Supplement to “Worth Reading,” Professional Safety, August 2012

Decision Making

Blink

The Power of Thinking Without Thinking


What caused me to think of this book was one of those extracurricular teenage classes my daughter was enrolled in, cotillion. It is a class that teaches social graces. Quite frankly, more people, including adults, should go through this class. But I digress. While watching the class from a distance, I heard the instructor say that people make decisions about others within 8 to 10 seconds of the first encounter. This caught my attention. I know about first impressions and how important they are. But the author of Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking says it is about 2 seconds. The author’s comprehensive research for this book spans many disciplines to come up with this premise.

As a professional in executive management, I’ve made many snap decisions based on my gut. I’ve made in-the-moment crucial decisions in the middle of a crisis. As a past president of ASSE, I’ve made big decisions affecting our membership. I made all these decisions with imperfect information. If we wait until we do, then it’s too late. The author has given credibility to these decisions and supported it with his extensive research. This also supports my premise that many so-called decision makers suffer from “analysis paralysis.”

According to Gladwell, the adaptive unconscious concept is that the brain is like a giant computer that quickly and silently processes huge amounts of data to keep us functioning. For example, when another car veers into your lane, you jerk your vehicle out of the way without really thinking. This is a survival skill.

This ability is predicated on the process that the author terms thin slicing. The human mind can often examine a situation, skim necessary information for making a correct decision and plot a course of action almost instantly. The most accurate thin slices are often those that involve our assessment of the emotional or mental states of others. This allows us to assess the actions and motives of others with a split-second glance.

For example, when you were in college, how long did it take you to judge a professor’s teaching ability? The author cites research which shows that a person watching a silent 2-second video clip of a teacher s/he has never met will reach conclusions about that teacher’s ability which are very similar to those of a student who has been in the teacher’s class for an entire semester. According to the author, that’s the power of our adaptive unconscious.

Most people, including me at first, are innately suspicious of this kind of rapid cognition. We live in a world which assumes that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it. What do we tell our children? Haste makes waste. Look before you leap. Stop and think. Don’t judge a book by its cover. We inherently believe that it is better to gather as much information and spend as much time as possible deliberating.

We typically only trust conscious decision making. But there are moments, particularly in times of stress, when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions can offer a much better means of making sense of the world. Gladwell says that the first task of this book is to convince the reader of a simple fact: Decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately.

According to the author, our world today requires that decisions be sourced and footnoted (just try publishing in Professional Safety). To improve the quality of our decisions, we need to accept the mysterious nature of our snap judgments. We need to respect the fact that it is possible to know without knowing why we know and accept that, sometimes, we’re better off that way.

This book suggests that what we think of free will is largely an illusion. Often, we are simply operating on automatic pilot, and the way we think and act—and how well we do so at the spur of the moment—are a lot more susceptible to outside influences than we realize. I sometimes feel this way when I’m driving to work in the morning. I get to work and sometimes wonder what happened on the way to work. It was just a blur. Also, during the day when it is particularly busy I find myself in decision-making mode like an SH&E answer man. I look back and wonder about the details of what happened.

In Chapter 3, The Warren Harding Error: Why We Fall for Tall, Dark and Handsome Men, the author illustrates what happens when we allow our unconscious prejudices and biases to circumvent the “blink” process. The result is
that our judgments are often grossly inaccurate. The author illustrates this concept through the story of President Warren Harding, a president whom many historians claim rose through the political ranks to the office of the presidency based largely on the power of his classically attractive “tall, dark and handsome” physical appearance. With no discernible political skills, other than an impressive speaking voice, Harding shrank from the responsibilities of his office, and is now considered one of the worst presidents in American history. Voters at the time allowed their deep-seated prejudices about the candidate’s physical attractiveness to make their decision.

