

## Voices



Photo by Boomer Jerritt.

"Intuition takes us beyond the limits."

David Pinel, IB graduate 1987

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Whether in adventure activities or in strategic planning discussions, listening to something deep down inside – a gut feeling – allows us to perform on a line of optimal tension that is safe, exciting, appropriate, and responsive to many rapidly changing variables. Intuition takes us beyond the confines and paradoxical risk of acting only on what we can rationally explain. When is that tingling "spider sense" actually all of the "knowing" that you need?

Despite a forecast for a calm afternoon, we're now paddling into winds that have rapidly picked up to above 30 km/h and seem to be increasing. The waves are building in height from the wind and against the outflowing current from dropping tides. Glancing over my shoulder I notice that the other kayakers with me have replaced smiles and banter with more focused looks in the face of more

challenging conditions that will require more effort. Everyone is instinctively paddling a little closer together and in a steady rhythm – this is good.

Ahead lies a choice: with our campsite and best landing option only 2 km ahead, should we take a short cut into steepening waves through a shallow swell-filled gap (with some rocks) between two islets? This is the most direct route. Or should we add another 20 minutes by going wide around the islets, avoiding a reef-strewn point by choosing deeper water, and then paddling back along the windward side of a rocky shoreline with rebounding waves from beam seas?

Each set of waves brings changing conditions to both options. And each minute brings potentially worsening conditions from the wind and falling tide level. We will lose momentum if we stop to observe further and discuss the options, and waiting will close the window of opportunity for the shorter option through the swell-filled gap, while making the more exposed longer route more challenging.

There is no dress rehearsal – we need to decide then "go for it" and act with organized commitment and no hesitation. Am I ready? Is the group ready? What instructions should I give?

We're taught and encouraged to prudently "gather all of the information" before "evaluating the data and options" then deciding and acting. In the discipline of professional planning, this is described as a "rational comprehensive" approach. For some, "professional" means methodical and therefore accountable.

But is it? Unfortunately, during the time it takes to find supposedly comprehensive information, the conditions and variables tend to change and the information that was originally gathered becomes insufficient or dated. At some point, responsible

and responsive planning benefits from our intuition flagging that we have enough information (or skill, or experience) to make and act on a decision – that more information won't necessarily lead to a better result. The "professional" advantage can come from consciously recognizing and acting on your somewhat less explainable intuition that comes from experience and enhances trained responses.

Ironically, though we use it all of the time, intuition is rarely taught or encouraged as a sufficient justification for actions, or as a reliable way of knowing what's best. Though intuition doesn't guarantee the best or optimal outcome, neither do the other tools for knowing and acting. Learning to find, listen to, and respect intuition adds a powerful tool to your kit.

catch the first impressions of an emerging pattern in our sense perceptions of the world, and let imagination carry us to a hypothesis for a possible cause? Could it be intuition? Yes, we really should give the other ways of knowing their share of the credit, but intuition just might be the fastest and the first to tap into our awareness of pattern.

Socially, too, it seems that we often make judgments at an intuitive level, strongly affected by our first impressions. Says one social psychologist, "Many psychologists now believe that most social cognition occurs rapidly, automatically, and effortlessly – in a word, intuitively – as our minds appraise the people we encounter on such features as attractiveness, threat, gender, and status."<sup>4</sup> Some psychologists suggest an evolutionary basis to such intuition, harking back to encountering strangers and having to decide in a flash whether they were friends or enemies. Those with accurate intuitions were likely to survive longer!

Other kinds of decisions more clearly demand the capacity of intuition to do fast calculation for us, especially when we are under pressure. And sometimes that intuition does appear to be

I slowed my forward momentum long enough for everyone to hear the instruction to follow my exact path single file through the gap, leaving a boat length between each kayak and turning where I turn. "Any questions? All good?" A quick round of nods and an "OK" signal from my co-leader at the rear indicated everyone was ready to go.

Within a few strokes, each kayak jockeyed into a line much like cars merging smoothly onto a busy highway – no discussion or negotiations. We were through the gap within 90 seconds and could now see the sheltered calm of our destination ahead. Several spontaneous hoots rapidly widened all smiles and energized the pace and chatter for the final stretch.

fairly trustworthy. When it can draw on deeply familiar knowledge, such as expert skill, it seems that it can take over fairly reliably. Chess players, for example, can rely on their skilled pattern recognition, so that they do not have to think through all the possible consequences of a single move but instead recognize familiar sequences.

The greater the expertise, it seems, the more reliable the intuition – and the more valuable in situations demanding instant decisions. Professor Hodgkinson of Leeds University tells the story of a Formula One racing car driver who suddenly braked sharply when nearing a hairpin bend, even though it was speed that would win him the race. He could not explain why he abruptly put on the brakes. Later, when shown a video, "he realised that the crowd, which would have normally been cheering him on, wasn't looking at him coming up to the bend but was looking the other way in a frozen, static way. That was the cue. He didn't consciously process this, but he knew something was wrong and stopped in time." He thereby avoided hitting a pile-up of cars on the track ahead. His intuition had saved his life.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Haidt, J. 2012. Moral Psychology. <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdh6n/moraljudgment.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Go With Your Gut – Intuition is More Than Just a Hunch, Says New Research", Science Daily, March 6, 2008.