

“Decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately.” This statement, as stated on page 14 of the book, summarizes the main theme of *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking* by Malcolm Gladwell (2005). Gladwell elaborates on this topic in great detail with the use of many examples throughout the book.

The book begins with a story about an art dealer who brings a marble statue to the J. Paul Getty Museum of California. The dealer states that this statue is what is known as a kouros, an ancient sculpture dating back to the sixth century BC. There are only about two hundred of these statues in existence and most of them are badly damaged. Because this particular statue is in good condition, Getty begins an investigation to determine the validity of the statue. All of the preliminary tests that are run show that the statue is not an imitation, and after fourteen months of the investigation, Getty decides to purchase the statue for the museum's collection.

As further investigations are still underway to track the history of the statue, problems start to arise. These problems are not anything that can be pinpointed, however several art historians and experts sense that something is not right the moment they lay eyes on the statue. One of them noted that “fresh” was the first word that came to his mind when he saw the statue. This did not seem right, as a two thousand year old statue should not feel or look “fresh”. Another individual felt an intuitive repulsion when he laid eyes on the statue.

Although several people had similar feelings toward the statue, no one was able to determine why they felt the statue was not genuine. After many more investigations, it was finally discovered that the statue was indeed a fake. Many of the dates on the documents that tracked the statue were not adding up correctly and a bank account was referred to in a document that was not opened until 8 years after it was dated.

It turns out that the experts were correct in their feelings toward the statue, but they did not know how they instantly could tell that something was not right. They did not have any evidence at that time to show that there was a problem, and they did not even know why they felt it was a fake even at the first glance. This glance, that led the art experts to sense a problem, was only a few seconds, but it was enough for them to make a decision about the validity of the statue. The reason for this decision was not yet known to each of the individuals, as it has come out of their unconscious.

There is a part of our brain, which allows us to quickly process, even a high value of data to come to a rapid conclusion and make decisions as needed. This is called the adaptive unconscious and is what triggered the art experts to realize that there was something wrong with the statue. We can also see similar things happen when we are in high stress or emergency situations, although it happens constantly during our daily lives as we make decisions as well. When we are in an emergency, such as seeing a car speeding toward us as we are crossing the road, we do not consciously think out all of our possible options, make a decision on what we should do, and then act on that decision. Instead,

we instantly move quickly in order to move out of the way of the car. This is the adaptive unconscious at work. It instantaneously processes the information that there is a car speeding toward us and we are in the middle of the street. It determines what our options are and what is the best action that should be taken in order to put us out of harms way. Although this would consciously be a process that would take at least several minutes, the unconscious mind can do this in a split second so that we are able to move quickly. Within our everyday lives, we are constantly making these split second decisions, such as this. Whether it is the first impression we get when we first meet someone, how we react in a stressful situation, or the feeling that we get when we sense something is not right, all of these decisions come from the unconscious mind.

Gladwell takes this further in the book as he discusses the theory of thin slices. Studies were done in which a psychologist by the name of John Gottman would invite a married couple to have a fifteen minute conversation about a point of contention in their marriage. This interaction was videotaped so that we could see the faces and actions of both individuals as they conversed. Gottman and his staff would analyze the videotapes of each couple. The purpose was to pick up on the facial expressions, emotions, and feelings during the interactions. These factors were all calculated and it would be determined whether or not this couple's marriage would last or not. Gottman has a 90% success rate of making those predictions, determined by only watching 15 minutes of the couple's interactions.

This idea of thin slicing is being able to look at just a brief moment in a situation to determine the whole picture. Gottman had discovered that by watching just a “thin slice” of this couple’s life, you can discover how their entire marriage will be. He would pay attention to the sounds of the individuals’ voices to determine their feelings as well as watch every facial expression that they made. An expression that lasts even for just a split second can say a lot about a person’s feelings toward someone else.

Gottman had discovered specific areas to look at in his studies to come to a conclusion. He had trained himself and his staff to take those brief moments to make a determination. This is not always the case, as we are not always able to come to a conscious reason why we have made a certain decision. Sometimes the unconscious mind can act as a locked door, where we have made some instantaneous, unconscious decision or determination, but we have not been able to consciously determine how we reached that conclusion. An example of this comes from Vic Braden, one of the world’s top tennis coaches. Braden noticed that as he would watch tennis matches, he would know when a player would double-fault before it even happened. A double-fault happens when a player messes up both of their chances at serving on their turn. This is something that typically will only occur a handful of times in any tennis player’s career.

As Braden realized that he was able to determine when a double-fault would occur, he started keeping track of how many he successfully called. He found that he was successfully predicting sixteen out of seventeen double-faults. The thing that bothered Braden about this was that he was not sure how he was

determining when the double-faults would occur. He states that he “would lie in bed, thinking, How did I do this? I don’t know. It drove me crazy. It tortured me. I’d go back and I’d go over the serve in my mind and I’d try to figure it out. Did they stumble? Did they take another step? Did they add a bounce to the ball – something that changed their motor program?” (Blink 49-50). He felt that in his unconscious, he knew the reason, but it was like it was behind a locked door that he could not open. There are times like this when we need to acknowledge the power of the unconscious mind and its abilities to make snap decisions, even when we are never consciously aware of the reasons.

The acknowledgement and acceptance of the abilities of the unconscious does not necessarily mean that we should trust every instinct that we have. There are times when a feeling that we may have could come from a prejudice or discrimination. Although thin-slicing and first impressions can be successful in showing us a truth or helping us to make a decision in a split second, we have to recognize that this can also lead us astray in certain circumstances. In *Blink*, Gladwell labels this sort of betrayal of the mind the Warren Harding error.

