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Cognitive Bias vs. Intuition: Evolved Decision-Making

A conversation with Francesca McCartney PhD



This conversation with AIM/AIMO founder Francesca McCartney and Kirk Hurford constitutes Chapter 8 of the recently-published book: *Developing Informed Intuition for Decision-Making*.

The idea of intuition is increasingly used in discussions about business management and decision-making, sometimes as if it were a new concept. But it is hardly so. A manager in the days before the Internet had little choice but to use intuition – the raw data simply was not accessible. Often, “a hunch” was all there was.

Today, so much data is available that the inverse is true. In mere seconds, we can summon enough data to support any decision we want to make, good or bad. Sorting through this flood of data makes the use of intuition more crucial than ever. Are we back to the idea of a hunch?

What is a hunch? Where does it come from, and how can we tell if a hunch is coming from intuition or false beliefs? Let’s ask an expert.

For the past 40 years, Francesca McCartney PhD (<https://intuitionmedicine.org/founder/>), has been researching and teaching the use of intuition in daily life and as a modality for medical healing. She has published several books, is a featured lecturer on the topic of intuition, and is the founder of three schools: the Academy of Intuition Medicine® founded in 1984; Energy Medicine University, founded 2006; and the Academy of Intuition Medicine® Online (AIMO) (<https://intuitionmedicineonline.org/>), founded in 2017.

KH Dr. McCartney, I know this sounds simple, but to begin with, what is intuition?

FM That was exactly the question I asked in 1976, and I am continuing to explore and expand upon that topic. Recent research shows that humans have more than 21 senses. Most people assume that we operate with only the five common senses. That belief was given to us by Aristotle and is long overdue for a revision. Those over the five senses are accessed via intuition.

The Oxford Dictionary defines intuition as “the faculty of knowing as if by instinct, without conscious reasoning.” But what does that mean? It is the sense of knowing or perceiving something without knowing exactly how you know. How does this work? Can we develop this ability in ourselves for decision-making and more? Yes!

Humans are wired from birth to receive inner- and outer-world information signals, but too often we ignore or don’t trust our subtle intuitive perceptions. The world is constantly communicating with us and the secret is learning to pay attention.

We are so much more than our five common senses, and learning to listen to, trust, and act upon your intuition develops super-consciousness, and with practice, becomes the normal way you live in your body and operate in the world.

We experience intuition in many perfectly ordinary, everyday ways. Intuition is the sudden “Aha!” that seemingly comes from nowhere after wracking your brain for an analytical solution that refuses to come – the light bulb over your head. Intuition is the flash of insight that reveals where your lost keys are. Intuition is the picture of someone in your head just before they call on the phone or walk into your office. Intuition is that feeling in your gut when something is not right, or someone is lying. Intuition is that inner knowing, so often drowned out by other, more insistent noises, that warns or advises us, and to which we often say (after the fact), “If only I had listened ...”

KH Listened to what?

FM Intuition has location signal points within your body. Intuition is a learned language of interpreting those signals – just as a child learns how to decipher signal language from sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste. Each of the five common senses has a receptor location that delivers signals to the nervous system and the brain for decoding and informing. The language of intuition operates in the same way.

In business, and in life, operating with a wide perspective of information yields the best outcome in the decision-making process. Five points of perception is a limited range of information and often is filtered through bias from conditioned data entry. An excellent starting place to stimulate stronger intuitive language signals is to listen to your first hit, go with your hunch, trust your gut feeling. The more you listen, trust, and follow through with your hits and hunches the stronger the signal wiring in the nervous system becomes, whereupon your decisions are memory imprinted in your brain, which develops a cognitive intuitive language.

KH When we say cognitive bias, we’re referring to a personal perspective, right? How is this different from intuition?

FM Cognitive bias is a language of personal perspective that for the five-sense person is developed from a limited perspective of the five senses. Western-minded people lean toward using analysis and rote educational sources for deductive decision-making. This system of analytical decision-making does not recognize the larger menu of possible choices available with the expanded human sense of intuition, and therein is a limited decision-making process. Decisions made in a box rather than inspirational choices streaming from outside of the box-where intuition, inspiration, and invention operate.

Limited perception developed as a survival mechanism as our body is bombarded by two million bits of information every minute. The common senses and analytical mind act as a filter. If we were unable to filter out most of these bits, we would go mad in one second. We

use our filters-the purpose of which was to weed out information irrelevant to our species-for the task: to lock into those objectifications alone which are in tune with cultural, informational, and survival purposes.

To survive with a semblance of sanity, we need some sort of filters to pick out those events, interactions, or relationships that we want or need to focus on. This doesn't mean that we should always keep filters in place or use them for purposes other than they were originally intended. Filters require intentional management. If properly handled, filters can both isolate the objects that we need to focus on and reveal their relationship with other objects and the whole. They can be both – like two sides of a coin.

