

Tea & Toast: Want to be strategic? Be emotional

Rachel Kasa, 26 July 2024

What would Einstein do?

Albert Einstein is considered one of the most intelligent and influential minds of the modern era. So it surprises many to know that **he believed intuition was more important than rational, linear thoughts** (Root-Bernstein 2010). Not only did the theory of relativity occur to him by intuition (and he would “think” through his music), but he even shared that:

“the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

Now think about your schooling, and your mahi. Many of us are taught to come up with thoughts and ideas without exploring our feelings and our creativity. We learn maths without music. We focus on spreadsheets without human connection.

How did we get here? Is it working for us? Is there a better way?

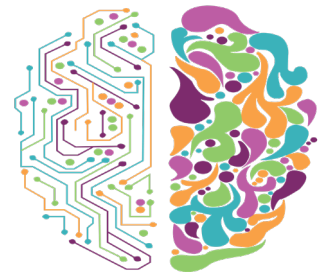
Why we avoid emotion in our world

The history of Western thought over the last few hundred years has prioritised and prized rational, empirical thinking over emotional, individual experiences and thoughts. Our society is “founded on the belief that rationality is at the core of functioning individuals and, by extension, properly functioning societies” (Shiv 2024).

Even Einstein had to advocate for his research. His work was challenging for modern science to accept – it’s hard to explain that you conceived of the theory of relativity by sitting down at the piano and banging out a tune (Root-Bernstein 2010).

But according to Einstein, that’s exactly how it happened. Imagine telling your boss that you know how to write your policy paper because you made a painting over the weekend.

Most of us have experienced being taught, or told, to “turn off” our creativity and emotions and be more objective and rational. This is neither possible, nor the best use of our amazing brains. Let’s find out why.



Strategic thinking: What is it?

First - what is strategic thinking?

When you're creating a way forward while thinking about what's happening now AND what could happen in the future, you're thinking strategically.

Life is hardly ever straightforward. We need to think about what might happen in the future, while being flexible enough to pivot when something changes.

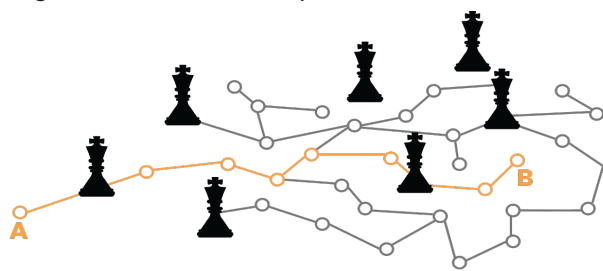
This is strategic thinking.

In the simplest terms, strategic thinking is being able to create new solutions to old problems.

In 1980, Peter Drucker, a well known management consultant, put it like this:

"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic."

Yet - that's often exactly what we're doing. Because it's "logical."



You need your emotions to be strategic

Traditionally, we see strategy as looking to the future, predicting what it will be like and then working towards it. People in more senior positions do higher-level planning, and we give it the name "strategic." Often it means looking five or ten years into the future.

Then, these strategic plans are broken down into operational plans and filter down into short-term goals and performance plans. It's a classic linear thinking model, with little to no value being placed on the unpredictable, hard-to-quantify emotional aspects of this process or outcome.

But is this supposedly rational, objective, linear a reality? Recent research says no. In fact, some researchers believe that only 5 to 10% of decisions are made rationally (Shiv 2024). Humans, it turns out, are often emotional, irrational and unpredictable.

And even when our behaviour is completely rational and logical, are there pieces missing that could improve our ideas and outcomes?

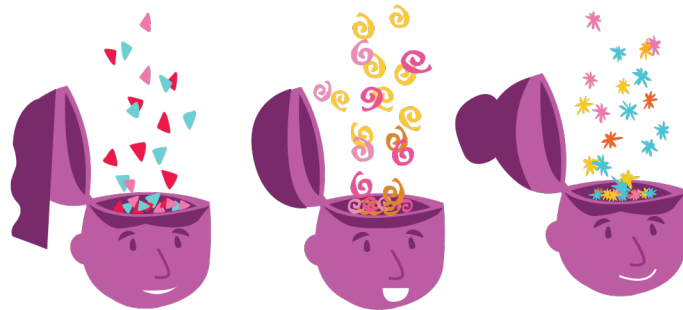
What would be more effective? Add emotional intelligence to your thinking

Recent research shows that the best strategic thinkers use more activity in the parts of their brain linked with emotion and intuition.

“Strategic thought entails at least as much emotional intelligence as it does IQ” (Gilkey, Caceda and Kilts 2010). In fact, when the best strategic thinkers in research were sampled, researchers were surprised to find “significantly less neural activity in the prefrontal cortex than in the areas associated with ‘gut’ responses, empathy, and emotional intelligence” (Schlesinger, Kiefer, and Brown 2012).

Research confirms that the best strategic thinkers rely on their gut feelings, empathy and emotional intelligence.

Further, they engaged the part of the brain associated with anticipating other people’s thoughts and emotions (Schlesinger, Kiefer, and Brown 2012).



