

The problem with "Trust your gut"

There is an entire sub-genre of decision-making research that we just have to talk about.

That's the whole "trust your gut" crew.

And listen... I want to be abundantly clear: There is an aspect to "trust your gut" that is beautiful and true. One of my six components of decision-making is insights and intuition, which - essentially - is trusting your gut.

But the way you trust your gut and knowing when *not* to are nuanced, delicate topics that require a certain degree of care that most authors in the genre seem to lack.

What's left is bubblegum-flavored feel-good nonsense that is at best laughable junk that can be disregarded, and at worse detrimental or even prejudiced.

For example, here is an anecdote from one intuition book aligns well to many of the books on the topic: A man is considering purchasing a home, but feels uneasy. He has done a thorough analysis on the home, and on paper it seems like an amazing investment. But some part of him feels off as he considers the purchase. So, he puts off the purchase, despite strong opposition from those closest to him. A couple of months later, he is watching the news and realizes that one of the homes destroyed by local wildfires was the home he was considering purchasing. The man feels vindicated in his decision not to purchase the home, and the tale is used as a triumph of listening to your body over the rationality of the argument and the advice of those around you.

As I read so many of the intuition books, I was left with little answers and so many questions. I appreciated these books' suggestions of mindfulness and listening to your body, but some things still felt off to me. Besides the fact that these books were filled with anecdotes like the house fire and very little scientific research, I also had numerous concerns.

Objective one: Resulting. Just because you got a good outcome doesn't mean you made a good decision. You just got lucky.

Objective two: Hindsight bias. The story above paints the picture of a man who was always confident about his decision not to purchase a home despite intense pressure, and whose decision was ultimately substantiated. In the author's defense, I don't believe he is spinning people's stories unfairly. But I believe the people reporting stories to the author are misremembering.

Objective three: It opens the door to prejudicial behavior. Think of it this way: You interview someone, and they appear super strong on paper, and their references are amazing, and they complete performance tasks excellently. But your gut tells you something about them is off, so you select another candidate. This sort of move would be championed by the "trust your gut" crowd, who might suggest that you "dodged a bullet." Yet we should ask ourselves: Is it possible that my gut turning me away from this person is potentially racism, or sexism, or homophobia, or ableism, or any other structure of oppression? *Given the prevalence and subconscious nature of bias, we might be feeling that way and not even be aware of it!* We should be urgently working to address our biases, and the "trust your gut" crew simply wants to provide you justification for continuing it.

I use the hiring example because it's a visceral one most of us can understand as unfair, but the same is true in ANY context. If you are grading a student's paper, and it is objectively an A, but your gut tells you it should be a B,

that's a problem. If you're selecting one of two students to give a big speech, and one student's speech is objectively better than the other's, but your gut tells you to select the other, that's a problem.

I'll have more to say about intuition and insights next week... but for now, be HIGHLY skeptical of allowing yourself to make decisions based on your "gut."

Make good choices, -Kevin

Bad decision of the week: A teacher was drunk at school on the first day

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