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Gut feeling should never substitute for facts, analysis

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On a job interview panel, one negative comment by an interviewer speaking from his or her own bias can taint all the other interviewers. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

When sifting through the product offerings of multiple Kenya-based training and consulting firms, one may notice that invariably many human resources related topics available for delivery include sessions on how to trust one's gut with either the managerial decision making process or while interviewing potential job candidates.

Additionally, enter into any sizable bookstore in Kenya and invariably you will come across some variation of a leadership or management title indicating "go with your gut" that espouse the perceived value of listening to one's own instinctive reaction as a highly accurate way for executives to make decisions.

Unfortunately, such simplistic concepts lull supervisors into thinking that they retain the truth inside of them without much effort of deliberate time consuming analysis. In certain narrow parameters, following instincts does prove useful. The social scientists who advocate for gut reactions in workplace settings often derive their results from simple often non-workplace-realistic experiment settings in controlled environments.

Joseph Mikels and team delineated specific scenarios in workplaces where feelings rather than deliberation resulted in superior results. Erik Dane, Kevin Rockmann, and Michael Pratt detailed that managerial decision making relying on intuition over deliberation only increases in validity commensurate with many years of experience in the specific domain of their jobs. Years of experience enable one's unconscious mind to learn many correct conscious decisions and summate those experiences in that specific line of work and internalise it into the unconscious mind.

Notwithstanding decades of experience training one's unconscious mind, otherwise your gut is mostly wrong.

Researcher Eric Bonabeau famously implored managers back in 2003 to not trust their guts or else fall victim to a risky delusion. Relying on intuition should not serve as a substitute for fact gathering and doing proper due diligence in one's workplace.

Disturbingly, an extensive survey conducted by executive search firm Christian & Timbers revealed that a shocking 45 per cent of corporate leaders admitted to relying on instinct more than on facts and figures to run their businesses.

Gut feeling inaccuracy also affects other professions outside board rooms and meeting halls. Dr Danial Cabrera of the Mayo Clinic led a team of researchers that found medical doctors who rely on gut feeling diagnosis of patients rather than conducting tests and digging deeper for more information actually misdiagnosed their patients an alarming 46 per cent of the time.

Multiple problems exist with gut feelings. First, unconscious bias represents a real problem with unconscious decision making. Especially in interview settings, interviewers strongly favour candidates more similar to themselves in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, religion, and interests. A similar candidate makes an interviewer over three times more empathetic to them and their plight.

Also, on an interview panel, one negative comment by one interviewer speaking from his or her own bias can taint all the other interviewers. Alison Ledgerwood and Amy Boydston's research shows that negative comments linger in people's minds far longer than positive ones. Further, negative comments change an opinion from positive to negative and also prevent future positive comments from sticking at all, thus keeping one's original negative opinion of someone intact far into the future unless conscious intentional thinking overrides it.

Second, when upset or scared the brain's prefrontal cortex's dominance in the mind diminishes and someone loses rational thinking and emotional regulation while the mind resorts to more primitive areas that respond to simplistic basic survival. An interview candidate who may pose a perceived threat to an interviewer can elicit an irrational response by the interviewer as the prefrontal cortex gives way.

Third, the unconscious mind evolved to protect us from danger in a then frightening world. We can quickly assess whether to fight or flight when walking on a nature path in Hell's Gate National Park and come across a hyena.

But a nuanced assessment of rewards, costs, consequences, alternatives, and impacts on others cannot come at an instant from the unconscious mind.

In addition to the medical field, certain other industries heightened awareness over the past decade on the dangers of gut feelings and actively work to diminish intuitive decisions among their employees.

RULES CREATING BIASES

Volker Thoma examined persistent fears in the investment banking sector that financial traders use gut feelings and therefore harm client and bank portfolios. Much to the relief of banking executives, he uncovered that financial traders did not use simple intuitive decision rules creating biases instead of rational normative decision making any more than regular retail bankers.

However, he did uncover that the older an employee got, he or she utilised intuition more and more similar to Erik Dane's work described above. Also, human resources professionals know the dangers of intuitive emotional decisions. Gut feelings taint what researchers Eva Derous, Alexander Buijsrogge, Nicolas Roulin, and Wouter Duyck call the three interview stages of pre-interview initial impressions stage, interview stage, and post-interview decision making stage. The researcher generated solutions to minimise the effect including interviewers taking active conscious processes to identify their biases and writing them down, then mentally overrule their behavioural and cognitive biases about a candidate.

Human resources departments should break down each of the three interview stages into four phases each and make forms reflect desired actions. Type 1 processes allow interviewers to make initial gut feeling impressions about a candidate.

Type 2 requires interviewers to record and analyse their biases towards a candidate that may be unjustified. Third, assess situational and interviewer factors. Conducting highly structured interviews helps accentuate type 2 thinking.

Fourth, decide on outcomes for the pre-interview initial impressions stage, interview stage, and post-interview decision making stage.

Additional solutions generated by Eugene Sadler-Smith and Erella Shefy include training for managers that enlightens them to the limitations of gut feeling decisions. Then, explore with managers the power of the unconscious mind in its appropriate role.

Managers should start with rational decision analysis, then pause for several hours and work on another task allowing the unconscious mind to process the nuances of your detailed start to your analysis, then managers should come back to the formal analysis after the break and use rationality to finish. Such actions powerfully combine both intuition and analysis.

In summary, do not believe the often repeated clichés to go with your gut feeling. Management is far more complex than a simple five word phrase. Understand the role your unconscious can play, harness it, and conduct deliberate analysis with pauses.

Share your experiences about gut feeling accuracy with other Business Daily readers through #GutFeelings on Twitter.