They were not only thinking about how to get from A to B, but how to bring others along for the ride. Empathy is an important part of strategic thinking. And being empathetic is about being in tune with emotions – yours AND others. **It’s not just about strategy – it’s also about influence. And that’s an emotional, intuitive skill.**

It’s not enough to develop a strategy. You need to think:

- How well will your ideas be received by others? Why would they care?
- Will I have buy-in? If not, how can I create it? Emotions play a critical role in helping us commit to the choices we make (Shiv 2024) – so it’s critical for creating engagement in others.

You can’t engage and motivate others if you aren’t in tune with what they need from you, what engages them, and what motivates them.

So what CAN we tune into? If we’re not exploring data and objective information, what exactly are we looking for?



Emotions, hunches, and intuition – oh my!

Emotions

“There is no such thing as a purely logical decision. The brain uses a combination of logic and emotion when making decisions of any kind” (Browning 2015).

You – and everyone you know – experience emotions. Every emotion is a messenger for you, telling you something potentially useful or important.

Every emotion is a data point.

Successful strategic thinking is “all about giving our brain more emotional information to work with through life experience to increase the probability of success for any given gut decision. Basically, the more we experience the more accurate our guts become” (Browning 2015).



Hunches

“The enigmatic phenomenon of intuition finds its roots not solely in the brain but also in the intricate interplay between various physiological systems. It manifests in bodily sensations, subtle cues, and flashes of insight that bypass conscious thought” (Kennedy 2024).

A hunch is an idea, or guess, based on intuition rather than readily visible data or facts.

It’s your “gut feeling.”

And to follow a gut feeling, you need to get out of your brain and FEEL YOUR GUT.

And your gut feeling is not somehow separate from your rational thoughts, but actually “draws on both objective and subjective information that is already available.” It is not quick or impulsive – it is “actually something much more cultivated and nuanced and based on experience” (Huang 2019).

Your gut also helps prevent analysis paralysis.

Your gut feeling will be useful when you need to make a decision, and gathering information is no longer helpful. In fact, some researchers believe that “the role of the gut is often to inspire a leader to make a call, particularly when that decision is risky” (Huang 2019).

Intuition

“Intuition refers to the brain’s process of interpreting and reaching conclusions about phenomena without resorting to conscious thought” (Bonabeau 2003).

You can be the most intelligent person on earth, and you will still never know everything.

It’s not possible.

And, sometimes you will need to make a decision fast – much faster than your rational brain is comfortable with.

Imagine if there was a way to parse through all of your accumulated data and experience to find an answer quickly.

There is. Your intuition.

“Intuitive decisions are often the product of years of experience and thousands of hours of practice. They represent the most efficient use of your accumulated experience” (Haden 2022).

Emotions, hunches, and intuition are NOT replacements for rationality and empirical knowledge – they add data and create pathways to make more holistic, strategic decisions.

There’s no substitute for knowledge, reason, and analysis. Learn as much as you can and gather as much data and insight as possible. What then happens is a deep knowing or intuition that comes from accumulated knowledge and experience.

It will help when your thinking is off or you’re suffering from analysis paralysis.

This is especially true “if you’re emotionally intelligent enough to read the signals your body sends you” (Haden 2022) – those gut feelings you’re having.



What are the qualities of people who think strategically AND emotionally?

Appreciative Intelligence is one way to think strategically that incorporates emotion. It's a way "to perceive the positive inherent, generative potential within the present."

It's being able to see a breakthrough, or a new future in the present. It's being able to understand your emotional reactions to failure, obstacles, and uncertainty (Thatchenkery & Metzger), and use that to strategically create the future you'd like to see.

You'll find emotionally tuned-in thinkers have similar behaviours:

Three behaviours of Appreciative Intelligence
Reframing
Appreciating the positive
Seeing and creating the future from the present

And what are the qualities of people who make best use of this kind of holistic intelligence?

Four qualities of Appreciative Intelligence
Persistence
Conviction that your actions matter
Tolerance for uncertainty
Irrepressible resilience

And I would add a fifth - **qualified confidence and self-trust**. We need "decision confidence," the conviction that our choice is the correct one (Shiv 2024).

Confident people are not scared to own their emotions, their hunches, and their intuition. Confident people are also happy to "stress test" their thinking and gather as much info as possible.

Most importantly... confident people ask "what am I missing? What else don't I know?"

Bias and overconfidence: check yourself before you wreck yourself

Be careful with confidence... but know it's a powerful tool for you to use

Daniel Kahneman advises us that “overconfidence is a powerful source of illusions.” He goes so far as to say that when thinking strategically, he would be most concerned about overconfidence. There are always aspects of the problem that you can't see (2010).

That said, he recognises that people WANT to see confidence in decision making. Leaders are often selected for their confident decision making, and “we deeply want to be led by people who know what they're doing and who don't have to think about it too much” (2010).

It's important, then, to make sure your **confidence is tempered with a healthy dose of humility and willingness to seek new ideas.**

Remember: the more research you do, the better your intuition works (Kasanoff 2021).

