

Don't ignore gut instincts, just don't call 'em that

In business, some of the toughest decisions are made based on intuition. Admitting this, however, can be uncomfortable, even unwise.

Want to earn respect for your intuition? Want to legitimize it in the minds of others?

That's easy. Just stop calling it "intuition." Here's a more scientific context within which to ground your advice and suggestions, a

context that might help you "sell" the utility of your intuition to relevant internal colleagues.

What mental pictures come to mind when you read the words "nurse," "auto mechanic," "pastor," "adolescent?"

C'mon, admit it. Scores of images flew through your brain. And those images didn't stop at appearance. Didn't you also associate certain behaviors with the words? As you imagine them in their respective workplaces, don't you also develop images of their performance?

These images, based on knowing nothing more than one's function, are called "schemas."

Our schemas of others create expectations regarding the behavior, the performance and even the appearance of individuals.

Schemas aren't absolutes, but they do help predict job fitness, provide guidelines

for interaction and help us articulate performance measures. There are, most assuredly, exceptions: engineers who are poised socially; financial experts who can think abstractly; public relations and marketing experts who can be structured and compliant. But they are the exceptions.

Let's take a look at two examples and consider the probable, if unintended, consequences of ignoring schemas.

Let's assume that to one solitary vice president is assigned the responsibility for outcomes produced by the efforts of several others. If, based on your intuition, you suggest that such a decision is destined to generate hostility, conflict and chaos, you're likely to be criticized for imputing to them an inability to function as a team. If instead, you ground your suggestion within the context of schemas, you're likely to achieve agreement more easily.

Here's how to do it. Provide a brief description of the "senior executive schema." They're usually competitive; they have the guts to risk high-profile failure, and they strive for the recognition that comes from high-profile success. The CEO is likely their sole source of meaningful professional affirmation so they vie for his/her favor and attention, which means they're often territorial. Based on such a description, suggesting that the assigned outcomes be made discrete to each vice president no longer seems insulting; instead it seems reasonable and wise.

Or how about this one. Let's assume the engineering department has invented a product to be introduced at the next sales meeting. The boss wants relevant

speechmaking assigned to the inventor. The engineer may indeed be a brilliant expert, but speechmaking is virtually antithetical to that schema. Ignoring this is likely to result in the most monotone and verbose speech ever given on the planet.

If the objective is to foster attention, retention and enthusiasm, the schema most likely to achieve those objectives must be considered. In advancing this viewpoint, having nothing other than intuition on which to base your suggestion seems personal. Grounding your suggestion within the context of schemas makes it more legitimate.

Attempting to educate others about schemas may alienate those who have historically demeaned your intuition. Instead, just look for opportunities to deploy the skill.

Remember, you can only increase the frequency of successful personnel decisions if you increase the frequency with which you are consulted. Ground your contributions to discussions about personnel within the context of schemas. It will become indisputably clear to your colleagues that there is real value in consulting you when making personnel decisions.

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