The Role of “Gut Instinct” in Project Management

Some months ago I had a debate with a colleague over an Earned Value Analysis derived project progress figure. My colleague thought that it was too low. We looked through the figures and the maths seemed OK, but he just wouldn’t believe it. When I asked why not he explained that his “gut instinct” was that we were on programme and that his gut instinct was normally very good. I think he was quite sincere in his belief and not trying to manipulate the figure in his favour. We both have a professional engineering background and therefore education in scientific method. However I think that my leaning towards the rational analysis approach rather than gut feel stems from my training as a private pilot, rather than my years at school and university. As a pilot I was trained that if you fly into cloud you must rely on instruments rather than gut feel. Fly by needle, ball and airspeed, gut feel will kill you.

The Social Animal

I was reminded of this debate when recently reading The Social Animal\(^1\) by David Brooks. David is a political journalist with a lifelong interest in how the human mind works. He tries to integrate latest scientific research with political and social theory, and he does so in a very entertaining and thought provoking style. He examines the roles of the subconscious and the conscious mind in decision making. I cannot do his book justice in this short article but the points which I take from it are:

1) The unconscious decision making process takes place in milliseconds whilst conscious decision making is many orders of magnitude slower.

2) Part of our unconscious decision making is so hard wired that it passes down to us through our DNA. This is the stuff fundamental to survival that has been relevant for so many years that survival of the fittest has governed.

3) Another important part of our unconscious decision making equipment is programmed into us as babes in arms.

4) We can train our unconscious mind. Consider learning to drive. When we are learning, driving is a totally conscious process whereas years later driving will have been absorbed as an instinctive skill set.

The power of the sub-conscious is that it is hard wired and hence virtually instantaneous. It is also usually hard wired because it has been found to work well. So perhaps “gut instinct is best.

The Limitations of the Unconscious

Skilled salesmen, negotiators, magicians and con artists are masters of exploiting the limitations of our unconscious. For example there was a game show on NBC in the 1960s called Let’s Make a Deal hosted by Monty Hall. The basis of the game was that contestants would be shown three doors. Behind one of the doors was a car and behind the other two there were goats. The contestant would be asked to choose a door. Monty would then open one of the other doors and ask the contestant if he or

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she would like to change their choice. The basis of the show has been applied to a number of scientific studies with very interesting results.

When a door was opened to reveal a goat only around 13% of participants chose to switch. In reality they would be twice as likely to win a car if they switched. The reason can best be shown in a diagram.

For the sake of the experiment Monty must know which door conceals the car because if he opened the door revealing the car then the contestant’s choice would be obvious. Therefore he will open one of the two doors concealing a goat. He won’t open the door that you have chosen because that will also render the contestant’s choice to switch obvious with only the subsidiary choice of which door to switch to remaining.

Cognitive psychologist Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini² says "...no other statistical puzzle comes so close to fooling all the people all the time.” and that “even Nobel physicists systematically give the wrong answer, and that they insist on it, and they are ready to berate in print those who propose the right answer.”

It would appear that there is something in our sub-conscious that will rejoice in seeing that we have already successfully eliminated one of the doors that concealed a goat and want to stick with our first “instinct”.

The Value of Experience

After leaving university I worked for Foster Wheeler on petro-chemical sites. We had a Construction Director who had worked his way up from the ranks and was legendary for being able to walk onto any site, at any stage of construction, and just know (without prior briefing) the percentage complete and where the problems lay.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Hall_problem
David Brooks cites people employed as chicken sexers. Apparently they can look at a day old chick and determine its sex in an instant, with better than 99% accuracy. They don’t know how they do it, they just can.

I think the ability of these extraordinary people lies in a combination of heightened perception of environmental cues and the experience to interpret the cues correctly.

Winston Churchill said that when faced with a difficult decision he would draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper and write all the factors in favour of a particular course of action on one side, and all the factors against on the other. I’m sure we have all done the same. He then made his decision according to which was the longest list. But is this really as rational and conscious a process as it might seem? Isn’t your subconscious influencing what goes on the list and what doesn’t? Certainly it is a way of bringing the conscious and sub-conscious together.

**Conclusion**

Our sub-conscious or "gut instinct" is particularly helpful in situations which are basically similar to those that our caveman ancestors faced. In our dealings with other people instincts are important. Our social skills have been wired into our sub-conscious. However when it comes to our interface with technology, then instinct must be learnt and grounded in experience to be of greatest value. If you have time for a considered opinion, which we normally do in project management, then try and evaluate decisions on both an instinctive and rational level. If they lead to different conclusions take more time to try and understand why. Involve other members of the team whilst acknowledging that they are social animals too and just as influenced by their sub-conscious as you are.
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