

Tapping Into Your Intuition For Faster And Safer Decision-Making

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Note: This article is much longer than usual as it is the major part of one chapter of my upcoming book: “Emotional Intelligence and Leadership in Asia”. As I am presently working on the second draft, any feedback from you would be very welcome.

Emotions are messengers. They carry messages that we’d better pay attention to, especially when it comes to making decisions. At the same time, they tend occasionally to lead us to unwise decisions. It then proves invaluable to learn to tap into an even deeper resource: our intuition. This article will give some keys to make the best use of our emotions and our intuition when making decisions.

Do you usually make decisions? If you are like most people, you operate mostly at a rational level. You review the options available, carefully weighing the pros and cons of each option. Occasionally, when a major emotion surfaces, like fear, worry, or joy, you take it into account. For example, if you feel very scared when considering one of the options, it is likely that you are not going to choose it, no matter how much it makes sense from a rational point of view.

More often than not, though, emotions take a back seat in the decision-making process. This chapter will show you that emotions can play a much more important and beneficial role in the decision-making process.

If we pay enough attention to them, emotions can show the right way for us, where rational decision-making finds its limitations.

Consider the following example.

You have an important decision to make, like expanding operations of your organization in a new country. From a rational point of view, although there are many risks involved, it makes a lot of sense. You have to do it, and you will be in the front line to make this happen. At the same time, if you check your emotions and your body, you notice some pressure in the chest. There is some fear here. It is not overwhelming. Not even very intense, so that you would have easily overlooked it had you not paid conscious attention to your emotions.

What does this pain in the chest mean? What is this fear? What is the message here? Ask yourself the question. You might be surprised at the answer. Don't censor anything. There is no rule of interpretation here. Emotions are messengers, but they don't deliver general messages. They have a specific message for you. In this case, the message could be that deep inside, you can foresee that this project will bring you a lot of trouble. Perhaps you are not the right person to be in the front line. This doesn't mean that you have to stall it. But there might be more options, like hiring a person who has a more suitable background for the job.

I personally became very aware of the importance of emotions in decision-making when I was immersed intensively in mountaineering. Mountaineering is an activity where you constantly have to make decisions. The first one is whether to start climbing a particular route or not. Then, to go to the right or to the left. To pause or accelerate. To push further or retreat. To let your partner take the lead or not. These decisions matter a lot, because your life is at stake in many cases. Two types of decisions are particularly crucial:

- whether to start climbing or not, because sometimes you can not retreat easily. You have to go to the top or else you are in big trouble.
- when you are engaged in the climbing already, and it is turning bad (bad weather, exhaustion of one of the climbers), whether to attempt to go push to the top, or retreat.

For a mountaineer, one of the hardest decisions to make is to retreat. This is because there are so many good reasons to attempt going to the top. You have given a lot of effort already. You have been dreaming of reaching this summit for so long. Friends are going to make fun of you and rivals are going to criticize you for turning back. All these thoughts make it very tempting to push forward and just ignore whatever fear you are feeling. This is why cemeteries in alpine villages are full of mountaineers who did not make the decision to retreat on time.

One famous mountaineer who climbed most of the major summits without oxygen told me one day that the most important decision he made was to retreat 50 meters below the summit of a prestigious mountain. This saved his life.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we should let our fears influence our every decision. Actually, in many cases, we should not. There are other emotions to listen to. There could be excitement and joy at the end of the road if we decide to go ahead in spite of our fear.

In many decisions, there is a mix of emotions: fear, excitement, worry, joy. How do we know which one to listen to? Our priority should be to collect the different messages. This can lead to clarity, as things are falling into place. Let's do the experiment below.

Think of an important decision you have to make. You have been weighing the different options for some time.

For each of the options, review the emotions involved.

If you don't feel any emotion, don't give up so easily. Emotions are not so easy to detect sometimes, especially if you are not used to paying attention to them.

For each emotion that you "catch", identify the message behind. If this emotion was a friend, what would it tell you? Leave your rational mind at rest for a moment. It has worked hard already!

Make the investigation methodic, by using the system below:

OPTION 1

Emotion 1:

Message:

Emotion 2:

Message:

OPTION 2

Emotion 1:

Message:

Emotion 2:

Message:

Etc.

You can even go one step further and notice as well your energy level for each of the options.