A lawyer and lobbyist named Harry Daugherty met a man named Warren Harding one morning as they were getting their shoes shined in 1899. Daugherty looked Harding over and instantly was overwhelmed by him. He was a very attractive looking man, proportioned well and very fit. He was what some refer to as tall, dark, and handsome. He was kind, generous, and generally a good-natured person. For these reasons, Daugherty instantly thought, “Wouldn’t that man make a great President?” (73).

Although Harding was not a very intelligent man, and liked to drink, play poker, and chase women, with the help of Daugherty, he quickly moved from one political office to another. Daugherty and his wife pushed him all the way up the U.S. Senate. They knew that Harding had such a distinguish look and that Daugherty had always felt that he would make a great-looking President and that is exactly what happened. Harding ended up being elected to the U.S. Presidency almost completely based on his looks. He looked very trusting and good-natured, and those qualities appealed to the general public. In this case, the first impressions that the public had received from Harding were incorrect. Although he may have been a nice person, he was not cut out to be the President and may not have even been the right person to fill any of the political offices that he had prior to his Presidency. Most historians would agree that Harding was one of the worst presidents in American History. The impressions that people received when they saw Harding told them that he was a trustworthy man and would make a great president. They were led astray by their impressions, as Harding, besides being a trusting man, did not possess any of the qualities that would have made a good president.

Another illustration of how unconscious decisions can lead us astray is through prejudice. Most people would reveal that they are not prejudice, however, there are still some prejudices and associations within our minds that might lead us to think about or even act differently towards different groups of people. Facts about others such as shape, size, race, and sex can trigger many powerful associations within us. These associations are a type of prejudice that

affects our first impressions and opinions of others. Even if we are not expressing prejudice towards a certain group, our unconscious associations can lead us to act differently towards others.

A good example of how associations can affect the unconscious decisions that we make is given in regards to car salesmen. Bob Golomb, the sales director of a Nissan dealership in New Jersey, has learned that salesmen are prone to falling into the Warren Harding error. When a customer comes onto the car lot, a salesman will instantly get an impression of who this person is and what type of car they may or may not be able to afford. This impression is not always correct and can lead to the loss of a sale. A farmer may walk onto the car lot in clothes that very dirty and worn out. A typical salesman would assume that this man is not going to be able to buy a car, and if he is, it will most likely be one of the cheapest models. The customer service that this man would receive is not likely to be very friendly and helpful, as the salesman is assuming that the sale is not going to be worth their time.

In his many years as a car salesman, Golomb has learned not to fall into the pitfalls of making assumptions based on first impressions. His philosophy is to take care of every customer, no matter what his impressions of them might be. He assumes that everyone can afford to purchase a car and gives everyone the same great customer service. Instead of leaning on the first impressions he receives from customers, he has learned to take the time to see beyond the outward appearance. Thin slicing can even be used to gather information about the individual in order to respond to them in an appropriate manner. Golomb has

learned to pick up on whether people are nervous about purchasing a new car or are overwhelmed by the process. By picking up on those clues, he can be responsive to a person's actions instead of basing his impressions solely on appearance.

Golomb does in fact have a customer similar to the farmer mentioned in the above example. He says this of the man, "I have a farmer that I deal with, who I've sold all kinds of cars over the years. We seal our deal with a handshake, and he hands me a hundred-dollar bill and says, 'Bring it out to my farm.' We don't even have to write the order up. Now, if you saw this man, with his coveralls and his cow dung, you'd figure he was not a worthy customer. But in fact, as we say in the trade, he's all cashed up (91)." If Golomb had relied on his first impression of the farmer and assumed that he would not be able to purchase a car, he would have probably lost his first sale with him. The farmer would most likely never have come back to that dealership and could have even passed on any bad impressions he received from the salesman to advise others not to purchase a vehicle there. Instead, by looking beyond the surface Golomb gained a repeat customer and built a trusting relationship with the man.

Like Golomb, we can learn a lot about ourselves and others by paying attention to our first impressions and instincts. As first mentioned on the topic, our initial instincts can be very helpful in steering us in the right direction, just as it did for the art experts at the Getty Museum. These instincts can warn us when we are in a dangerous situation or when we just need to be cautious. We can also gather information when we meet people for the first time. Just as Golomb



did, we can learn to not only listen to our instincts, but take a little more time to look beyond the surface to gather information on who a person really is, not just how they appear.

In the business world, decisions are made each and every day. We need to realize the power that our unconscious mind can hold by trusting what it is telling us. If we feel hesitant about going forth with a new business venture, maybe there is an unconscious reason for that that has not yet been realized by the conscious mind. If we receive a proposal for a job and have a bad feeling about it, this could also be our unconscious trying to warn us that we need to make sure we are reading all the fine print and are not missing something or being led astray. By listening to our instincts, we can make sure that we at least do some further investigating or research when we are sensing that something is wrong. Even if it is discovered that everything is fine, at least we have the evidence guiding our decisions and helping to lay aside any doubts or questions that we may have had.

We can take the initiative to give all customers the benefit of the doubt, just as Golomb learned to do as a car salesman, instead of thinking of customers differently based on the initial impression that we receive of them. We must realize that although some may not seem like they will be good customers, everyone has the potential of helping us be a more successful business. We never know how we can assist someone and how much business they might bring to our company. Good customer service does just that. It recognizes that everyone is a potential life long customer and also has an influence on how their

friends, families, and co-workers will view our company as well. By training ourselves to control our judgments and look beyond the surface, we learn to treat everyone in a similar manner. This kind of thinking and actions can help impact the success of any company or organization.