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Tell Your Gut to Please Shut Up

9:15 AM Wednesday May 12, 2010 | [Comments \(13\)](#)

Your gut is overrated. Really. Don't trust it. It deserves skeptical vigilance, not quiet deference. In the heat of the moment or — sorry, [Malcolm](#) — the blink of an eye, your gut instincts and gut feelings will betray you. No business cliché is more worthy of repudiation, annihilation, and eradication than "you've got to trust your gut."

My impatience with this intestinal mindset — or should I say "gutset"? — comes from [an unfortunate surge of celebratory posts](#) I've recently read and meetings I've attended. Leaders and managers are encouraged and exhorted to rely more on their intuition and judgment. Everyone knows that "Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment." Ha ha ha. But where does bad judgment come from? My answer — and the replicable answer from Nobel Prize winning research: Trusting gut instincts and feelings.

[Daniel Kahneman](#) and [Philip Tetlock](#), among many others, have [conclusively demonstrated that experts tend to be remarkably overconfident about their abilities to make accurate predictions or quickly solve problems](#). Ironic, isn't it? The entire field of [behavioral economics](#) has been built on

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the intensifying recognition that people, particularly smart ones, are suckers for cognitive illusions and heuristic biases that pretty much guarantee that "gut-trusting" will, on average, yield heart burn. **Dan Ariely** didn't call his best-selling book "**Predictably Irrational**" because instant intuition was a recipe for success. It's not just that high IQ types mistakenly over-rely on their gut instincts; it's that they make the same mistakes over and over again. They're overconfident about their ability to manage their overconfidence. That's beyond ironic; it's perverse.

What gives this issue great urgency and good timeliness is the nascent phenomenon discussed in **Gary Wolf's excellent New York Times Magazine piece** on data-driven introspection. He describes his cast of anal-retentive compulsively computational cast of characters as uber-geeks. To me, they're the uber-introspects: a new cultural class that values the ability to relentlessly act upon obsessive self-knowledge.

To hell with intuition and what we think we think about what we know. Instrumenting ourselves, our thoughts, our actions, and — yes — our networks of colleagues and acquaintances, simultaneously transforms both self-awareness and situational awareness. This is the antithesis of networked narcissism; it's a ruthless investment in looking in the mirror and at the scale and saying, "Jeez...I'm really letting myself go...."

Or, as Wolf more politely puts it, "Generally, when we try to change, we simply thrash about: we improvise, guess, forget our results, or change the conditions without even noticing the results. Errors are possible in self-tracking and self-experiment, of course. It is easy to mistake a transient effect for a permanent one, or miss some hidden factor that is influencing your data and confounding your conclusions. But once you start gathering data, recording the dates, toggling the conditions back and forth while keeping careful records of the outcome, you gain a tremendous advantage over the normal human practice of making no valid effort whatsoever."

To my cynical eye, "making no valid effort whatsoever" is synonymous with "gut instinct" and "intuition."

I was both inspired and horrified by the immaculate introspection apps and infrastructures devised by Wolf's subjects. I don't envy the compulsions and neuroses driving them. Like all obsessions, self-monitoring and self-improvement often create costs that subordinate the benefits. But this is "gut instinct's" mirror image more than evil twin. I know too many managers who excuse their cavalier decision-making with an "I-went-with-my-gut-on-this-one" rationalization. They don't look back; they keep looking forward. **Confirmation bias**, anyone?

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So here's a simple, cheap experiment: the next few times you make a snap decision or judgment where your gut is your best friend, take 20 seconds to send yourself an email or text briefly describing what you did and why. Quit after doing it maybe 20 times. Then look at those messages from the vantage of a week later. I promise you'll be surprised. (I did a version of that exercise when I was having a nightmare time with a client. The resulting review left me biting my tongue and forbidding myself from sending substantive project emails without sleeping on them first.)

Do I really respect data that much? Do I really doubt and resent intuition and gut feelings that much? No and no. But I bet I can tell — just like you — when the people we work with use "intuition" and "gut instinct" more as excuses than as reasons ("gut extinct"?). Even worse, I bet I can tell — just like you — when I am using them more as excuses than as reasons.

So did I write that based on empirical observation? Or because I'm trusting my gut?

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Jon Nuger 1 week ago



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Interesting post. I'm curious if you have considered the possibility that different methods of thinking are optimal for different types of problems and situations.

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