Some people and tasks give us energy. And some people and tasks drain our energy. Energy level is highly connected to emotions, but can be identified a bit more easily by many people. Using the criteria of your energy level to make decisions can be truly liberating. Once you take the habit of moving towards people and tasks who give you energy, and moving away from people and tasks that drain you energy, somehow life becomes more enjoyable.

Think of one person and one task that drain your energy. What decision are you going to make to move away from them (distance yourself from that person, and do less of that task)?

Think of one person and one task that give you energy. What decisions are you going to make to move closer to them (be closer to that person, and do more of that task)?

Now there are still cases when following our emotions to make a decision definitely isn't a good idea:

- when emotions are running high or we are in the middle of an emotional episode.

In other words, when emotional waves are high.

- when there are too many emotions that we end up confused with these mixed emotions. In other words, there are too many waves.

There is one way to avoid high and confusing waves: go deeper in the sea, to a place where there are no waves. A calm and deep place, that is beyond any emotion and is a great place to make decision. This place is called intuition.

GOING WELL BELOW THE EMOTIONAL WAVES: TAPPING INTO THE WISDOM OF YOUR INTUITION

The more a leader gets senior, the more decisions there are to make, and the less time is available to analyze them. Of course, this is why there are teams, who can do a good part of the job. Still, there are many times, when, as a leader, we are the only one to make the final call, whereas we don't necessarily have the data we would like.

Intuition is a fantastic resource for leaders. Whenever we feel stuck at a rational level, and emotions are too mixed to be of any help, intuition brings clarity.

It takes effort and practice, as it is something we were never taught. It is important here to realize that intuition is actually more than just a "gut feeling". What many people call "gut feeling" and see as intuition is actually an emotion. It is certainly helpful in many cases, but it is not necessarily intuition. Intuition is a place of great calm where there are no emotions.

But what exactly is intuition? Intuition is a source of messages that bypass the conscious, rational mind. These messages can take different forms: a voice, a physical sensation, a picture. For some people, listening to their intuition is a spiritual experience, as they feel that they are tapping in a divine source. But intuition can be seen as well from a purely secular (non religious) angle. It can be described as resorting to the huge mass of information that is our unconscious mind. We perceive an immense amount of information every day, and we are conscious of a very small part of it. However, we still perceived it, and connection to our intuition is a way to retrieve part of it.

Some leaders are not ashamed to admit that they are heavy users of intuition in decision-making. This is the frequently the case for entrepreneurs. Read Richard Branson's autobiography for instance.

However, most leaders are very reluctant to resort to intuition. Typical concerns are that it doesn't look professional to be making decisions based on intuition. How to explain to our peers, boss and team members how we made the decision? We don't want to be branded as corporate fortune-tellers or tarot readers!

These concerns make a lot of sense. Again, intuition is a tool that we were never taught anywhere, and therefore it is normal that it is surrounded by a cloud of mystery, generating distrust.

At the same time, we should always be reminded that using our intuition doesn't mean stopping analyzing altogether. According to the very definition of intuition presented above, we can't do both at the same time, of course. But we can make sure that we dedicate some time to look at the issue at hand with a sharp analytical approach, and some time to use our intuition.

Besides, even if we really prefer to use our intuition, we always have the option to reflect on how we are going to present the decision to our boss, peers and team members with a sharp analytical eye. This is what one of my clients does. As he is relying heavily on his intuition, he makes decisions fast and with great clarity. And then he creates an argument to justify his decisions in a way that is understandable by his people.

Intuition is a resource that is always available and free, like a spring source. The problem is that this source of fresh water is located in a busy city with a lot of noise: our mind. Most of time, we don't hear our intuition because we are too busy thinking.

To use our intuition, we need to be able to consistently find this source in the middle of this busy city. This requires us to calm our minds, and stop incessant thoughts from covering the sound of the source.

How to calm the mind? There are many ways, but one of the most potent is to go through a short process mixing visualization and breathing. Please note that this process is a simplified version of a longer process that was developed by one of the experts on intuition called Judy Gee. This is the version that I use when introducing intuition to the senior leaders I work with. Judy Gee wrote a fascinating book called "Intuition" that I really recommend to you if you want to go deeper.

Let's create a first experience.

