

Managing intuition in the workplace

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Summary

Learning to trust our own intuition in the workplace – and to be trusted in using it – could help us feel more involved in the work we do. In this short article, Tom Graves describes how to make more sense of those strange hunches, and to develop your intuition as a practical skill for everyday work.

What *is* intuition?

"I'm a loans officer at the bank", she said. "I work best with feelings. I've seen so many people now that I just *know* if they're a good credit risk, as soon as they come in the door."

That's intuition at work. It's not based on individual details or selected facts, but a sense of the *whole*.

Everyone has their own kind of intuition – though often they don't know it! Some people have hunches, or 'gut-feelings'; others have that strange sense of *déjà vu*, and watch the scene unfold as if they've seen it before; others see images in dreams, or reflections in computer screens. It's all intuition.

"I just *know* it. But I can't *prove* it. It's so frustrating trying to explain it to anyone else!"

Trying to explain intuition just gets in the way. In fact, because it's a sense of the whole, an intuition is by definition impossible to analyze. The only possible 'proof' is in the results. If we're allowed any, that is...

"Even though it's often wrong, we can only follow the rule-book. We're not allowed to use our own judgement at all. So I haven't been able to help people who I *knew* were good risks, but didn't match the rules. The bank's lost good business, and I've no way to learn to improve my judgement, my intuition, to do my job better. What a waste!"

Ignoring intuition *is* a waste. But it's easy to see why companies are so wary of it: intuition seems too personal, too unpredictable, perhaps too unreliable. And there's always a risk of fraud, or lawsuits – or expensive mistakes, at least.

We could reduce those risks by recognizing that intuition is a *skill* – one that can be learned, and used, by anyone, in their own way.

Using intuition at work

To improve any skill, we need to practice! Here are some suggestions:

- Notice those times when you have odd 'hunches' or 'gut-feelings' about some part of your work – particularly feelings which seem 'more real than real'.
- Note the precise feeling: What exactly do you feel? How and where does it express itself in you?
- Note the context: What exactly was happening when you felt this?
- Note the apparent meaning: What does the feeling 'say' about the context? What is the feeling 'telling' you to do?
- Note any intrusion of prejudice: What are your usual thoughts and assumptions about that context? How much might this flavor your feeling?
- Note the rational view: What should you do according to the company's 'rule-book'? Is there a clash between your feeling – your own judgement – and the rule-book's expectations?
- Note the implications: If you could do what the feeling tells you, regardless of 'the rules', what would happen, for you, for others, and for the business?

We need always to remember that intuition *complements* analysis – it's no substitute for careful thought! And like a dim star at night, intuition does tend to come and go, and vanishes if we try to look straight at it. Yet if you can safely experiment with it at work, do so wherever practicable – because it helps you to know and trust your *own* judgement.

Even if you can't act on those feelings, watch for any feedback – indications of what happened about the context of your 'hunch'. Sometimes your feeling will be proved right; sometimes – often, at first! – it will be proved wrong. Notice if there are any patterns in what works and what doesn't. If there are, support those patterns any way that you can.

Intuition is perhaps the most powerful tool we have – especially at work. It's part of us – in many ways *is* us. And allowing ourselves to trust and use our intuition helps make work itself more meaningful and satisfying. Try it!