



Focusing: Uncovering a Kind of Knowledge You Didn't Know You Knew

By Flavia Cymbalista

There's an increasing suspicion among management science experts that our old portfolio of models and tools for decision-making aren't by themselves enough to grapple with today's issues and challenges. The environment in which we work and strategize is too uncertain, multifaceted, and dynamic to stand still for traditional approaches to decision-making. Change comes too fast, and all our complex business interrelationships make it next to impossible to identify all the forces that are at work in our areas of interest. There's an increasing interest in "complexity theory," which studies the emergence of new properties, of new events, that can't be reduced — or deduced — from what was there before. And this exposes the insufficiencies in the current approach to decision-making models and the computer programs — they assume the future will not only carry forward as a linear extension of the past, but will be accessible with the same collection of relevant variables and the same set of business rules that exist today. What's missing is a component that state-of-the-art observers of the business world call "emergent knowledge." What's still missing is a method for generating and surfacing this emergent knowledge, for personal and corporate use — and the most promising approach to this quest involves something far afield from traditional analysis techniques.

Researchers and analysts are finally taking seriously what business people, especially successful financiers and entrepreneurs, have known all along: good decisions aren't based on good numbers

and good analysis alone. Good decisions absolutely have to include good hunches. We don't just scrutinize spreadsheets any more; we're told to look for patterns, allow patterns to emerge, trust our "gut" to recognize trends and patterns.

But how do we do that? What kind of knowledge do we need as a starting point? Where and how does new knowledge emerge? We can all do this now — sporadically, occasionally, sometimes successfully. So the real challenge is to

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turn these gut feelings into gut knowledge. We need to make our hunches trustworthy, but there haven't been many resources available for teaching us how to generate hunches when we need them, much less determine whether what we've unearthed is reliable to any degree.

This article addresses a method for directly accessing the kind of knowledge we need to be in touch with. It's based on a psychological process called "focusing," which has been used in multiple settings by hundreds of thousands of people all over the world.

FOCUSING FOR DIRECT ACCESS

The process recognizes and actually makes use of the "blind spot" that's present in conventional decision-making approaches. These traditional methodologies encourage, even insist on, un-

compromising objectivity. They encourage people to shunt their bodily reactions and subjective feelings to the side, and they frame problems and decisions "scientifically." Interestingly, this insistence on a scientific approach doesn't even meet current needs in the hard sciences themselves. Ever since Heisenberg, we have known that observation isn't independent of the observer. Discoveries in neurobiology, especially the pioneering work of Maturana and Varela, also support the

realization that what we see all depends on what we've learned to see.

From discipline to discipline, hard science to soft science, and in business too, we see that our "statistically reliable" computer programs and analytics embody only what has already happened. Think about creating a checklist to address a new situation you face in the office — we have been trained to do things this way, and assigning weights to the pros and cons we identify is almost second nature to most of us. But this approach only works when all the facts are known. We acknowledge this implicitly all the time when, for example, we confront the decision for a new HRIS: we keep looking for certainty, get frustrated with "analysis paralysis," and finally just make our decisions anyway.

Executives aren't immune from these same phenomena. When they rely exclusively on objective criteria in their

deliberations, they often encounter a dramatic, if not ominous, misfit between models and reality. In hindsight, such situations are called “lapses in judgment.” In fact, analyses and interviews reveal that many of the “failed” decisions never sat right with the executives who made them. The quality of the misfit was — or could have been — sensed at the time. There appear to have been unseen factors at work, but they were dismissed as subjective and not taken into account during the decision-making processes. Nothing was “known” that could override the sense of unease with the decision outcome. This resulted in trouble on two fronts: bad management decisions for the company or business unit, and tension, stress, and sleepless night for the decision-maker(s).

Still, there is often a way to shift from hindsight to foresight and detect these misfits in advance. It’s possible to supplement — not replace — logical reasoning with the systematic use of one’s bodily-felt experience. That’s because the decisions that “sit right” with us are based on a whole constellation of factors within factors. In complex situations, we cannot ever think through the implications and consequences of all the variables involved. But just because we can’t fully think things through analytically doesn’t mean we can’t “size up” a situation and then act based on its overall sense of given context. As experienced pilots put it, “You don’t just fly with your instruments, you feel flying in your bones.” And that takes a while to learn or absorb.

