

BLINK by M. Gladwell

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Abstract

In the age of organizational complexity, managers need to develop unique thinking abilities and decision making talents, in order to catch up with the changeable demands of business reality. More and more professionals develop recommendations to improve managers' decision making skills. This paper provides a brief report on Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. The paper discusses possible reasons for writing the book, its main themes and tasks, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as possible implications for managers.

Keywords: Blink, Gladwell, thinking, “adaptive unconscious”, managers.

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Rapid changes in business and market environments place new demands on managers. Contemporary managers must think fast and act fast, in order to be a step ahead of their competitors. Only the most creative, innovative and decisive will have a chance to succeed in the era of business complexity, and it comes as no surprise that more and more professionals publish their recommendations to improve managers' decision making skills. Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* is a bright example of the so-called "easy-to-read" textbook on how to develop and improve thinking and decision making abilities. Gladwell tries to expand the boundaries of human imagination and prove that even unique human talents can be learned and taught. Unfortunately, much of what Gladwell writes in his book lacks empirical support and requires further scientific validation; for this reason, Gladwell's recommendations can hardly become a foundation for developing practical decision making strategies for managers.

Malcolm Gladwell's book is titled *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. The book was first published in 2005. The author does not share his reasons for writing the book, but it seems that the book is an attempt to close the existing gap in literature and expand the boundaries of managerial decision making in contemporary organizations. Gladwell (2005) begins his book with a story of the J. Paul Getty Museum in California and the statue of a Greek kouros that stirred huge controversy among art professionals, scholars and critics. Despite the abundance of scientific evidence supporting the authenticity of the statue, the prevailing majority of outside experts felt that something was wrong with it. Some experts called it uniquely „fresh', whereas others claimed that the statue looked as if it had been dipped in the very best Starbucks's caffe latte (Gladwell, 2005). Gladwell (2005) describes experts' reactions as a moment of revelation, an intu-

ition that blinks, and an impression that falls on them out of the blue and has no rational explanation. Yet, everything has its explanation. It would be fair to assume that the reason why Gladwell (2005) writes his book is because he wants everyone to know that this professional intuition is called the “adaptive unconscious”, and it can be taught and used by managers to meet their professional and organizational goals.

This “adaptive unconscious” is the central thread of Gladwell’s (2005) story and the theme around which all events, tales and anecdotes in Gladwell’s book actually revolve. The author investigates the numerous sides of human consciousness and unconsciousness and tries to prove that the “adaptive unconscious” carries an unprecedented decision making potential. According to Gladwell (2005),

the adaptive unconscious is not to be confused with the unconscious described by Sigmund Freud, which has a dark and murky place filled with desires and memories [...] this new notion of the adaptive unconscious is [...] a kind of giant computer that quickly and quietly processes a lot of the data we need in order to keep functioning as human beings. (p.11)

Every day during their lives, humans experience moments when, the faster they think the more likely they are to escape troubles. These are the moments when, according to Gladwell (2005), there is no time to gather and process evidence. These are the moments when decisions should be made quickly. Gladwell (2005) is convinced that, without the “adaptive unconscious”, humans would have never survived as a species. This “adaptive unconscious” is a kind of higher-level thinking, an auto-pilot of consciousness and cognition that does not require any input from humans (Gladwell, 2005). According to Gladwell (2005), the whole world judges the quality of decisions, based on the time and effort spent on investigating the alternatives. Yet, the “adap-

tive unconscious” has the potential to speed up decision making processes and become the source of the most relevant decisions, when there is no space for thinking.

Gladwell’s (2005) book is intended to fulfill three important tasks. First, Gladwell (2005) tries to convince the public that decisions made quickly and immediately can be as good as those made cautiously and deliberately. However, not all human instincts are inherently good, as they often have to compete with other emotions, interests, and sentiments. For this reason, the second task of the book is to teach the reader how and when to trust their instincts and when to be wary of them (Gladwell, 2005). The author believes that it is possible to learn when to trust the “adaptive unconscious” computer and when to avoid its instinctive recommendations. The third, and most important, task of Gladwell’s (2005) book is to prove that the “adaptive unconscious” is a skill that can be learned, taught, educated, managed and controlled. Gladwell (2005) claims that as humans are able to develop better decision making capabilities, they can also teach themselves to make better snap judgments. Whether or not Gladwell (2005) succeeds in this mission will become clear by the end of the book. As of now, the author makes a very promising beginning and implies that the book may have far-reaching implications for managers.

