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Leadership Intuition Meets the Future of Work

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“We’re gonna be in the Hudson,” the pilot said to air traffic control.

The weather in New York on January 15, 2009 was pleasant, but the inside of the cockpit of US Airways Flight 1549 was anything but. As the plane plummeted toward the river, the automated proximity warning system chanted, Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!

“Got flaps out,” said the co-pilot. “You want more?”

Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!

“No, let’s stay at two,” the pilot replied.

Caution, terrain! Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!

“This is the captain,” he announced over the intercom. “Brace for impact.”

Terrain! Terrain! Pull up! Pull up!

He turned to his co-pilot. “Got any ideas?”

Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!

“Actually not,” the co-pilot replied.
Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!
“We’re gonna brace.”¹

As Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger lifted off from LaGuardia Airport in an Airbus A320, he had no idea that minutes later he would be hailed as a hero and a model for quick decision making and performance under pressure. Most of us know the story from news articles or the feature film depicting the event: against all odds, the brave airline captain manages to perform an emergency ditching of a commercial flight in the Hudson River after the plane struck a large flock of geese. The end result: all 155 aboard the flight survive, and passengers and crew will forever owe their lives to the swift problem solving of Sullenberger and co-pilot Jeff Skiles. Despite the fact that the event took a little under 3 minutes from engine failure to emergency landing, Sullenberger managed to draw on a lifetime of experiences to guide the plane to safety that day.² How did Sullenberger’s nearly 40 years of experience as a commercial airline pilot combine with his assessment of the situation and his own feelings and values to form the controlled actions that he exhibited that January afternoon? As Sully put it, “One way of looking at this might be that, for 42 years, I’ve been making small regular deposits in this bank of experience: education and training. And on January 15, the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal.”

Though certainly not as dramatic as Sullenberger’s experience navigating the skies, the stakes facing leaders today have never been higher. As organizations, industries, and society at large evolve, so too does leadership at the executive level. The foundation and characteristics of great leadership remain largely unchanged, but the speed and urgency of decision making has come to the forefront as the single greatest factor impacting executives today. Industry disruption due to digital transformation, an evolving workforce, and other leadership demands is at an all-time high. Recent history is littered with examples of leading companies that have faltered due to their inability to act quickly and decisively. Additionally, leaders are now inundated with data to sort through and experts to consult before coming to key decisions that set the course for their organizations. Given the speed and complexity of decision making today, executives must rely on an age-old method: intuition.

We have all heard the advice to “follow your gut” before, but what does this mean? Gut-driven decisions are difficult to quantify and evaluate and

as such are rightfully treated with a heavy dose of skepticism by others. However, there is a difference between the common “gut” platitude and what I am advocating as informed intuition. Executive intuition is an informed process, perfect for today’s ever-changing business environment, because it blends the years of experience and insights leaders have cultivated with the powerful analytics tools that most organizations have at their disposal. Informed intuition is defined as the process of blending existing information and data with one’s experiences, educated assumptions, and instincts to arrive at a logical conclusion. When viewing intuition as being driven by both instinct and insight, leaders can more easily integrate and make sense of complex information, resulting in decisions that are well-rounded, delivered with conviction, and appreciated by those who are impacted.

Intuition is best used during times of high-speed change, when the situation is ambiguous and risks are largely unknown. If that sounds familiar, it should. The modern business reality demands some level of intuition, and in this chapter, I make a case for the power and relevance of informed intuition. First, I will provide an overview of the changes to the business landscape that necessitate this new way of thinking. Next, I will review a framework for leadership decision making and show its connections to the development of informed intuition. Last, I will discuss how leaders can blend intuition with more rational, data-driven approaches to decision making, demonstrating how they can successfully capitalize on their intuition as one piece of a larger puzzle.

SHIFTING SOCIETY, SHIFTING LEADERSHIP NEEDS

It is more important than ever before for leaders to be able to exercise agility, adaptability, and other characteristics of informed intuition. Both the workplace and marketplace have rapidly shifted: technology continues to advance and evolve; the workforce is changing with the advents of millennial talent and artificial intelligence; and the phrase “Innovate or die” is increasing in salience as most every industry continues to mature within this “Digital Age.”³

The very nature of intuitive decision making has changed with the evolution of big data and business analytics. Our traditional understanding of “following your gut” meant making decisions in the absence of data.

