answering!

1. Are your first impressions generally accurate?
2. Do you see 'symbols' as guidance in your everyday life?
3. Are your hunches true more often than not?
4. Are you able to imagine images easily?
5. Have a number of your day dreams come true?
6. Can you visualize the outcome to a difficult problem before the solution has been applied?
7. Can you take in a whole scene quickly and remember the details?
8. Do you see images in abstract patterns?
9. Can you easily fantasize about your future?
10. Can you find your way around town in an unknown city?
11. Are you good at solving puzzles?
12. On an average day, are your positive thoughts more prevalent than negative thoughts?
13. Have you ever thought of a song then heard it shortly thereafter?
14. Have you ever felt a bond with a person you've just met?
15. Have you ever 'felt' something relevant to the occasion without any words being spoken?
16. Do you know what time it is without looking at a clock?
17. Do you 'feel' the energy of another person?
18. Are you aware of the non-verbal signals of others?
19. Do you sometimes know the answer without knowing the subject matter?
20. Are you able to shut out all input to focus on one thought pattern?

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14. A 'stylistic skill' is an ordinary skill but a signature style has been applied to it. For example: typing 60 WPM is an ordinary skill, but typing 60 WPM with three fingers when 10 are available is a stylistic skill.
15. Nobelprize.org, October 4, 2004. < http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/2004/press.html > (12 June 2009).
16. Courtney Richards, e mail message to the author, June 28, 2009.
17. The questions are not based on scientific findings; individual scores may not accurately reflect the intuitive state. Scoring is based on the number of 'Yes' answers:
 - 17 – 20 = Indicates higher than average intuitive responses with rapid and effortless processing skills
 - 10 – 16 = Indicates a problem solver who mainly uses the right side of their brain, above average intuitive responses
 - 5 – 9 = Indicates average intuitive responses who easily processes symbols
 - 0 – 4 = Indicates a mechanical, technical or scientifically adept person who mainly uses the left side of the brain

About the Author:**Zelda Jones***Author*

Zelda Jones has over 20 years of Project Management experience and has often been faced with having to make on-the-spot decisions. While recognizing that experience and knowledge form the basis for decision making, she believes intuition is the background guide. Zelda has managed software development projects in the medical industry, and managed international hardware implementation projects in the telecom industry. She is currently working for a global manufacturing corporation managing large to medium software development. Zelda lives and works in North Texas, USA and can be contacted at jones.zelda@gmail.com.