



Humans are Hardwired for ... Gut Feelings

It won't come as any surprise to hear that humans make quick judgments about other people and situations.

What might be news is to learn the reason why we make these quick judgments. We do so in order to *classify* our experiences.

In this newsletter we look at how you can use this instinct, including in increasing your ability to influence other people.

First Impressions to Classify

Courtesy of Professor Nigel Nicholson, the instinct is called "first impressions to classify". Humans quickly classify people, situations and experiences into categories based on first impressions and "gut feelings" rather than engage in time-consuming analysis. The categories that we generally use to classify other people and experiences are "good or bad", "like me or not like me", "harmful not harmful".

In the formative years of our hardwiring on the plains of Africa over 200,000 years ago, this trait would have served our ancestors well. It would have meant the difference between life and death, where we would have had to react instantly to an often harsh world. Our brains still work this way...all day, everyday.

Classification

Classification is done primarily on the emotion we feel at the time.

Here's an example of a positive first impression. Two weeks ago I had a meeting at the Westin Hotel in Melbourne. I arrived by taxi. As I stepped out of the cab the hotel porter handed me a business card which contained a four-digit number and he said, "Sir, welcome to the Westin. This card contains the number of the taxi you have just arrived in, which you might need just in case you left your phone or wallet in the taxi".

What an instant positive impression! Intuitively, I have immediately classified the hotel as "good". The first experience becomes the imprinting experience, and if the second experience is similar to the first then the imprint is consolidated, and quite unlikely to change.

Organisational Life

Apart from service delivery, here's a number of ways "first impressions to classify" occurs in organisational life and how we can use this human instinct productively.

1. Project Management

Imagine you are in charge of a project. It's handy to know that your clients (internal or external) are going to classify their view about the project based on their first impression. Part of your planning should include deciding how you are going to influence the client to feel "good" when they first learn about the project. Once a person makes their classification, it takes a fair bit to change it. So if the first impression is "good" then you'll have a fairly smooth time with the project and if anything later becomes difficult you will have some grace. If the first impression is "bad" then you'll be forever recovering without knowing why.

2. Recruiting

Inappropriately, modern recruiting practice seeks to take gut feelings out of the selection process. Our advice is that trying to take gut feelings out of human assessments is first, denying reality, and second, we are seeking to take out a vital source of information. The trick is to make sure gut feelings are tested as they are fast but not necessarily perfect. So next time as an interviewer you think to yourself, "I don't know why but I have a great feeling/uneasy feeling about this candidate", then the action should be to test your intuition, not to ignore it. (Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink*, provides good insight into gut feelings).

3. New Role

Imagine you are starting a new role soon. You will have a sense that the new people you will be working with will be "sizing" you up, as you will with them. That's not necessarily good or bad, it's just how humans work. So, try to make this work for you. What actions are you going to take to make the first impression positive?

Here are two examples of managers joining their organisation. What first impressions are likely in the minds of their new team members?

A good example: The manager phoned each of his direct reports before Day 1 just to introduce himself.

A poor example: The first the team knew of their new manager was when her bar fridge arrived some days before she did!

4. New Team Member

Similarly, what if you're a manager and you have a new person joining the team tomorrow? What are you going to do on their first day, and in fact the first moment on the first day, to make a positive first impression? You don't have a choice that you will make a first impression. The question is whether you take steps, like the Westin hotel, to make it a positive one.

5. Them and Us

We categorise people into whether they are like us or not like us. Globally, this applies to issues such as colour, race, and religion. At an organisational level it means that often one internal department might not get on well with another (eg HR versus Finance, Sales versus Delivery). The reason is that one group differs from another in their orientation so that they see the world as different. Leaders of the departments need to work at respecting and benefiting from differences.

Persuasion

Another way we can use this instinctive need to classify is in persuading and influencing other people.

1. Whoever first delivers news is more likely to be believed because the listener classifies based on their first impression. So, say you have an upset client, try to be first to update your boss because they will be in a better place (from your perspective) than if the angry client reaches them first! I don't for a moment mean that you be anything other than truthful. The point is, human nature being what it is, that the boss is more likely to classify the situation as "okay, under control" than if the angry client has the first say ("bad, disaster").

2. If you are seeking to convince someone of your point of view, think about the first seven words you are going to say that will cause the person to instantly and emotionally be interested in your proposition (Peter Thompson's book, ***Persuading Aristotle*** is a great reference on this point).
3. Use the same seven-word test in your email and verbal communication. What are you going to say in the first few words that allows the reader or listener to know what your point is? Help them classify it ("This is an update with good news", "There is one item requiring resolution").

Finally, a word of advice if you are an executive whom other people seek to convince. Be aware of your unconscious need to classify. Avoid jumping to conclusions where you are too quick to like or dislike an idea without listening to the person. And right at the beginning of the conversation, demonstrate your interest so the person classifies you as "interested".