

Diversity Leadership Guide

BLINK: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking

Author Malcolm Gladwell

Blink is about how we think without thinking, about choices that seem to be made in an instant — in the blink of an eye — that actually aren't as simple as they seem, and about those instantaneous decisions that are impossible to explain to others.

Blink reveals that great decision makers aren't those who process the most information or spend the most time deliberating, but those who have perfected the art of "thin-slicing" — filtering the very few factors that matter from an overwhelming number of variables.

What You'll Explore in this Summary:

- * How unique but learnable skills can empower human perception and understanding.
- * How our brains really work—in the office, in the classroom and in the marketplace.
- * How some of the best decision makers utilize the theory of thin-slicing to their competitive advantage.
- * How training and practice can affect our ability to make the right decision.

The Statue That Didn't Look Right

In September 1983, an art dealer by the name of Gianfranco Becchina approached the J. Paul Getty Museum in California. He had in his possession, he said, a marble statue dating from the 6th century B.C. It was what is known as a kouros — a sculpture of a nude male youth standing with his left leg forward and his arms at his sides. There are only about 200 kouros in existence, and most have been recovered badly damaged or in fragments from grave sites or archeological digs. But this one was almost perfectly preserved. It stood close to 7 feet tall. It was an extraordinary find. Becchina's asking price was just under \$10 million.

A geologist from the University of California named Stanley Margolis came to the museum and spent two days examining the surface of the statue with a high-resolution stereomicroscope. He then removed a core sample from just below the right knee and analyzed it using an electron microscope, electron microprobe, mass spectrometry, X-ray diffraction and X-ray fluorescence. The statue was made of dolomite marble from the ancient Cape Vathy quarry on the island of Thasos, Margolis concluded, and the surface of the statue was covered in a thin layer of calcite — which was significant, Margolis told the Getty, because dolomite can turn into calcite only over the course of hundreds, if not thousands, of years. In other words, the statue was old. The Getty was satisfied. Fourteen months after its investigation of the kouros began, it agreed to buy the statue.

The kouros, however, had a problem. It didn't look right. The first to point this out was an Italian art historian named Federico Zeri, who served on the Getty's board of trustees. He found himself staring at the sculpture's fingernails. In a way he couldn't immediately articulate, they seemed wrong to him. Evelyn

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Harrison, one of the world's foremost experts on Greek sculpture, was next. In the very first moment of seeing the statue, all Harrison had was a hunch, an instinctive sense that something was amiss. A few months later, Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was taken down to the Getty's conservation studio to see the statue as well. Hoving always makes a note of the first word that goes through his head when he sees something new, and he'll never forget what that word was when he first saw the kouros. "It was 'fresh'—'fresh,'" Hoving recalls. And "fresh" was not the right reaction to have to a 2,000-year-old statue.

When Federico Zeri, Evelyn Harrison and Thomas Hoving — and many others — looked at the kouros and felt an "intuitive repulsion," they were absolutely right. In the first two seconds of looking — in a single glance — they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than the team at the Getty was able to understand after 14 months.

Further investigations revealed more questions about the statue's authenticity. Now, in the Getty catalog, there is a picture of the kouros, with the notation "About 530 B.C., or modern forgery."

Thin-Slicing Defined

A critical part of rapid cognition is known as "thin-slicing." Thin-slicing refers to the ability of our unconscious mind to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience. In the theory of thin slices, a little bit of knowledge goes a long way. This is the way that our unconscious works: It is sifting through the situation in front of us, throwing out all that is irrelevant while we zero in on what really matters. The truth is that our unconscious is really good at this, to the point where thin-slicing often delivers a better answer than more deliberate and exhaustive ways of thinking. Thin-slicing is not an exotic gift. It is a central part of what it means to be human.

The first impressions of experts, however, are *different*. When we become expert in something, our tastes grow more esoteric and complex. With experience, we become expert at using our behavior and our training to interpret — and decode — what lies behind our snap judgments and first impressions. Whenever we have something that we are good at — something we care about — that experience and passion fundamentally change the nature of our first impressions. This does not mean that when we are outside our areas of passion and experience, our reactions are invariably wrong. It just means that they are shallow. They are hard to explain and easily disrupted. They aren't grounded in real understanding.

The Dark Side of Thin-Slicing

We thin-slice whenever we meet a new person, have to make sense of something quickly or encounter a novel situation. Taking rapid cognition seriously — acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives — requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions. We must confront the consequences of first impressions and snap judgments.

What makes thin-slicing possible is our ability to very quickly get below the surface of a situation. But what happens if that rapid chain of thinking gets interrupted somehow? What if we reach a snap judgment without *ever* getting below the surface?