What Gladwell (2005) writes in his book holds a promise to teach managers to make better use of their abilities and talents. Basically, Gladwell (2005) implies that the “adaptive unconscious” can teach managers to find patterns in behaviors and situations, based on extremely narrow slices of evidence, experiences and impressions. Simply stated, Gladwell’s (2005) book can become a guide for managers who want to learn how to make fast but reasonable decisions. This is also what Gladwell (2005) calls “thin-slicing” – a unique ability to make fast decisions in a short time.

However, not all decisions are good by nature. At times, the chain of

thinking is interrupted by impressions and feelings that have nothing to do with rationality (Gladwell, 2005). Gladwell (2005) promises to teach readers to deal with their experiences in ways that distinguish rationality from prejudice and bias in the most controversial situations. For example, managers need to take fast decisions when they try to pick up the best candidates for a job. Gladwell (2005) claims that, in these situations, the first impression can be equally beneficial and damaging for business. Gladwell (2005) writes that prejudice and bias represent the dark side of the “adaptive unconscious”, and his book can teach managers to make a difference. Bearing in mind the importance of human resource decisions in organizations, these skills and abilities can eventually lead managers to become perfect leaders, perfect followers, and perfect human resource specialists. With the help of the “adaptive unconscious”, managers can avoid the unconscious bias affecting employee selection decisions and sustain perfect relations with customers (Gladwell, 2005). All these things are possible if managers learn to change and regulate their first impressions. They can do it, by altering the way they thin-slice their experiences and changing the scope of experiences comprising these impressions (Gladwell, 2005). Gladwell (2005) assumes that rapid cognition has an enormous decision making power, both for good and bad, and it is imperative that managers take active steps to regulate and control their impressions. Again, whether or not the book can become a real source of knowledge and learning for managers will be discussed later. At this point of analysis, the book is filled with interesting stories and anecdotes, whose main intention is to confirm the validity of Gladwell’s adaptive unconscious assumptions and teach managers to manage their cognitive and emotional resources more wisely.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is in the way Gladwell (2005) describes the “adaptive unconscious” experiences. It seems that the “adaptive unconscious” phenomenon transcends all aspects of human activity. Gladwell (2005) describes managers, architects, art experts and doctors, and the “adaptive unconscious” seems to be

affecting the prevailing majority of routine decisions and acts. Even more surprising is the fact that Malcolm Gladwell, a professional journalist with no psychological education or background, tries to discuss the subject that requires a deep psychological insight. This is also one of the major strengths and weaknesses of Gladwell's book. On the one hand, the lack of psychological education reduces the risks of professional bias and enables the writer to present his findings in an easy-to-read format. On the other hand, with no degree in psychology, Gladwell (2005) cannot grasp the complexity of the emotional, cognitive and unconscious processes in the human brain. Gladwell's (2005) book is unique in the sense that it expands the boundaries of managerial thinking and motivates managers to achieve new decision making frontiers. Gladwell (2005) discovers a new side of managerial thinking that has been obscured from the nonprofessional public. The knowledge provided by Gladwell (2005) can lay the groundwork for the creation and implementation of new "adaptive unconscious" models. Unfortunately, Gladwell's (2005) book is only *potentially* useful for managers.

Potentiality is the key source of criticism in Gladwell's *Blink*. Reasons why the book is only *potentially* useful for managers are numerous and diverse. To begin with, the absence of theoretical and empirical support is the main weakness of Gladwell's book. Included in his argument are numerous situations, cases, experiments and examples, which lack solid theoretical and empirical support. Certainly, it is possible to say that the current state of research into the "adaptive unconscious" is still in its infancy, and no theories of the "adaptive unconscious" have been devised so far. However, the abundant examples in Gladwell's book suggest that the theoretical point is still missing. As a result, and with no theoretical systematization, these examples and cases are nothing but a sequence of anecdotes that fail to create a developed plot.