Today, however, leaders are inundated with data. Though more data can result in more reasoned approaches to solving organizational issues, the sheer volume, velocity, and variety of data can make it difficult for leaders to utilize properly. Not only do leaders have a plethora of descriptive and diagnostic analytics to guide their understanding of a topic, but advances in data analytics have now given business leaders predictive and prescriptive insights to take into consideration. These future-focused analytics allow leaders to accurately model different decisions and their potential consequences across the business, enabling a more reasoned, logical approach to situations that were once very ambiguous.

In order to succeed—even just to survive—leaders need to act as change champions for the Digital Age. Resistance to change isn't an option; a study featured in the *Harvard Business Review* found that CEOs who failed to adapt to the Digital Age were “being phased out” and showed that, in a survey of executives, the percentage of respondents who said their CEO was a “champion for digital” doubled over the past decade.⁴ It is the new norm for leaders to prioritize digital innovation, at least in talking the talk, but exceptional leaders must also be able to walk the walk. This means not only supporting digital transformation within their organization but also having the expertise, confidence, and mindset to enable their organization to actively drive change.

Another writer for the *Harvard Business Review* describes this as “choreographing the change” instead of existing in a constant state of ad hoc reaction and contends that “only the CEO has the power to provide this kind of direction” for their organization to accomplish this.⁵ Leaders must have a comprehensive understanding of the digital landscape that their organization plays in and a strong Digital IQ. As executives, they must also be able to bring a holistic point of view to the digital space; they cannot make decisions in a vacuum but must reconcile the complexities and contradictions of their entire ecosystem. This, again, underscores the need for strong informed intuition: inherently, when you bring all of these disparate pieces of information together from the ecosystem—the digital lens, your organization's mission, the fluctuating demands of the marketplace, workforce issues, and so on—you are using your own unique perspective in order to make sense of it all.

Increasingly, we now have to go through this process of sense making at breakneck speed. In the Digital Age, leaders are called on to make decisions at a much faster pace and in much more turbulent environments. As a result, achievement necessitates a high level of risk

taking. Overall, the capacity for risk-taking experimentation—and for quickly scaling up experiments—is increasing in value.^{6,7} And for good reason: according to research by Andrea Derler, Anthony Abbatiello, and Stacia Garr, organizations that embrace risk taking are “five times more likely to anticipate change and respond to it effectively and efficiently, and seven times more likely to innovate than others that do not.”⁸ Informed intuition is critical to thriving as a leader in these types of environments.

In the face of such a wealth of data—both descriptive and prescriptive—where does informed intuition fit? And how do leaders use their intuition to make smart decisions on what types of risks to take? Leaders are faced with ambiguity and complexity in the uncharted terrain of the Digital Age, while being simultaneously inundated with data. First, leaders need to get comfortable embracing the unknown—enjoying the breeze on their face as they move from leap of faith to leap of faith. For direction on the practical application of this insight, look no further than Jeff Bezos, who suggests that executives need to make decisions with 70% of the data. Affirming my earlier point about the need for speed in the Digital Age, Bezos cautions, “If you wait for 90%, in most cases, you’re probably being slow.”⁹ Intuition can still play a key role as an additional input in situations when the data is simply not available or only tangentially related to the problem at hand. In such moments, leaders must draw from their personal experiences and insights, using these tools to correctly prioritize and simplify the existing data, or to communicate the most appropriate course of action in the absence of data. Thus, in today’s fast-paced business world, the traditional idea of intuition or following your gut has fundamentally changed, necessitating the new ability to quickly digest information while blending it with one’s experiences, educated assumptions, and instincts to arrive at a logical conclusion.

Regardless of how much insight they have on an issue, executives must strike a balance between engaging with the data streams and mechanical aspects of an issue and acting flexibly to respond to issues that resist a cut-and-dry solution. The growing need for this balance is affirmed in Deloitte workforce analyses such as “The Future of Work,” where we identify this skill as “STEMpathetic talent.”¹⁰ Research suggests that the need for this type of intuitive ability will only increase as technological augmentation and artificial intelligence are used more widely to automate tasks. Organizations should expect a heightened need for leadership that can relate intelligently to the entire ecosystem in front of them, drawing

on emotional intelligence, creativity, and social skills while still engaging technical knowledge and data analysis.^{11,12} Other studies have supported this as well; as the world gets more digital, leaders must double down on the “human experience” in order to raise their Digital IQ. In the survey of executives I mentioned earlier, the top performers—those with revenue growth and profit margin increases (or expected increases) exceeding 5% for both the past and upcoming 3 years—were found to have a more developed understanding of how to center human experience in their digital endeavors.¹³ Even data experts agree with this approach. When asked about the characteristics that make a good data scientist, Rachel Schutt, a senior statistician for Google Research, described a person with “deep, wide-ranging curiosity, [who] is innovative and is guided by experience as well as data.”¹⁴