Gladwell also recounts the results of many research studies that demonstrate the way our prejudices mislead us, usually unconsciously and despite our best intentions. When our biases take control of our thought process, the “thin slicing” layer of the unconscious, which is capable of highly accurate decision-making, is never accessed. The Warren Harding error is the downside of rapid cognition. It is the root of much prejudice and discrimination. It’s why selecting the right candidate for a job is so difficult and why incompetents often end up in positions of enormous responsibility.

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

Gladwell illustrates via a poignant example. In American hospitals, somewhere between 2% and 8% of the time a patient having a genuine heart attack gets sent home because the examining doctor thinks for some reason that the patient is healthy. We take it as a given that the more information decision makers have, the better off they are. What messes up doctors when they are trying to predict heart attacks is that they take too much information into account. It doesn’t seem to make sense that we can do better by ignoring what seems like perfectly valid information.

There are two important lessons here. First, truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking. Second, in good decision making, frugality matters. To be good decision makers, we have to be able to edit. We get in trouble when this process of editing is disrupted, when we can’t edit, don’t know what to edit, or our environment doesn’t let us edit. If given too many choices, if forced to consider much more than our unconscious is comfortable with, we become paralyzed.

Snap judgments can be made quickly because they are frugal; to protect our snap judgments, we must take steps to protect that frugality. Often, Gladwell contends, the best decisions are made by relying on only a few pieces of high-quality information. I’ve seen this with boards of directors that want 100% of the information and are willing to wait for it, and it never shows up. Decisions are not made or delayed to the point of failure of the organization. A perfect example is Montgomery Ward versus Sears. Sears embraced the retail store concept while Montgomery Ward failed to move from the mail order catalog.

In Chapter 5, Kenna’s Dilemma: The Right—and Wrong—Way to Ask People What They Want, the author focuses on another part of the decision-making process: the context in which a judgment is made. The author uses examples and case studies, drawn from the world of marketing and focus groups. His chief contention is that people will often make the wrong snap judgment if they are being asked to decide something outside of their range of knowledge. The author also demonstrates that taking a problem out of context makes it difficult for people to make accurate decisions. This allows us to color all these focus group data that many sources rely on as fact.

In Chapter 6, Seven Seconds In the Bronx: The Delicate Art of Mind Reading, Gladwell details some negative outcomes that can occur when a series of erroneous judgments are made in rapid succession. The author uses the killing of immigrant Amadou Diallo at the hands of NYPD officers as a case study in the way that misjudgments can snowball.

The author provides a brief overview of the history of mind reading. Although we know that this is impossible, the author notes that several researchers and experts who have undertaken intense studies of human facial expressions have been able to demonstrate a heightened level of perception and insight about people’s emotions and thought processes. I think we’ve all used this in some form or fashion and coupled it with body language to get our points across or negotiate our needs.

In the final chapter, Listening With Your Eyes: The Lessons of Blink, the author recounts the way that a simple innovation in audition practices incited a revolution in the entrenched traditions of the classical music world. In one
audition, an orchestra instituted the use of physical screens to conceal the identity of the candidates during tryouts because the son of an administrator was auditioning and it was feared that nepotism might unduly influence the process. In conditions of anonymity, merit won out over the many prejudicial factors that had long prevailed in the era of nonanonymous auditions. We see this today, particularly in professionally refereed paper reviews where the author’s name is concealed so the evaluator is not prejudiced or intimidated by a known author’s previous reputation. Interesting.

Gladwell then concludes the book by encouraging readers to take this lesson to heart and apply the lessons of Blink to make positive changes in their decision-making behaviors.

What implications does this have for safety professionals?

1) Making a good first impression takes less time than you think. This works both ways.
2) Trust your gut in your area of expertise. Your first decision is usually the best.
3) Sometimes we over-think our decisions.
4) We need to understand that we have to make decisions with imperfect information.
5) Don’t blindly trust focus groups.
6) In face-to-face encounters, facial expressions can be telling.

So, go ahead and make your next decision. But do it before you blink—I mean think—whichever.

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