

Blink – book review



Xavier Labour Relations Institute Managing Human Behaviour Assignment

Blink by Malcolm Gladwell A book review by Narendran Santhanam (G10031)

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Introduction “ Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell is a book about how we think without thinking, about choices that seem to be made in an instant – in the blink of an eye – that actually aren’t as simple as they seem.

The book deals with the smallest components of our everyday lives—the content and origin of those instantaneous impressions and conclusions that spontaneously arise whenever we meet a new person or confront a complex situation or have to make a decision under conditions of stress. A brief summary Gladwell starts the book with a riveting example of the statue that didn’t look right and an experiment using a gambling game to drive home the point that our mind unconsciously does reach a conclusion swiftly when faced with a situation where we have to take decisions.

Gladwell calls this process of swift intuitive conclusion, “ thin slicing” and explains the concept by citing a series of experiments and instances - how a psychologist named John Gottman predicts the strength of marriages just by listening to a few minutes of conversation between a couple, how a psychologist Samuel Gosling was able to assess the personality of college students just by observing their dorm room for 15 minutes, how listening to the frequencies of a doctor talking to a patient can be sufficient to determine the likelihood of the doctor to get sued and how the film producer Brian Grazer was able to recognize Tom Hanks’ talent the first time he met him. The next concept that Gladwell explicates is that though we make these “ snap” decisions as he would call them, we are not sure why we make a

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certain decision or a judgement – it's always done behind a closed door, our unconscious. He again cites numerous examples from psychological experiments to expatiate further on this point. Gladwell then acknowledges what we as readers would have been skeptical about all the time now – that the unconscious isn't always right every time.

Our unconscious is for the most part, the origin of all our prejudiced judgements about people, which can turn out to be very wrong. Gladwell says that these prejudiced opinions were the reason behind Warren Harding getting elected as the President of the United States and also the differential treatment that customers get from salespersons. To check whether the readers are prejudiced themselves about common opinions, Gladwell suggests taking the Harvard IATs. Rapid cognition has one major advantage though. When people are faced with situations where they have to take decisions based on very less information, rapid cognition seems to give the better results than mechanistic, analytical thinking.

One of the examples cited by Gladwell is about the US Marine Corps officer Paul Van Riper, who was known for his unorthodox military strategies which were largely successful. Paul Van Riper played the rogue commander in the military war game organized by the Joint Forces Command, and his Red Team emerged successful against the Blue Team in spite of the Blue Team's meticulous analysis of the Red Team's weaknesses. Van Riper says it's a strategy called "In Command and Out of Control", where he gives instructions to his team on what to achieve and not how to achieve. Thus, his team members were free to come up with innovative solutions to problems

they encounter on the battlefield in the absence of any rules and procedures restricting their thought processes.

Thus, decisions taken under pressure in chaotic situations sometimes work better than the ones taken inside meeting rooms after hours of discussions. Gladwell reinforces this by telling us about the story of a firefighter in Cleveland who made a decision in split second time that saved the lives of his firefighter team and also about the decision tree algorithm followed in the Cook County Hospital in Chicago to estimate with reasonable accuracy whether a patient complaining of chest pain is really suffering from a heart attack. Perhaps one of the most important points made by Gladwell in this book is that neither analytical nor intuitive thinking is good or bad.

But under chaotic conditions, the lesser the information available, the better because information overload can delay decisions, and under pressure, delayed decisions are worse than bad decisions. Gladwell illustrates this with an astonishing example of an experiment where sales of a jam shop were as high as thirty percent more when they had only six types of jam than when they had twenty four. What Gladwell calls “thin-slicing” or rapid cognition, should be done in context. Examples of the market researches on taste-test of Coke and Pepsi samples, survey of people’s acceptance of Michael Kenna’s music and two radically new TV shows on CBS have been quoted to emphasize the importance of context in thin-slicing.

Numerous instances of products that received higher acceptance among the public only because they were packaged differently make it clear to us that thin-slicing is useful only when done the right way. When a product is new

and different, it is vulnerable to market research, which in most cases is not done in the right context, thus leading to the product being shelved. Having established the fact that rapid cognition is not always as accurate as one would want it to be, Gladwell now goes on to the topic of reading the minds of others just by looking at their facial expressions. Most of us, unbeknownst to ourselves, read facial expressions to gauge the mindset of others. And surprisingly, we are right most of the time. But sometimes, we fail to read these signs correctly and jump to conclusions that turn out to be drastically incorrect.

Gladwell says this is what happens in autism. People with this condition do not have intuitive skills and thus, are not able to infer anything, although they may be highly intelligent. Mind-reading allows us to adjust and update our perceptions of the intentions of others. But, under high stress situations like a shootout, police officers tend to lose sight of the mind reading mechanism and switch off the signals from their unconscious. In other words, they go mind-blind. Decisions taken under such extreme situations result in dismal outcomes. Examples of how innocent citizens were killed because of the mind-blindness of police officers have been cited to emphasize the same.

We tend to have reservations against and for some people based on their gender, caste, color and the society they are from. These reservations cause our decisions to be either in favour of or against those people, which in turn affects our everyday lives. The case of the female trombone player, Abbie Conant, who was turned down by the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra only because she was a woman, is a perfect example of this. Evaluation The good thing about Blink is that Gladwell has done adequate research to convince

the readers about the existence of rapid cognition with some enthralling examples. Gladwell seems to anticipate the reader's mentality well as one reads through the book.

When I was reading the book, I was starting to get unconvinced by the whole "thin-slicing" theory because I have witnessed people make wrong judgements about others almost all the time. But, Gladwell seems to have recognized that and he acknowledges that rapid cognition does not work all the time and that it works only when applied in the right context. Reflecting upon my professional experiences, I now realize that there were many instances where I witnessed prejudices that had affected employees' performance. I have also witnessed situations where snap decisions made on effort estimates submitted to clients helped us clinch the deal. The IATs on the Harvard website are classified according to country.

As Gladwell suggests in the book, I took some of the Indian IATs to find out if I have any implicit affinity towards age, gender and weight and I admit I was surprised by the results. I consider myself free of any bias based on these parameters, but the result from IATs was far from what I assumed. I found that though initially I was not convinced with the theories that the author was building upon, examples, illustrations and exercises such as these made a believer out of me. Some of the examples cited by Gladwell need some probing. For example, Gladwell says that customers' likelihood to buy is higher when they are presented with lesser number of choices to buy. But, this statement holds good only for items like jams where the customer's involvement in choosing the product is very low.

For example, if I want to buy a dress for myself, I would want to have as many choices as possible because buying a dress is not a “snap” decision as it is for jams. There are two important takeaways for me from the book as a future manager. First, thin-slicing is a real phenomenon. We use it in our everyday lives so much that we don’t realize it. Second, misjudgements based on thin slicing affects our decisions acutely. This is one of the most important lessons in organizational behaviour – not to judge a person using a “snap” decision. Conclusion I would like to conclude saying this book was a revelation to me. The concept of thin-slicing, though it sounds fancy, is very much real and can be useful for managers aspiring to improve their interpersonal communication skills.