

Intuition or Intellect?

October 01, 2006

Say this much for President Bush: He is not deaf to the inner whispers of his intuition.

“I know there’s no evidence that shows the death penalty has a deterrent effect,” he reportedly said as Texas governor, “but I just feel in my gut it must be true.”

Six years and two wars into his presidency, the president still relies on his gut instincts. His recent fly-in to Baghdad was, he explained to U.S. troops, “to look Prime Minister [Nouri] Maliki in the eyes — to determine whether or not he is as dedicated to a free Iraq as you are.” The president’s snap assessment? “I believe he is.” He told Larry King in an interview last month: “If you make decisions based upon what you believe in your heart of hearts, you stay resolved.”

In flying by the seat of his pants, Bush has much company.

“Buried deep within each and every one of us, there is an instinctive, heart-felt awareness that provides — if we allow it to — the most reliable guide,” offered Prince Charles, whose decisions also have been relentlessly second-guessed for much of his adult life.

For those disposed to follow their inner guide, today’s pop psychology offers books on “intuitive healing,” “intuitive learning,” “intuitive managing,” “intuitive trading” and much more.

So, when hiring and firing, fearing and risking, investing and gambling, should we follow Bush’s example and tune down that analytical, linear, left-brained mind? Should we stop obsessing over logic and data and trust the force within?

Today’s psychological science documents a vast intuitive mind. More than we realize, our thinking, memory, and attitudes operate on two levels — conscious and unconscious — with the larger part operating automatically. We know more than we know we know.

Studies show that as we gain expertise, even reasoned judgments can become automatic. Rather than wend their way through a decision tree, experienced car mechanics and physicians will often, after a quick listen and look, diagnose problems. Chess masters intuitively know the right move. And Japanese chicken sexers use complex pattern recognition to separate newborn pullets and cockerels with near perfect accuracy.

Moreover, we’re all experts when it comes to reading people’s emotions. Psychologists Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal report that after viewing mere “thin slices” of college professors’ teaching — three two-second clips — observers’ ratings of them correlate well with students’ end-of-semester ratings. To gain a sense of someone’s energy and warmth, six seconds will often do.

So, is our president smart to harness the powers of his intuition? Or should he, and we, be subjecting our hunches to scrutiny?

Intuition is important, but we often underestimate its perils. My geographical intuition tells me that Reno is east of Los Angeles and that Rome is south of New York. But I am wrong. “The first principle,” said Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman, “is that you must not fool yourself — and you are the easiest person to fool.” In hundreds of experiments, people have greatly overestimated their eyewitness recollections, their interviewee assessments and their stock-picking talents. It’s humbling to realize how often we misjudge and mispredict reality and then display “belief perseverance” when facing disconfirming information.

We fear things that claim lives in bunches. Smoking kills 400,000 Americans a year, and carbon dioxide looks to be the biggest weapon of mass destruction, but terrorists frighten us more. We are told, but are unmoved by, statistics showing that the most dangerous part of air travel is the drive to the airport.

Intuition — automatic, effortless, unreasoned thinking — guides our lives. But intuition also errs, and false intuitions may go before a fall.

After meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin, Bush felt that he had him sized up. “I looked the man in the eye,” Bush said. “I was able to get a sense of his soul.” But the president has since expressed frustration at Putin’s democracy-suffocating record. Bush also told Bob Woodward that intuition was a key to his decision to launch the Iraq war: “I’m a gut player. I rely on my instincts.” Bush still insists that he made the right decision, but most Americans now disagree.

The president, like all of us, should check his intuitions against the facts. He can welcome the creative whispers of the unseen mind, but only as the beginning of inquiry. Smart thinking often begins with hunches but continues as one examines assumptions, evaluates evidence, invites critique, and tests conclusions. As Proverbs says: “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.”

Originally printed in the August 22, 2006, *Los Angeles Times*. Reprinted with permission.