We're not looking for arrogance or confidence without evidence. We're looking for people who trust themselves to find all the information possible and be bold when it's time to take action.



Stress-test your ideas... and then trust yourself to go for it

One of the most dangerous aspects of our intuition is our own biases and “deep-seated need to see patterns.” We often attempt to fit things into old patterns, and don't use our creativity to seek out new ideas (Bonabeau 2003).

This is especially true when you've had bad outcomes or experienced trauma. Think of a child who has been bitten by a dog and is now frightened of every dog she sees. Will every dog bite her? Highly unlikely. But her old pattern thinking has taken over in order to keep her safe.

This is sometimes incredibly useful, but is often very limiting when you're thinking strategically and creating a new vision for the future.

The future is not always going to be the same as what you've already experienced. Can you use Appreciative Intelligence to imagine a new way?

Another way to counteract this tendency is to get feedback or seek out more objective views from others.



What CAN we do? Disciplined Intuition

You need BOTH your rational brain and your emotional one - how do you tune into both in the most effective way possible?

In addition to considering the Appreciative Intelligence model, also look at Joel Pearson's work.

The SMILE Method from Pearson's The Intuition Toolkit	
Self-awareness	Don't follow your intuition if your feelings have taken over
Mastery	Learn before you leap - make informed decisions and learn as much as you can
Impulses and addiction	Never mistake impulsive desires for intuitive insights
Low probability	Your intuition does not serve you in gambling and game shows
Environment	Use your intuition in familiar and more predictable contexts

And finally... know your why

You can also be like Simon Sinek and think about WHY your outcomes matter to you.

In strategic thinking, desire matters. Strong desire "motivates you to act, enables you to persist, and makes you more creative when confronted with obstacles" (Schlesinger, Kiefer, and Brown 2012).

Why do vegans and vegetarians have the highest rate of adherence to diets? Because they feel strongly about WHY they're eating this way.

Tapping into your why using your emotions and the emotions of others will help with the buy-in and engagement for yourself and the people on your strategic thinking journey.



Bibliography

- Bonabeau, Eric. (May 2003). Don't Trust Your Gut. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Browning, Geil. (July 2015). Why Trusting Your 'Gut Feeling' Is Often the Best Strategy. *Inc. Australia*.
- Gilkey, R., Caceda, R. and Kilts, C. (September 2010). When emotional reasoning trumps IQ. *Harvard Business Review*, 88(9), 27.
- Gladwell, Malcom. (2005). *Blink*. London: Penguin.
- Haden, Jeff. (April 2022). How the Smartest Minds Use Intuition - and a Little Emotional Intelligence - to Make Better Decisions, Backed by Considerable Science. *Inc. Australia*.
- Huang, Laura. (October 2019). When It's OK to Trust Your Gut on a Big Decision. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Kahneman, Daniel. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. London: Penguin.
- Kahneman, Daniel and Klein, Gary. (March 2010). Strategic Decisions: When can you trust your gut? *McKinsey Quarterly*.
- Kasanoff, Bruce. (December 2010). Intuition is the Highest Form of Intelligence. *Forbes*.
- Kay, John. (2010). *Obliquity: Why Our Goals are Best Achieved Indirectly*. London: Profile.
- Kennedy, Justin James. (May 2024). The Roots of Intuition and Emotional Intelligence: Decoding the neuroscience of gut feelings and sudden insights. *Psychology Today*.
- Lovalle, Dan and Sibony, Olivier. (March 2010). The case for behavioural strategy. *McKinsey Quarterly*.
- Parrish, Shane. (2023). *Clear Thinking: Turning Ordinary Moments into Extraordinary Results*. London: Cornerstone.
- Pearson, Joel. (2024). *The Intuition Toolkit: The New Science of Knowing What Without Knowing Why*. Sydney: Simon & Schuster.
- Root-Bernstein, Michele and Robert. (March 2010). Einstein on Creative Thinking: Music and the Intuitive Art of Scientific Imagination. *Psychology Today*.
- Schlesinger, L.A., Kiefer, C. F., & Brown, P. (March 2012). New project? Don't analyse—Act. *Harvard Business Review*, p154.
- Sinek, Simon. (2009). *Start with Why*. London: Penguin.



Bibliography (cont.)

Shiv, Baba. (March 2024). Emotion vs. Reason: Rethinking Decision-Making. *Neuroscience News*.

Sull, D.N. (September 2005). Strategy as active waiting. *Harvard Business Review*, 83(9), 121.

Thatchenkery, T. and Metzker, C. (2006). *Appreciative intelligence*. San Francisco, USA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Thanks for coming!

From The Training Practice team - Hilary, Kristen, Rachel, James, Oliver and Paucha

Check out our website, with our latest thinking and events:

trainingpractice.co.nz

Consider leaving a [Google Review](#)

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#)

Get in touch: 027 222 1498 | admin@trainingpractice.co.nz

[RSVP to our August Tea and Toast:](#)

Why your leadership brand matters

Hosted by Rachel Kasa

Friday 30 August 2024, 8:30am

Ernst & Young, Level 2/40 Bowen Street, Pipitea, Wellington 6011