A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING INFORMED INTUITION

The question of how organizations grow these types of curious, emotionally intelligent, innovative, and data-fluent leaders is one that we’ve considered thoroughly during my time at Deloitte. Our leadership framework in Figure 7.1 provides an overlay onto the concept of informed intuition. The Deloitte Leadership Framework identifies the three key components of a leader: capability, potential, and experience. In terms of capability, leaders must be able to inspire others, achieve results, exert influence, collaborate, provide vision and direction, show business acumen, bring a competitive edge, and build talent. While many of these capabilities are developed through practice, many others require some innate drive or personality dimension. For example, while you can receive coaching on your rhetoric, demeanor, and actions to improve your ability to inspire others, your personality and charisma may dictate the extent to which that training can have an effect (Figure 7.1).

This leads us to the second component: potential. In our framework, we define potential as a leader’s ability to drive and respond to change, to think quickly and flexibly, to adapt to complex interpersonal or emotional demands, and to intrinsically and extrinsically generate motivation to achieve. Personal values are also encompassed within this component. It’s

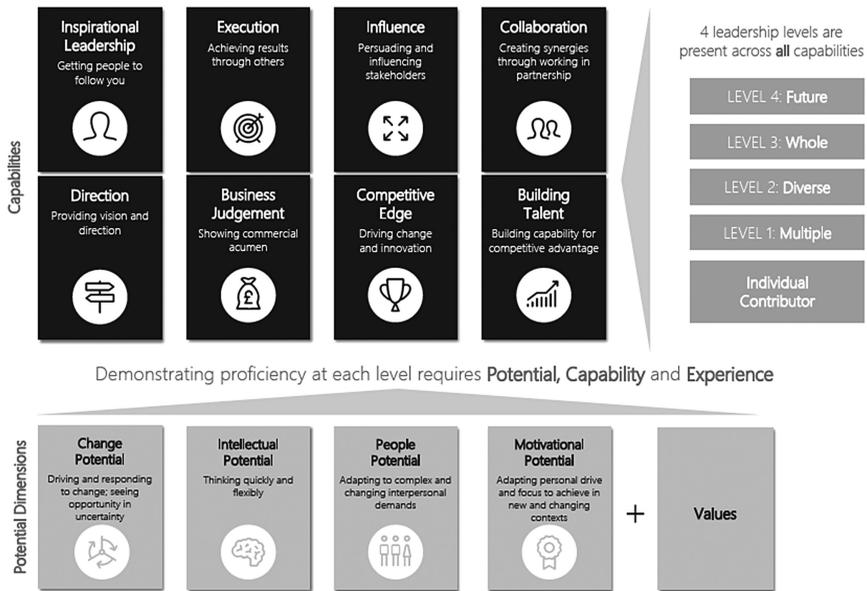


FIGURE 7.1

Deloitte leadership framework (from <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/at/Documents/consulting/leadership-booklet.pdf>).

clear to see how closely the dimensions of potential align with the needs of a rapidly changing Digital Age. In both leading researchers’ analyses of the Digital Age and our Deloitte Leadership Framework, adaptability is paramount for success.

If we think of our main ingredients for informed intuition as facts, feelings, and values, there are clear connections to the Deloitte Leadership Framework. This framework demystifies some of what goes into informed intuition, and perhaps more importantly, it helps organizations develop a pipeline of future leaders who can capably and confidently wield intuition to make innovative and game-changing decisions. The Deloitte Leadership Framework is data driven itself, using assessment and diagnostic tools to drive leadership strategies for a diverse customer base. It’s also executed through cognitive modalities and engages clients through holistic interviews.

At the center of this framework is the idea that the organization or ecosystem—not the individual him or herself—has the biggest influence when it comes to leadership development. The data, the situation, and the environment all matter. But if you don’t have control over your

entire organization, what are some ways to improve your immediate surroundings to strengthen informed intuition? For one, you can build a diverse team that can complement your capabilities, potential, and experiences. In the Digital Age, it is critical to admit when you don't have all of the answers. A tactical approach is necessary to draw on a team that can bring vastly different perspectives to a difficult problem that demands a quick response. Second, you can intentionally expose yourself to new situations to build a diversity of experience within yourself. Repeated problem solving can bolster your capabilities, but problem solving in a new domain can stretch and exercise the dimension of your potential. You can also dive into the Digital Age itself, blurring the lines between typical dichotomies that separate the technological from the emotional: using virtual reality to experience new situations, for example, or tapping into artificial intelligence that has been developed to use emotional reasoning. These are all examples of how you might develop your intuition, but what does the practical application of informed intuition really look like, and what real-world stories can we look to for inspiration?

