

SIGMA EI Series



**Great Leaders
Trust Their Intuition**



GREAT LEADERS TRUST THEIR INTUITION

“ I believe in intuitions...I sometimes FEEL that I am right, I do not know that I am.”
- Albert Einstein

Business leaders are faced with important decisions on a daily basis. They determine strategic direction, guide hiring and promotion, set business priorities, the list goes on. People generally make decisions using two different processes; the first is based on logic and facts, and the second is based on intuition. Intuition is our intuitive sense of the best course of action. Rather than conscious reasoning, intuition comes from paying attention to our emotions. When making decisions, leaders primarily rely on and benefit from facts and information, but often there is competing or incomplete information. In these cases, trust in intuition becomes a valuable leadership competency. As Bill Gates says, “often you have to rely on intuition.”

While it sounds simple, trusting intuition can be difficult in a culture that places greater value on facts, data, and logical analysis. Furthermore, trusting intuition leaves room for errors in judgment due to heuristics (mental shortcuts), biases, and our limited ability to know what we don't know.^{1, 2} Despite these limitations, intuition can be a valuable leadership competency, and it's worth taking time to develop.

To assess your ability to trust your intuition, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I pay attention to my first reactions about a given issue?
- When I'm faced with a decision, do I consider my feelings in addition to the facts?
- Do I check in with my gut feeling after summarizing the pros and cons?
- Do I pay attention when my gut sense is at odds with the available information?

Strengthen Your Intuition

Develop your expertise: Strong intuition requires experience. In other words, practice, practice, practice. Research shows that subject matter experts outperform novices when answering questions based on intuition, because novices needed to use their analytic abilities to perform well.³ In order to improve your expertise, seek out on-the-job training and real-life experiences, which tend to be the best teachers. Reading relevant case studies can also be helpful. Over time, and as you practice, your intuitive judgments about familiar work-related scenarios are more likely to be accurate.

Slow down and tune in: In our fast-paced work-world, it can be hard to slow down and check in with ourselves. This, however, is necessary in order to access intuition. The next time you're faced with an important decision, take some time to get out of your head and away from your desk. Sit with the decision, ponder alternatives, and try brainstorming new solutions. As you do so, tune in to your emotions and evaluate your reactions to understand how intuition might be leading you in this situation.

Be aware of your biases: In cases where a leader's intuition has led them astray, errors can often be attributed to unconscious biases. Biases are cognitive distortions that manifest in personal preference or misleading assumptions. Decisions based on biases can be made quickly, but they lack accuracy and objectivity. When making biased decisions, we often feel more confident in our answers than we should be. Research by Russo and Schoemaker has shown that experts can be very sure of the *wrong* decision due to this overconfidence.⁴ To ensure you don't mistake bias for intuition, be aware of your context (personal and situational) and think critically about the assumptions you're making to reach a conclusion.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Enhance Your Intuition

The following steps can help you use and strengthen your intuition:

1. **Notice your inner critic.** The rational and often critical voice in your head wants to keep you safe, but this voice can sometimes overpower your instincts about the best course of action and hamper your ability to feel confident in going with your gut. Practice noticing and listening to what your inner critic is saying so that you can make better informed decisions. Reflect on whether critique is coming from a place of fear, old habits, or a deeper (more intuitive) sense of inner knowing.
2. **Prove yourself wrong.** If you have an intuitive hunch, make a note of it, and if it's contrary to the facts of the situation, look for information that could indicate you are wrong (versus continuing to look only at information that confirms your hunch is correct). It is also good to seek out advice from others. Doing this will help you avoid confirmation bias, and it allows you to test and refine your intuition throughout, rather than only at the end of the decision-making process.
3. **Reduce the noise.** It's hard to listen to our gut when our minds are full of information. See if you can reduce the information overload by adding space to your day. Even a short lunchbreak with no media or distractions can help you sort through the tasks you're faced with and give you more bandwidth for intuitive decision making.

Resources



[Blink by Malcolm Gladwell – Animated Book Review.](#)



[When is it safe to rely on intuition and when it's not.](#)



Develop your ability to use your intuition by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ Gigerenzer, G., & Gaissmaier, W. (2011). Heuristic Decision Making. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 451-82. 10.1146/annurev-psych-120709-145346.

² Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

³ Chi, M. T., Glaser, R., & Rees, E. (1981). *Expertise in problem solving*. Pittsburgh Univ PA Learning Research and Development Center.

⁴ Russo, J.E., & Shoemaker, P. (1992). Managing Overconfidence. *Sloan Management Review*, 33(2), 7-17.