

Background

Hunch or reason?

1

Some years ago the Getty museum in Malibu was offered an ancient Greek statue of a young man. When most art experts viewed it, they instinctively felt that it was a *forgery. Scientific analysis, however, suggested it was genuine so Getty went ahead and bought it. The people in charge of acquisitions decided to follow the scientific team's advice that supported its claimed antiquity. Nevertheless the jury is still out: the statue carries the label 'Greek 530BC or a modern forgery'! Getty had chosen factual analysis over instinctive hunch. The art expert's hunch was based on decades of living and breathing ancient art. He could 'think without thinking' so gave the statue the thumb's down.

2

Companies are not really supposed to make choices based on hunch or instinct. A manager buying a fleet of vans for its delivery service will be expected to support a decision with hard facts about cost, fuel consumption, reliability, service packages, and carbon footprint. Similarly, huge capital project decisions cannot be taken lightly and have to be as rational and scientifically based as possible. Engineers and experts will estimate the challenges, costs, and timescale of a project before it is given the green light.

3

But is factual analysis always the best way of arriving at the best business decisions? Managers need to do things right but leaders have to do the right thing. These people have to make difficult strategic decisions about how to take their companies forward. They have to envisage a future that may be unsupported by the facts that are available today. It is this kind of creativity that saw Nokia transform itself from being a producer of wood to a producer of cable, then a telecommunications giant. It was an inspired jump into the unknown. Careful research and analysis before you act doesn't always provide the answers. Before New Coke was launched the company carried out extensive marketing research: the drink was test-tasted by almost 200,000 people. Even though these *guinea pigs said they liked it, the drink was a failure. It is a perfect example of the Hawthorne effect, that is, how the research process itself may be responsible for unreliable results.

4

And in our private lives, while we know we should really make decisions about where we live and what we buy, decisions that can often involve large sums of money, on purely rational criteria, our instinct tells us what is right for us. It often comes down to 'does it feel right for me?' A poor decision will only affect ourselves. At work, whether we should always trust the experts or our instincts is a more difficult question to answer. If we trust the experts, then it can help us avoid the blame if something goes wrong. Sticking our necks out and trusting our instincts can have unhappy consequences if we are proved wrong. We are the perfect scapegoat.

Glossary

**forgery* = a copy designed to look exactly like the original

**guinea pig* = a small rodent, the word is used to indicate the subject of an experiment

Exercises

1 Which statement best describes the way you solve problems and take decisions.

'First of all, I analyse the facts and identify what needs to be done. I then come up with different solutions and compare the advantages and disadvantages of each.'

'I have a good feel for situations and can quickly identify the root of a problem. I can usually come up with a solution that feels right and that I think will work.'

2 Read the text and choose the best sub-headings for each of the paragraphs.

At home and at work Leaders and managers
Ancient or modern? Supporting decisions

3 Read the text again and answer these questions.

- 1 What was the instinctive reaction of art experts when they saw the statue?
- 2 Why did the Getty museum go ahead with the purchase?
- 3 How are people expected to reach decisions at work?
- 4 Why can't leaders always base decisions on facts?
- 5 What example does the writer use of inspired vision and leadership?
- 6 How is the way people take personal decisions different from taking professional decisions?

4 Match 1–8 to a–h to make collocations from the text.

- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| 1 scientific | a example |
| 2 hard | b footprint |
| 3 marketing | c decision |
| 4 carbon | d project |
| 5 capital | e research |
| 6 strategic | f analysis |
| 7 perfect | g facts |

5 Using the text to help you, decide what the collocations in 4 mean.

6 Choose the correct answer from a, b, or c.

- 1 If something *is given the 'green light'*, it ...
a goes ahead b is told to wait c is rejected
- 2 If something *'gets the thumbs down'*, it ...
a goes ahead b gets a second chance c is rejected
- 3 If you *stick your neck out*, you ...
a take a risk b hide from the truth c avoid a risk.
- 4 If the *'jury is out'*, ...
a a decision has been made b people are still deciding
c you don't agree with the decision
- 5 If you *play safe*, you ...
a take risks b minimize the risks c agree with everyone else
- 6 If you are a *scapegoat*, everybody...
a blames you b laughs at you c avoids you

7 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

8 After reading and discussing the article, what do you think is the best way of making decisions?