Intuitively sourced information does not pass through the same perceptual filters that process analytical information. The sense of sight, for example, gathers five points of data through the rods and cones in the eyes, travels through a decoding filter in the optic nerve that chooses three of the five data points based on the most common memory-that is the memory pattern that has the most charge stored in the brain and delivers a composite image to the brain built on that three of five choice of repeated experience. This creates visual image perception based on repeated data and most likely probabilities and excludes new data/new perception as a primary choice for decision-making. These filters become so internalized and automated that alternative perspectives, such as intuitive sensing, are not even recognized. This mostly unconscious control mechanism obstructs the ability to think outside of the box, thus limiting new knowledge, inspiration, and the “quick hit.”

Historical and cultural contexts also influence perception and create bias. A Coke bottle dropped from an airplane into a society of bushmen in South Africa's Kalahari Desert in the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* is seen as many things, but never as a container for carbonated beverages. It has been reported that some pre-Columbian Native Americans could not see the large sailing vessels of the first European explorers to approach their shores because they had no cultural precedent for such an event or object, and no appropriate words in their vocabulary to describe it. Thus, in their reality, such things simply did not exist. Even the “objective” cognitive act of seeing in the material world requires a synergy of senses.

Genius is often described as highly creative, clever, and brilliant-characteristics of a person who has access to knowledge and data beyond the norm – which is a definition that also applies to intuition.

KH So, you're saying intuitive information is from outside the box, and cognitive bias is an attempt to restrict information from inside the box?

FM In the broadest sense, yes. Information is more than just facts. Facts also have context. Context is a powerful influence on how we perceive facts. Context is what gives facts meaning. For example, you might be reading a story about animals on a farm and, at some point in events, you realize that there is a bigger story being told (Orwell, 1945). As the

context changes, so does your perception of the facts. The pig is no longer a pig. Intuition allows for a richer context. Cognitive bias comes from a failure to perceive and appreciate the contextual information that comes from our extra-normal senses.

KH Can we apply these ideas in a real-world circumstance? Let's say I'm interviewing three people for a critical position. How would I include intuition in the decision-making process?

FM Once you have all the information, interviews, etc. — clear your mind and go into meditation and visualize all three of the candidates sitting around a table with you. Which one appears most prominently? This should be a first, quick hit, such as they look bright, active, more animated and the others look dull, lethargic, quiet. The one that responds best to this intuitive inquiry is the best person for the position.

KH I can see where some people might have a problem with what you are proposing. You're suggesting that I not think about the facts? What about the person's resume? Experience? Shouldn't I compare those things?

FM You're touching on the reason why some people choose to take courses on this topic. There is a lot of unlearning required to make full use of intuitive information. You can use all those pieces of information to vet the person's suitability to be considered, but that is what qualifies them to be considered a candidate. The intuitive method of picking a qualified candidate is to place them in the context of your company and their job and let your imagination coupled with intuition show you who will be the best fit.

KH Now something less organic — how about a new logo design for my company?

FM Again, clear your mind and go into meditation and pose the inquiry question: *"What colors, symbols, words represent my company?"* This inquiry posture is dependent on you not mentally responding and letting go of preconceived ideas. Simply hold quiet mind and observe — you are sitting in a movie theater watching the film, not controlling the film. This means that you are allowing your imagination the freedom to respond with anything. Imagination is a powerful tool for intuitive language-building. It is the bridge between your subtle abstract knowing and fully formed intuition as a practical decision-making sense. Imagination/intuition allows the combination of diverse types of knowledge and ways of thinking to create new ideas and allow existing ideas to be built on and improved—all through the creation of novel thoughts and ideas including metaphors and symbols.

KH So, you're saying imagination is an intuition tool — a sense?

FM Not exactly. Imagination is a bridge language that uses metaphor and symbol that the mind is familiar with as interpretative process for creating connection into the intuitive senses and thereby either removing a bias filter and/or creating a new filter that receives subtle signals from outside the learned, conditioned, rote information stored in the brain and emotional body.

Albert Einstein once said “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create.”

KH It seems like the idea is to “trust” my intuition, but is there any hard science supporting the use of intuition?

FM There is about 50 years of research on the human sense of intuition – hard science – as you call it. Several renowned and respected organizations are conducting research on intuition. The Rhine Research Center began research in 1965; the Princeton Engineering Anomaly Research lab (PEAR) began research in 1979; and the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), which has a large online research results library, started their research in 1971. In 2000, I received a seed grant from IONS to do intuition research and conducted that research project in the IONS lab. We had 100 test subjects participate in four weekly sessions, in a randomized, controlled study, testing how the subjects use intuition as a decipherable sense-language. The results were significant with a statistical outcome above chance.