Part of what it means to take thin-slicing and first impressions seriously is accepting the fact that sometimes we can know more about someone or something in the blink of an eye than we can after months of study.

But we also have to acknowledge and understand those circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray.

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Being a successful salesperson is a task that places extraordinary demands on the ability to thin-slice.

Someone you've never met walks into your place of business. Some people are insecure. Some are nervous. Some know exactly what they want. Some have no idea. Some know a great deal about your product or service and will be offended by a salesperson who adopts a patronizing tone. Some are desperate for someone to take them by the hand and make sense of what seems to them like an overwhelming process. A salesperson, if he or she is to be successful, has to gather all of that information — figuring out, for example, the dynamic that exists between a husband and a wife, or a father and a daughter — process it and adjust his or her own behavior accordingly, and do all of that within the first few moments of the encounter.

Some salespeople see someone, and somehow they let the first impression they have about that person's appearance drown out every other piece of information they manage to gather in that first instant.

The best salespeople try to be more selective. They try to pick up on whether someone is confident or insecure, knowledgeable or naive, trusting or suspicious — but from that thin-slicing flurry the successful salesperson tries to edit out those impressions based solely on physical appearance.

But if those impressions are happening outside of awareness, how on earth do you fix it? The answer is that we are not helpless in the face of our first impressions. They may bubble up from the unconscious — from behind a locked door inside of our brain — but just because something is outside of awareness doesn't mean it's outside of control.

Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions — we can alter the way we thin-slice — by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions.

There are two important lessons here. The first is that truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking. Deliberate thinking is a wonderful tool when we have the luxury of time, the help of a computer and a clearly defined task, and the fruits of that type of analysis can set the stage for rapid cognition.

The second lesson is that in good decision making, frugality matters. Less is more. Overloading decision makers with information makes it harder, not easier. To be a successful decision maker, we have to edit.

Verbal Overshadowing

Allowing people to operate without having to explain themselves constantly enables rapid cognition. Here is a very simple example of this:

Picture, in your mind, the face of the waiter or waitress who served you the last time you ate at a restaurant, or the person who sat next to you on the bus today. Any stranger whom you've seen recently will do. Now, if you were asked to pick that person out of a police lineup, could you do it? You probably could.

Unconscious Cognition

Recognizing someone's face is a classic example of unconscious cognition. We don't have to think about it. Faces just pop into our minds. But suppose you were asked to take a pen and paper and write down in as much detail as you can what your person looks like. Describe her face. What color was her hair? What was she wearing? Was she wearing any jewelry? Believe it or not, you will now do much worse at picking that face out of a lineup. This is because the act of describing a face has the effect of impairing your otherwise effortless ability to subsequently recognize that face.

The psychologist Jonathan W. Schooler, who pioneered research on this effect, calls it verbal overshadowing.

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Your brain has a part (the left hemisphere) that thinks in words, and a part (the right hemisphere) that thinks in pictures, and what happened when you described the face in words was that your actual visual memory was displaced. Your thinking was bumped from the right to the left hemisphere. When you were faced with the lineup the second time around, what you were drawing on was your memory of what you *said* the waitress looked like, not your memory of what you *saw* she looked like. And that's a problem because when it comes to faces, we are much better at visual recognition than we are at verbal description.

Harnessing Thin-Slicing

Our powers of thin-slicing and snap judgments are extraordinary. But even the giant computer in our unconscious needs a moment to do its work.

Perhaps the most common — and the most important — forms of rapid cognition are the judgments we make and the impressions we form of other people. Every waking minute that we are in the presence of someone else, we come up with a constant stream of predictions and inferences about what that person is thinking and feeling.

This practice of inferring the motivations and intentions of others is classic thin-slicing. It is picking up on subtle, fleeting cues in order to read someone's mind — and there is almost no other impulse so basic and so automatic and at which, most of the time, we so effortlessly excel.

However, mind-reading failures happen to all of us. They lie at the root of countless arguments, disagreements, misunderstandings and hurt feelings. And yet, because these failures are so instantaneous and so mysterious, we don't really know how to understand them.

They aren't always as obvious and spectacular as other breakdowns in rapid cognition. They are subtle and complex and surprisingly common.

Our unconscious thinking is, in one critical respect, no different from our conscious thinking: In both, we are able to develop our rapid decision making with training and experience.

Excerpted from Soundview Executive Book Summaries

Ideas for Dialogue

- * Do you think the snap judgments of others external to GRC has effected the Center? Our ability to obtain work? How our collective expertise is utilized? Etc.
- * How can snap judgments create barriers to opportunities, building partnerships, as well as international alliances?
- * How can thinking that takes place so rapidly be at all useful? What techniques can be used to effectively use rapid cognition to its advantage?

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