



*Intuition - is it useful or is it unreliable?  
Shelley Row investigated why it's important  
to pay attention to intuition and how real  
leaders put theirs to use.*

# Four Ways Leaders use Intuition

*by* **SHELLEY ROW**

**T**hink, think, think. We live in a culture that values thinking. We have big thinkers, deep thinkers, creative thinkers, out-of-the-box thinkers. There are think tanks and a sculpture called, *The Thinker*. We think out loud; we think to ourselves and then we think nothing of it. And, if you put your thinking cap on, you realize that we give little value to the role of feelings in leadership. And yet, interviews with over seventy leaders confirm that you can't think your way to the top. Becoming a successful leader requires developing both cognitive and intuitive skills.

Interviewed leaders identified four areas where intuition is an essential complement to fact and analysis:

### **DECISION-MAKING**

Leaders make decisions with far-reaching impact. At executive levels, decisions are frequently made without complete information. As one leader said, "If you have complete information then you should have made the decision long ago." Market competitiveness and

public urgency require quick decision-making. Over and over, leaders talked of surrounding themselves with facts and analysis only to find there remained a void where judgment, powered by both cognition and intuition, must step in. Other leaders describe situations where the analysis 'feels off.' In these examples, the leader's intuitive sense kicks in to aid the final decision. Some of their biggest decision-making mistakes were when they did not trust their instinct.

### **ASSESSING PEOPLE**

Leaders spoke clearly of reliance on intuition when dealing with people. Leaders talk of hiring a candidate that 'looks good on paper' even though their intuition is saying otherwise. Consistently, executives say they should have trusted their intuition. But assessing people is not just about hiring. Collaborating, negotiating, and partnering depend on the ability to 'sense' people. In psychology, there is a term 'empathic accuracy' that refers to how accurately one person can infer the thoughts and feelings of another person.<sup>1</sup>



## VISIONING

Much of the business world values the systematic, step-by-step strategic planning process. Indeed, strategic planning is good for getting from point A to point B. But the leader must identify point B. Setting a vision requires looking into the future. Trends can be studied but the future remains ambiguous. Leaders saw vision-setting as an inclusive process that draws on the perspectives of many. Leaders listen, learn, seek out opinions, and collaborate, but at the end of the day, they look to the future, engage cognition and intuition and identify point B. One leader said that intuition allowed her 'see around corners.'

## WHAT TO PURSUE AND WHEN TO PURSUE IT

This is the ability to sense the right moment to lead on a particular issue. William Duggan, author of *Strategic Intuition*, refers to having a 'presence of mind' to discern the optimal time to move forward. Leaders must collaborate and influence others in order to move forward. They need the ability to sense the attitudes of employees and the tenor of a board. Examples ranged from the timing to introduce an employee wellness program (bringing yoga into a law office) or the timing to bring a political issue to the floor for legislative vote. If a leader chooses incorrectly, it could

mean the death of an idea. Intuitive sense is indispensable and it complements analysis of facts and data. Both are necessary and neither alone is sufficient.

The next time you face one of these four situations, gather the facts, look at the analysis and make a conscious effort to ask what you sense about the situation. Does it feel right or is there a nagging feeling? If a feeling nags, these executives say to honor the feeling and ask more questions. It will make you a better leader. **RL**

<sup>1</sup>Wikipedia. Intuition (psychology). Retrieved January 7, 2013 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intuition\\_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intuition_(psychology)).



**Shelley Row** is an executive, speaker, author and... recovering over-thinker. After thirty years as a professional engineer and government executive, she learned that you can't *think* your way to

the top. Today's fast-paced world is filled with complexity and change. How do effective leaders lead in this atmosphere when data alone is not enough? Personal interviews with seventy-six respected leaders reveal the secret. These executives gather information and sense their intuition. That powerful combination is what Shelley calls *infotuition*<sup>®</sup> - the intersection of business pragmatics *and* gut feel. The skillful combination of cognitive and intuitive abilities allows leaders to decide and move on without wasting time over-thinking it. The addition of published research on neuroscience transforms

intuition from woo-woo and wacko to insightful and practical.

Today, Shelley is a sought-after speaker, author and executive coach who works with managers and leaders who must make fast, insightful decisions in the face of rapid change. Her one-of-a-kind programs provide practical, effective skills that can be put to use immediately using her Cognition-Intuition Balance Model.

Shelley's latest book, *Think Less. Live More. Lessons from a Recovering Over-Thinker*, was just released. Follow her work through Twitter, @ShelleyRow, or sign up for the *Newsletter for Recovering Over-Thinkers* at [ShelleyRow.com](http://ShelleyRow.com).