I'd like to include an excerpt from a PEAR paper about the “filter tuning process”:

- More subtle mechanisms for the acquisition of information, such as intuition, instinct, inspiration, and various other psychical modalities, also can enhance the flux of incoming information. Although commonly experienced, these channels involve less readily identifiable sensors and therefore are less susceptible to orderly reasoning, and they are correspondingly less respected and utilized in modern scientific practice, traditional education, and contemporary social activity. In the extreme materialistic view, this imbalance extends to a total dismissal of these subtler capacities, thus restricting experience to the five primary sensory capabilities and their technological extensions alone. Consequently, the inferred models of reality are limited to those substances, processes, and sources of information that constitute conventional contemporary science.

KH So, intuition is a well-researched tool that we can use to make better decisions. In other words, intuition is a critical decision-making tool. If I want to improve my intuitive decision-making ability-you said there are courses-what do people study?

FM Yes, intuition is a discipline with a wide range of study. I have focused on teaching intuition as a natural human sense that should be used in all endeavors of life along with the five common senses, as well as methodology for assessing spiritual maladies that largely get ignored by modern medicine. This method includes a broad study of the nature and use of intuition and what I call a reinvention of ancient and indigenous medicines into a Western healing system that includes the Spirit as well as body and mind. At the Academy of Intuition Medicine, classes first teach meditation, grounding, and basic energy system concepts.

KH I understand what you mean by meditation, but what do you mean by “grounding”?

FM Have you heard the expression “that person is well-grounded”? What did you think when you heard that? Being grounded is a state of being completely and totally present while having full control of all your perceptive abilities – active and balanced. Meditation helps you get there, but there is no reason why you can’t be grounded all the time. In class, students learn about how to sense the state of being grounded, and especially, being *not* grounded.

KH You’re saying that intuition is a valuable decision-making tool and that being grounded is necessary to make use of intuitive information. Do you have any other advice?

FM We spoke earlier about meditation – and that deserves consideration as a foundation for this process. There are many techniques for meditating, but they all seek one main goal – a quiet mind.

KH Isn’t thinking like breathing? How does one stop thinking?

FM Your question reveals a potential misunderstanding – do you believe “thinking” is the principal activity taking place inside you? Learning to meditate will teach that the thing that is “you” is perfectly capable of being present and aware without thinking. You will learn to notice the presence of ideas and notice the analytical engine that processes those ideas and puts them in conveniently labeled boxes: good, bad, happy, sad, exciting, depressing, important, not important – often sizing and coloring the ideas in the process. Meditation will return to you the ability to experience raw ideas – you could call them organic ideas. From that larger, richer perspective will come fresh ideas along with new ways to see old ideas.

It’s not uncommon for meditation students to experience powerful emotions in the beginning. These come from the process of rediscovering oneself – not unlike greeting a long-lost friend with a combination of joy and grieving for the lost time. Ultimately, once reunited with your full, complete, true self – you will be happy, peaceful, and well-grounded.

KH You make meditation sound like a cure for everything.

FM Not meditation, but the intuitive awareness that comes from meditation – which ultimately results in a reconfiguration of a person’s entire energy system, and the way one lives in the body. Modern research is increasingly supporting the model of the constant interaction between body and mind. Not only that, there is increasing evidence that the body is the mind; mind traditionally considered located in the brain. The evolving field of mind-body medicine known as psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) has added a new layer to the mind-body dynamic by introducing the vital role played by the immune system within this network. It has provided many new insights into the various hormonal and chemical connections between emotional stress and illness. A key characteristic of the cells of the immune system is that they travel through the body to wherever they are needed to mount

a defense or repair damage. PNI refers to the multidirectional network of communication between the psyche – the intangible aspect of being human – the mind, emotions, and soul; the human biologic processes of neurology and physiology; and the function of our body's immune system.

KH When you say modern research, can you give an example?

FM One of the pioneers in this recent field of mind-body research is **Dr. Candice Pert**. She started her career in neuroscience with measuring receptors, molecules made up of chains of amino acids that respond to energy and chemical cues by vibrating. These receptors basically work as scanners. They are attached to a cell's membrane, waiting for the right chemical to come along to bind to-called receptor specificity. This chemical is called a ligand, and it is a molecule itself. As soon as the message, the chemical cue, is received, the receptor transmits it deep into the cell's interior, where a reaction of biochemical changes is started. The actual change depends on the message, but the changes in this single-cell influence on a much larger scale.