Let’s say you’ve just hired a new HRIS analyst. Between what you tell them, what they have learned in school or in seminars, and their current inventory of experience, you can put together a pretty good job description, development plan, and list of actions for the first month or so on the job. But if you’re involved in the evaluation of software for a new system, you probably relegate them to observer or junior-partner status for a while. That’s because you know you can’t give them all the background, objectives, personal and departmental histories and management quirks that color the decision you are about to

make. They work from general principles; you work from experience.

However, you don’t think of each of these categories or their components consciously. If you try to surface all of them, the project grinds to a halt. So, in fact, you’re weighing a lot of the alternatives with your body, not your mind. When things are in sync, you feel good. When there’s dissonance in the project, you don’t feel quite as content.

The process that moves us from clueless to sensitivity vis-à-vis these subjective components of decision-making can be broken down into seven steps, some of which may be repeated once or several times until the “right” feeling results. The steps themselves are identified in Figure 1., but rather than deal with them in a detailed and theoretical fashion, the accompanying case study and interview provide a narrative approach and discussion of how one “focuses to fit.”

RE-VISITING THE SYSTEMS APPROACH

The methodologies and practices that traditionally fall under the “scientific analysis” or “engineering” umbrella have delivered a sound foundation upon which to build modern approaches to business management and an alignment between business and information systems. But those same processes, when used to the exclusion of other techniques from other disciplines, are proving to be a limiting factor to the kind of systems that resonate with and support the “whole” enterprise — especially its “people” component.

The cover for the November 2002 issue of the magazine *Business 2.0*, highlights something different — what the magazine trumpets as “The Art of the Brilliant Hunch.” (The cover lead-in states that “Science is starting to understand why the best decisions come from the gut. Here’s how to make tough calls under pressure.”)

As the *Business 2.0* article by Thomas A. Stewart, the magazine’s editorial director at the time (he has since become the editor of the *Harvard Business Review*) says:

“What the science suggests is that intuition — or instinct, or hunch, or

“learning without awareness,” or whatever you want to call it — is a real form of knowledge. It may be nonrational, ineffable, and not always easy to get in

Figure 1.

FOCUSING TO FIT: A SEVEN-STEP PROCESS

Step One:

Finding and surfacing the murky zone

Step Two:

Connecting with what the body knows

Step Three:

Stabilizing the bodily signals

Step Four:

Clearing the decks

Step Five:

Creating and nurturing alternatives

Step Six:

Stepping through the choices

Step Seven:

Embracing the parts

touch with, but it can process more information on a more sophisticated level than most of us ever dreamed. Psychologists now say that far from being the opposite of effective decision-making, intuition is inseparable from it. Without it we couldn’t decide anything at all.”

HRIS make so many changes to so many aspects of its management systems, so quickly and so often, that it can no longer afford to insulate itself from all the available tools and inputs to organizational and personal decision-making. It needs to expand its tool kit and skill set, and focusing is one of the tools that need to be there. It’s not the kind of topic that traditionally appears in brochures for HR and HRIS conferences, but perhaps it should be there.

As Stewart says: “And as science looks closer, it is coming to see that intuition is not a gift but a skill. And like any skill, it’s something you can learn...

To make sense of this, you have to first get over the fact that it contradicts everything you've been taught about making decisions."

And this realization creates both a challenge and an opportunity for HRIS: its charter has long focused on analytics and supplying the data and information that support line and staff decision makers. It is time to acknowledge that other kinds of data and information, presented in different forms, may be a real contribution to a broader, redefined concept of people-related decisions in 21st century organizations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Focusing, by Eugene T. Gendlin
Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind, by Guy Claxton

Descartes' Error, by Antonio Damasio
Complexity, by M. Mitchell Waldrop
The Tree of Knowledge, by Varela and Maturana

Flavia Cymbalista earned her Ph.D. in economic sciences at Berlin Free University. Her dissertation, "On the Impossibility of Rational Valuation Under Uncertainty," was published in Germany. She was a post-doctoral research fellow in the Psychology Department, at the University of California at Berkeley, researching bodily-based knowledge and developing her

methodology to improve the intuitive element of decision making in financial markets. She now lives in New York City and collaborates with philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin, Ph.D., the creator of "focusing." They are currently working on a book on decision-making. Cymbalista characterizes herself as an uncertainty specialist: a financial economist who works with the psychology of uncertainty and helps traders, investors and others make better decisions. She can be reached at flavia@marketfocusing.com.

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