As soon as Sully Sullenberger realized what had happened, he went into action. He knew that clear communication with his co-pilot would be critical to surviving the ordeal. He also knew that, being the captain, he was responsible. Sullenberger's first words after the plane's engines failed were not a lamentation, he simply said to his co-pilot, "My aircraft." His co-pilot, Jeff Skiles, recognized Sullenberger's authority and said back, "Your aircraft."¹⁵ In this simple way, Sullenberger showed his capability by exerting influence on his co-pilot and in the situation at large.

After this simple exchange and understanding, Sullenberger made a decision that was unorthodox but perfectly describes his potential in thinking outside the box. Sullenberger flipped on the Auxiliary Power Unit (APU), a small turbine that supplies energy to critical systems such as hydraulics, pressurization, and electrical power in the event of an engine failure.¹⁶ It is not the fact that Sullenberger turned on the APU that is impressive but rather when he did it: right at the start of the event. The reason Sullenberger immediately turned on the APU aligns with the third component of the Deloitte Leadership Framework: experience. Years prior, Sullenberger had experienced a double engine blowout while flying fighter jets in the Air Force. The jet lost electricity, and it was this experience of

flying without electrical power that led Sullenberger to flip on the APU far earlier than what any checklist would have told him to do. The National Transportation Safety Board later verified the importance of turning on the APU at this critical juncture, stating:

Starting the APU early in the accident sequence proved to be critical because it improved the outcome of the ditching by ensuring that electrical power was available to the airplane. Further, if the captain had not started the APU, the airplane would not have remained in normal law mode. This critical step would not have been completed if the flight crew had simply followed the order of the items in the checklist.¹⁷

In just 3 short minutes, Sullenberger had shown examples of capability, potential, and experience, allowing his intuition to guide him toward an emergency landing.

INFORMED INTUITION IN PRACTICE

Let us transport back to the office now. Using intuition can be an intimidating prospect for organizational leaders, especially those who are used to making primarily data-driven decisions and who may not be as used to tapping into their curiosity, innovation, and experience. Ralph Larsen, the longtime CEO of Johnson & Johnson, gave voice to this concern, saying, “Very often, people will do a brilliant job up through the middle management levels, where it’s very heavily quantitative in terms of the decision-making. But then they reach senior management, where the problems get more complex and ambiguous, and we discover that their judgment or intuition is not what it should be.”¹⁸ What Larsen described is a common frustration for many organizations, as critical succession planning efforts can fail due to a promising leader’s inability to tackle difficult business problems using an intuitive way of thinking.

Earlier in my life, I had a career-changing experience in which my informed intuition played a significant role—in my decision, in my career, and now how I look back on it. In essence, it was the seminal moment in my career when I transitioned from being a technical expert to an executive leader. My boss brought me into her office and said, “I would

like you to take on this new exciting role that will change the way we do business around here. The role comes with risk and uncertainty and it also may not be very popular with our customers in the short term. But when I look at who you are and your potential as a leader, I have complete faith in your personal success and of our organization.” I will never forget what she said next: “If you succeed, I will sing your highest praises. If you stumble, I will be there to catch you when you fall.” In my decision to accept the role (very quickly I might add), I certainly considered the facts and my feelings. But when I look back many years later, I truly believe my values played a role in not just accepting the assignment but in articulating and convincing others to rally around the new organization. For me, this life-changing event changed the course of my career; more importantly, it shaped how I view myself as a leader today and how I look to provide others with similar opportunities. My informed intuition as a brand new executive was certainly at play.

Part of the problem is that using your intuition is scary, especially if you subscribe to the old view of intuition as a gut decision devoid of reason. However, as the scientific community learns more about intuition, we are coming to understand that it is instead a remarkable process by which we unconsciously leverage our past experiences in confronting the problems of the present. Brene Brown explains the concept well:

Intuition is not independent of any reasoning process. In fact, psychologists believe that intuition is a rapid-fire, unconscious associating process—like a mental puzzle. The brain makes an observation, scans its files, and matches the observation with existing memories, knowledge, and experiences. Once it puts together a series of matches, we get a “gut” on what we’ve observed.¹⁹

Leaders using informed intuition take it a step further by understanding how their memories, knowledge, and experiences led them to a particular decision, and properly weighing their intuition amid the myriad of relevant information when deciding. However, using informed intuition to come to a decision is only the first step for leaders at the executive level; the next step is executing on intuition by convincing others to follow.