The largest category of ligands is called peptides. They are the chemicals that play a wide role in the regulation of almost all life processes. A peptide that is brain involved is called a neuropeptide. It turns out that almost every peptide that has ever been found anywhere is a neuropeptide. These neuropeptides also have receptors in the brain. The research found that neuropeptides exist in all parts of the brain. What amazed me was the discovery that neuropeptides and their receptors are to be found in the body as well. In the study, it is noted that neuropeptides are "abundantly distributed in subtly different intricate patterns all the way down both sides of your spine."

As mentioned earlier, it is the connection with the immune system that provides the vital link between body and brain. Monocytes and other white blood cells travel along in the blood and at some point, come within "scent" distance of a given neuropeptide, and because these white blood cells have receptors for that given neuropeptide on their surface, they begin to move toward it. Candice Pert discovered that every neuropeptide receptor they could find in the brain was also on the surface of the human monocyte. It has been known for over a century that the pituitary gland-located near the middle of the brain-spews out peptides throughout the body. But a few years ago, it was found that these peptide-producing cells also inhabit the bone marrow-the place where immune cells are generated. Human immune system cells have receptors for opiates and other emotion-affecting peptides which appear to control the routing and migration of the monocytes, which are very pivotal to overall health. However, they don't just have receptors on their surface for the various neuropeptides. Immune cells also make, store, and secrete the neuropeptides themselves.

In other words, the immune cells are making the same chemicals that control our moods. Immune cells clearly do not only take care of the physical health of the body, they also create information chemicals that can regulate mood and emotion.

What this illustrates is two-way communication-brain communicating with immune cells in the body, and immune cells in the body communicating with the brain. It seems fair to conclude that intelligence is located in these cells distributed throughout the body.

According to Dr. Pert, it is the emotion-affecting peptides and their receptors that make the dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious processes possible. Since neuropeptides and their receptors are in the brain as well as in the body, and since there is a multidimensional exchange of information between the various systems of the body, we can reasonably take the step that the mind is in the body, with all that that implies. The thing we call mind is immaterial. However, the mind has a physical basis, which is the whole body, including but not limited to the brain. The mind is what holds this psychoneuroimmunology information network together.

The traditional separation of mental processes, including the emotions, from the body need to be reconsidered in this context. If the mind is defined by brain-cell communication, as in contemporary science, then this model can now be naturally extended to the entire body. Hence, the ideas of Intuition Medicine® and Energy Medicine from which the respective academies are founded.

KH The research on psychoneuroimmunology is fascinating. Is there a real-world example you can provide?

FM Certainly. Let's look at the idea of "conscious breathing," a technique taught and practiced in prenatal classes all around the Western world, and deeply practiced in the Eastern world. A wealth of data shows that changes in the rate and depth of breathing produce changes in the quantity and kind of peptides that are released from the brain stem. And vice versa! One can do this by bringing the process of breathing into consciousness and doing something to alter it. By either holding your breath or breathing extra fast, you can cause the peptides to diffuse rapidly throughout the cerebrospinal fluid. This is an attempt by the body to restore balance. Since many of these peptides are endorphins – the body's natural opiates – you soon achieve a lessening of your pain.

KH So, if I understand you correctly, meditation can influence more than just my decision-making?

FM Much, much more. And this is because meditation has a beneficial effect on the total organism that is you. You are healthy, vibrant, and this results in your ability to make quality decisions. The thing is, there is a bigger organism that responds the same way to your positive state of health – your company. Professor Richard Pascal believes that businesses must recognize that they are living organisms, subject to the same dynamics of life as all other organisms: adapt or die. "Rapid rates of change, an explosion of new insights from the life sciences, and the insufficiency of the old-machine model to explain how business today really works have created a critical mass for a revolution in management thinking."

Intuition is what will give you the ability to be in synchronicity with the organism that is your company. People and companies who recognize this are the ones that will adapt and thrive.

KH In other words, using intuition in business is revolutionary?

FM Darwin's theories are true for all organisms. Let's call it evolutionary.

KH We've covered a lot of ground in this conversation. Is there anything you'd like to say in closing?

FM We need to overcome the bias built into the current Western idea that the mind is totally in our head. We need to start thinking about how the mind manifests itself in various parts of the body, and beyond that, how we can bring that process into consciousness. Using consciousness techniques, such as visualization, we can consciously influence reality at a micro-level. By selectively influencing certain micro-events, it is possible to create a much larger effect. If we genuinely believe that we have a greater ability to influence ourselves and the world around us, and if we learn to focus our consciousness in very specific ways, our consciousness will produce an energetic effect and will shape our reality accordingly. All people have the ability to be intuitive. We all have the ability to develop a heightened sensitivity to the world around us.

Ultimately, this will lead to an expanded ability to become the intuitive decision-makers and business leaders we need to direct the course of human history toward happiness and prosperity.

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