Another major weakness of Gladwell's book is in the radical state-

ments and assumptions made by the author. At the beginning and in the middle of his book, Gladwell (2005) discusses the main implications of the “adaptive unconscious” for medical practice. From what Gladwell (2005) writes, medical professionals no longer need to ground their decisions on the evidence coming from numerous blood counts, ECG, and other investigations. Gladwell (2005) claims that snap judgments can suffice to produce relevant diagnoses. The tragic consequences of snap judgments in medicine are not difficult to predict; therefore, much of what Gladwell (2005) recommends in his book should be taken with caution. Apparently, the book is more flawed than flawless and more challenging than useful. As a talented journalist, Gladwell (2005) was able to produce a piece of writing that is wordy but refined in its language, but language and wordiness alone cannot make the book useful for readers. Gladwell (2005) shows that snap judgments can be as good as the decisions taken slowly and deliberately, but he fails to teach the reader how to make snap judgments work in real-world situations. Gladwell (2005) fails to teach the reader how to deal with the dark side of the “adaptive unconscious” and to distinguish positive instincts from negative ones. Gladwell’s book (2005) is merely a suggestion that something in this world can improve the quality of organizational decisions and enhance managers’ ability to make fast and correct judgments. Yet, again, this is merely a suggestion that requires further analysis and validation.

Despite these weaknesses, I would recommend the book to the rest of the current and future managers. The book can help them to discover how and why they make snap judgments and why these judgments lead to the desired or undesired results. For many readers, the book can become a worthy object of pleasant reading and a unique way to look behind the human unconscious. Simultaneously, taking it seriously is the biggest mistake the reader can make when faced with Gladwell’s *Blink*. Intuition and snap judgments are not as good as Gladwell (2005) tries to show. Love at first sight can have tragic consequences for marriage. More serious are the consequences of intuitive

decisions in multinational business, politics and international relations. Contrary to what Gladwell (2005) tries to say, taking deliberate decisions based on evidence and thorough analysis is still a preferable option for many managers. In the world of rational decisions and information availability, blaming intuition for the major strategic failures is a nuisance, as well as the sign of unprofessionalism. When everything is becoming interconnected, even the slightest interruption with the “adaptive unconscious” processes can cause a domino effect, a chain reaction leading to irreversible consequences for hundreds and thousands of people. Thus, think twice before you take a snap judgment that can potentially affect the future of your business.

The book is structured as follows:

- Introduction: The statute that didn't look right.
- Chapter One: The theory of thin slices: How a little bit of knowledge goes a long way.
- Chapter Two: The locked door: The secret life of snap decisions.
- Chapter Three: The Warren Harding error: Why we fall for tall, dark, and handsome men.
- Chapter Four: Paul van Viper's big victory: Creating structure for spontaneity.
- Chapter Five: Kenna's dilemma: The right – and wrong – way to ask people what they want.
- Chapter Six: Seven seconds in the Bronx: The delicate art of mind reading.
- Conclusion: Listening with your eyes: The lessons of *Blink*.
- Afterword.

Conclusion

Gladwell's *Blink* was called an outstanding parade of anecdotes and scientific research. However, the latter seems to be the biggest problem of Gladwell's book. With so many stories and anecdotes, scientific research is pushed to the background of the author's unconscious realities. By the end of the book, many readers may find themselves tired of numerous stories, impressions and situations that are too abundant to be useful. Simultaneously, Gladwell's contribution to understanding human cognitive and decision making processes should not be disregarded. *Blink* implies that snap judgments have the potential to speed up organizational decision making and expand the cognitive boundaries of organizational growth. Yet, years may pass before snap judgments become a rational supplement to the existing decision making models used by managers to advance themselves and their organizations.

References

Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.