FIRST STEP

Think of a decision that you have to make, for example about hiring a candidate for an important position. You have been struggling with it for some time. There are quite many arguments in favor of hiring the candidate, but you have some reservations as well.

SECOND STEP

Then, follow the short process below to connect to your intuition.

Find a comfortable position. Make sure that nobody is going to disturb you. Switch your mobile off.

Imagine that you are walking on a path in nature. Feel the air around you. Feel the sun gently warming your body. Feel the air coming in and going out of our body as you are breathing.

In the distance, you can see a building. It could be a house or a temple. Keep walking on the path in its direction. As you keep walking, imagine that there is a thread that is connecting you to the sky from the top of your head. Take some time to appreciate this connection to the sky.

Then, as you keep walking, imagine that there is another thread connecting you to the center of the earth from the lower part of your backbone. Take some time to appreciate this connection to the center of the earth.

You are now connected both to the sky and to the center of the earth. As you kept walking, you are now in front of the building that you could see earlier from a distance. It is a place where you feel "at home". It doesn't have to be a real building. Just imagine how the place where you will feel totally "at home" would be.

As you are entering the building, make the movie in your mind as precise as possible. What is the color of the walls? The shape of the room? Are there windows?

Once you have a clear picture of the interior, imagine that you are sitting in the middle of the room. Your mind is very calm now. You can feel that there are very few thoughts coming to your mind, like there are few clouds in a clear sky.

THIRD STEP

Ask your intuition if you should hire this person. You can even create a dialogue with your intuition. If you are truly using your intuition, you should be able to feel that answers are not coming from your mind. There are no emotions either. Answers come with clarity and certainty. Clarity and certainty are good signs that you are connected to your intuition.

In the example we chose (hiring a new person), it is likely to be a clear "Yes!" or "No!"

The whole process may seem too long to you. It is certainly not easy to get started on your own. When starting to develop your intuition, it is very helpful to join a workshop on this topic. Although it is not mainstream, there are now some professionals of personal development who organize sessions on developing intuition. Unfortunately, I never heard of any in Asia.

However, with some practice, you will be able to tap into your intuition anywhere and in a very short time (a few seconds). You will have the habit of accessing your intuition.

But can you really trust your intuition? Isn't your intuition going to be wrong at times?

This is a very valid question. Especially because answers you receive can be very surprising, and even take an opposite direction from what you have in mind. For example, if you were inclined to hire the candidate, although with some reservations, your intuition may give you a clear and loud "No way!"

This question whether you should trust your intuition or not can be answered by you alone, after you experience the process. It is extremely difficult to build a strong case for others. Again, one of the hallmarks of intuition is that the answers come with an incredible degree of clarity. Once you have this experience, you don't even ask yourself any more if you should trust your intuition. It has become obvious.

I am well aware that for many leaders in organizations, particularly business leaders, the whole thing sounds very weird. However, my experience practicing this process with senior leaders makes me absolutely confident that:

- most of us can access the benefits of intuition in a reasonably short time
- it is a precious resource for leaders for decision-making

A few pages is definitely too short to cover a topic as fascinating and rich as intuition, but this article is meant to give you an introduction and create some interest to go deeper. Again, the book by Judy Gee is highly recommended. But be aware that it was not written for business leaders. You won't find examples from business situations, and you will need discipline and determination to apply the content to your daily life as a leader. But it is really worth the effort.

Let me know if I can support you in the process. I'd be happy if I can.



Sebastien Henry is **Progress-U's expert for Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and stress management**. He works with executives who want to:

- avoid feeling exhausted and uprooted as their career takes them to the top;
- become more inspiring leaders by developing their Emotional Intelligence (EQ) at work; and, as a consequence
- be able to motivate their people more and retain the best.

Having worked in an Asia-Pacific regional position at a multinational company, Sebastien has experimented extensively on how to develop Emotional Intelligence in his daily work life. He is currently writing a book on this topic. His articles on Emotional Intelligence in Leadership have been published in Human Resources and South China Morning Post.

He firmly believes in action, and the tools he uses and shares are derived from several areas of his life: his business experience as a corporate executive, of course, but also his intensive practice of mountaineering and rock climbing (7a on-sight and more than 50 alpine routes), his commitment to teach and coach prisoners, and his daily meditations for more than six years.

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- Certified NLP Trainer (NLPU, USA)
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