There are two things leaders must do to execute on intuition: first, they must have conviction that their decision is the right one; second (and related), they must be able to understand and articulate how they came to their decision. Intuition without conviction will leave people unconvinced

and will stall progress, but having conviction in intuitively driven decisions is difficult due to the level of uncertainty that is inherently involved. Uncertainty is a natural reaction to intuitive thinking, but the best leaders recognize this uncertainty while also trusting in themselves and the many ways they have developed knowledge and insight over the years. Kathryn Finney, founder and managing director of digitalundivided, showed a great deal of conviction when she invested \$30,000 of her own money toward a startup tech conference geared toward young women of color in 2012. As Finney explained:

Most people think leaders are some sort of “all-knowing-beings,” but in reality we often don’t know the answers. The difference is that leaders trust their instincts to lead them to an answer. [...] No one had ever done a startup conference for black people before and there was really no model for us to follow. People thought I was crazy and told me so. But I did know that there was a disconnect between the tech startup world and my community.²⁰

Despite a previously failed business under her belt, Finney held the conviction that her new idea would land. Six years later, Finney boasts that digitalundivided has helped build 52 companies, raised \$25 million in investments, and reached 2000 founders.²¹

In addition to conviction, leaders must possess the self-awareness to understand and articulate what inputs played a role in their decision-making process. Executive-level decisions have the potential to impact thousands of employees and customers. Due to the weight of executive-level decisions, as well as the rise of participative decision making, it is essential that leaders share the details of their decision-making process. However, developing the insight needed to understand the inputs leading to a critical decision and relaying such quick and complex thought processes to others is often easier said than done.

A common example comes to us from the world of sports. Professional athletes are often asked after making a game-winning shot or goal to “take us through the moment” and describe what happened. Very rarely do these athletes point to the myriad of inputs that led to their decisions in the moment, and how could they? These athletes’ split-second reactions were likely based on years of experience in similar situations, advice from coaches, and other inputs that snowballed to create a quick, fluid reaction. However, upon further reflection, they may point to a film session that

showed their opponents' tendencies, or compare the situation with a similar one from a previous experience. Oftentimes, they point to their coaches, who put them in a position to succeed. These inputs combined to put them one step ahead of the competition, and the best athletes not only draw from diverse sets of information very quickly, they can later identify the factors that led them to success, with an added benefit being that they can share with others or keep drawing from the most helpful sources.

There may be no better example of this quick learning process than hockey superstar Sidney Crosby. Crosby is renowned not as the fastest player nor the player with the most accurate, hardest shot, but rather as a player who can quickly learn and implement a new strategy that puts him ahead of the competition.

The business world is not much different in terms of speed of decision making. Executive decision making is often just as quick as a hockey player's decision to shoot or pass, employing what psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer termed "fast-and-frugal thinking"—decisions we must make in the blink of an eye when time, knowledge, and/or cognitive resources are limited.²² Where the business world differs, however, is the level of complexity of the information and the need to draw from multiple areas outside of one's specialty. To succeed as leaders, modern-day executives must develop the capacity to quickly interpret their intuition as one more input within an entire ecosystem of information. By reaching this standard of informed intuition, business leaders can provide a distinct competitive advantage for their organizations.

Former AOL CEO Robert Pittman provides an excellent example of a leader who has flourished in the era of complex, fast-moving data. As Pittman explains: "Staring at market data is like looking at a jigsaw puzzle. You have to figure out what the picture is. What does it all mean? It's not just a bunch of data. There's a message in there." Pittman's answer to the most complex of problems is, paradoxically, to seek out more data. He further explains: "Every time I get another data point, I've added another piece to the jigsaw puzzle, and I'm closer to seeing the answer. And then, one day, the overall picture suddenly comes to me."²³ What may seem like a sudden strike of intuition is actually a careful consideration of many factors and the development of associations between disparate data points, all happening behind the scenes. Pittman's intuition is actually far from a sudden inspiration, though it may seem that way.

When Sully said that he had “been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience,” he didn’t mean that those deposits were singular or isolated. Rather, like compounding interest, those deposits multiplied by the number of connections he made between those experiences. Our informed intuition includes how quickly we make connections between our vast life experiences and the current situation.

Sullenberger’s assessment of the situation certainly rings true, but the speed in which he accessed this fountain of experience and his ability to make connections in a completely novel situation highlights the incredible power of informed intuition. The fact that he worked closely with his co-pilot to assess options and settle on an answer further displays his ability to draw from multiple sources of data in arriving at a conclusion. Last, Sullenberger showed conviction in his decisions (as well as his values) by being the final person off the plane as it slowly took on water in the Hudson River.

Informed intuition is a powerful yet often overlooked tool that is becoming increasingly important in the new, digital era of work. Contrary to common belief, many major decisions cannot be mapped using big data or predictive analysis; they are simply tools to be leveraged when coming to a conclusion. Similarly, the traditional view of intuition as a gut feeling devoid of any deeper understanding is also limiting. What I am advocating is a differentiating approach to decision making whereby leaders blend data-driven methods with their established intuition to arrive at big-picture answers to their businesses’ most challenging problems. In this manner, leaders are using the information at hand as well as their established intuition that has been built through experience, and instinctively understanding when and how to leverage each.

HOW TO DEVELOP INFORMED INTUITION

The journey to using intuition can be difficult, but there are steps leaders can take to drive these dual modes of thinking and arrive at informed intuition.

- First, leaders must learn to combine hard data and emotional skills. I am not advocating that leaders should disavow a rational, data-driven approach to decision making. In fact, leaders should be

actively engaging with analyses and strategically using relevant data streams. If you are not capitalizing on the incredible advancements in analytics and big data, you are already behind. However, it is also true that leaders will not succeed if they arrive at conclusions based solely on preexisting data. As leaders rise in the ranks, decisions become broader, more complex, and more ambiguous. In such scenarios, relying on intuition as an additional input is advisable. However, intuition without emotional skills such as self-awareness makes it difficult to articulate to others that your decision truly is the best way forward. Thus, a strategic combination of hard data and emotional skills is a competitive advantage for any leader.

- Second, leaders must learn to embrace risk, as using intuition is ultimately an exercise in risk tolerance. Intuition is commonly used to “fill the gaps” in areas where the data is not available quickly enough or is insufficient to the matter at hand. Thus, with the use of intuition comes a certain amount of uncertainty. Leaders will not have any charts or figures to point to when describing their decision-making process, but must trust that their accumulation of experiences, organized and turned into wisdom, is accurately guiding the process. As such, leaders must have conviction that their experiences matter and they must be able to deliver their recommendations and calls to action with confidence.
- Third, leaders must continue to adapt quickly. It is not an exaggeration to say that leadership is all about adaptation and experimentation. What works in one scenario may not work in another because, at the core of it, people drive decisions. As Isaac Newton bemoaned after losing his life savings in investments, “I can calculate the motions of the heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people.” Leaders today are in the same predicament Newton was in so long ago, as they find themselves operating in complex global markets with many unpredictable elements. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions. But, thankfully, informed intuition is set up for this level of ambiguity. Intuition is made up of associations between related concepts and events, and can be honed by making decisions in ambiguous environments where data cannot provide a quantitative answer. If leaders start small, they can begin building associations between more and more data points, eventually preparing themselves to employ informed intuition in the most complex environments.

- Fourth, leaders should check their intuition with others. With only seconds left before the plane hit the water, Sully asked his co-pilot, “Any ideas?” He was checking his decision making one more time before he committed to the action. He was testing his intuition against the logic and insights of his fellow pilot. The response from Jeff Skiles of “Actually not” was the confirmation that his intuition was right. This act of checking with others to verify your intuition is not relinquishing your authority but a tactic for gaining buy-in and commitment.

Bruce Henderson, founder of the Boston Consulting Group, defined intuition as “the subconscious integration of all the experiences, conditioning, and knowledge of a lifetime, including the cultural and emotional biases of that lifetime.”²⁴ Henderson’s definition from 1977 is still relevant, as intuition alone is still subject to bias, but he also could not have predicted the data, tools, and resources available to modern-day leaders. Leaders today can balance the inherent shortfalls of our traditional notions of intuition by considering it as one input to be analyzed in conjunction with other pieces of information. Thus, the concept of informed intuition blends the best of both worlds—rational and intuitive—resulting in decisions that can keep up with the rapid pace of the modern business world.

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NOTES

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