Contingency Planning: Brain Food for Your Gut Feelings

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Abstract

Bonabeau's "Don't Trust Your Gut" (2003) warns against trusting intuition when reasoned analysis is where our knowledge comes from, whether conscious or subconscious. On the other hand, Pretz (2008) found that intuitive problem solving is more successful for novices. Combining expert knowledge with novice input in contingency plans will feed everyone's intuition, making all staff ready to respond quickly and accurately in a crisis or change situation.

Contingency Planning: Brain Food for Your Gut Feelings

In "Don't Trust Your Gut," Eric Bonabeau (2003) is almost cruelly straightforward: "Detached from rigorous analysis, intuition is a fickle and undependable guide." The vanity in thinking one's ideas mystically appear from a special place inside or arrive on a thunderbolt from above is not humanity's only weakness. Bonabeau describes the irrational appeal of information that arrived first or that tells us what we already know. We imagine patterns in the most random data and parrot others' ideas as if they were our own.

Bonabeau seems to rebut Hiyashi's (2001) earlier article, "When to Trust Your Gut," which encourages readers to listen to their emotions when making decisions. After all, even Hiyashi's experts tell us that the "sense of revelation" is the conscious mind comprehending the analysis the subconscious mind has conducted behind the scenes.

Bonabeau focuses on decision-making software that can run through hundreds of scenarios and provide the most likely or suitable for human analysis. More important than the technology is that administration and staff actually conduct analysis, question assumptions, and plan for multiple likely scenarios. In this modern age of self-direction and "hands-off" management, employees still need guidance. And in this fast moving age where organizations must adjust quickly to survive, it behooves library staff to create contingency plans whenever possible. For most situations facing a library manager, pen, paper, and old-fashioned brainstorming will suffice.

Given the chance to participate in and internalize library strategizing, front-line staff will have the grounding and knowledge needed to respond correctly in the moment and feel that "sense of revelation."

Intuition for Beginners

A study by Bolte and Goschke (2005) reinforced the idea that intuition unconsciously retrieves information already in the brain. When given simple word association problems, participants were able to see when words were related without articulating the actual relationship. Their findings led them to describe intuition as "not some special or even mysterious capacity but...rather based on preexisting knowledge that may guide decisions and judgments without being accessible to conscious awareness" (p. 1248).

Unfortunately, intuition is not always accurate. Brown and Marek (2005) described forest firefighters unable to outrun flames because they were weighed down by their tools. Why not just drop them when the situation got out of control? Their gut instincts told them to keep hold of what had saved lives in the past. Even when commanded to drop their tools, they could not, tragically exemplifying Bonabeau's warning that humans don't like new information.

Pretz (2008) finds novices solve problems more successfully with an intuitive approach while "analysis was found to be an appropriate strategy for more experienced individuals" (p. 554). Those with experience are able to sort out the relevant information in a problem and analyze it clearly. Following their intuition alone is distracting. Conversely, novices are overwhelmed by incoming data and their analysis fails. Their intuition, however, might summon relevant information from their subconscious.

Not Having a Plan Could Be a Disaster

Marek and Brown cite Weick's firefighter metaphor for dropping tools that are no longer useful and even hold us back in a crisis situation (1996). Simpkins (2009) also uses a disaster response metaphor for the value of contingency planning. Simpkins calls attention to airlines training flight attendants and passengers on disaster response, ground and air controllers monitoring conditions, and manufacturers stress-testing airplanes before their first flight. The analogy might seem quaint in this age of cancelled flights and planes falling apart in mid-air, but his point is still taken. Leaders can hope they will be able to adjust quickly to changing conditions or plan ahead for various possibilities. Simpkins identifies two types of contingency plans: "continuity plans" address emergencies and disaster response; "uncertainty plans" address business challenges arising from competition, economic changes, and technical difficulties (p. 106). Both types require the same steps: educate and communicate, review objectives, identify variables, and develop a contingency plan for each objective.

To continue this pervasive disaster response analogy, Simpkins' continuity plans are the fire drills and recovery plans every library should have. We conduct fire drills because we don't expect people to automatically know what to do in a crisis. We repeat them because we don't expect people to remember how to handle rare occurrences. We write down our recovery plans ahead of time so that we can respond quickly and uniformly after a crisis. Because intuition can be misleading, fire drills and similar training ensures that inexperienced people draw upon the correct subconscious responses.

Uncertainty plans are recovery plans for potential business-related crises. A common response from a change-wary employee is "What if it goes wrong?" The blithe manager reassures,

"Everything will be fine." The wise manager answers, "Yes, what if? Let's make a plan for that." The employee feels acknowledged and takes an active part in addressing the fears.

Just as Simpkins uses a disaster metaphor to explain business, Kiel (1995) reviews lessons learned from disaster response, unwittingly offering relevant tips to any manager. Among many findings, Kiel says, "Management rules may require more 'letting go' while employees must take responsibility and initiative" (The Changing Nature of Workplace Rules). Sounds like the self-directed employee of any modern management theory. To make an employee ready for responsibility, managers should get them involved beforehand and prime their intuition. Simpkins emphasizes the same thing. Employees on all levels should be involved in planning. Evans and Ward (2007) reiterate the need for employee involvement and list three categories of plan: strategic, long-term plans; tactical plans that align the organization to the strategic plan; and operational, short-term plans "guide staff in their day-to-day activities" (p 148).

What's Your Problem?

Future Problem Solving Program International (FPSPI) teaches students problem-solving techniques by presenting a general scenario and asking them to identify inherent challenges (FPSPI, 2011). The steps they use are appropriate for general strategizing, solving specific problems, introducing new technology, or changing procedures—any of Evans and Ward's categories.

First, one must define the situation clearly and succinctly. Simpkins warns that a situation "will probably be difficult to communicate or observe" if its description is not "clear, to the point, and measurable" (p. 107) The definition could be an environmental scan in preparation for a strategic plan, a needs assessment for new technology, or a suggestion from a patron.

Next, identify challenges inherent to the situation. Many plans start with a challenge and it is important to step back and figure out the situational cause of the challenge, if related challenges exist, and if the alleged challenge is the real problem. Kiel recommends Goldstein's (1989) "difference questioning" technique. Whether faced with a problem or merely reviewing operations, a manager should welcome questions that ask,

> Why do we do things this way? What will happen if we change the present work process? (Process Is More Important Than Structure)

Kiel calls questions like this "creative fluctuations" (Freedom and Instability in Work Teams) Managers should see the value in people who act as devil's advocates. This negative energy can be transformed into useful fodder for discussion.

The third step is to identify possible solutions to the most critical challenge. Simpkins suggests identifying best, worst, and most likely scenarios for variables that affect an objective and then developing contingency plans that cover all three. This is not the time for judgment. Let the ideas flow freely and do not fear the worst-case scenarios. They are only possibilities, not prophecies.

For instance, at the time of writing, the mayor of Oakland, California, is offering three options for libraries in the 2011–2013 city budget: close all but the main library and three large branches (with no employee contributions), cut $400,000 from the library budget (with employee contributions), or raise taxes (Burt, 2011). Is this a political ploy to get the tax increase? Perhaps. However, the idea of closing small, neighborhood libraries is worth considering, if only to generate arguments for their continued existence.

What's the Plan?

Once a number of possible solutions are on the table, judgment can begin. It's time to select criteria for assessing each solution. What are the organization's priorities? Saving money? Timeliness? Limited staff resources? Community outreach?

With measurable, objective criteria, it is hoped participants can reach a decision in a neutral manner. What happens next depends on the nature of the problem. A friendly memo, a proposal to the board, an action plan of some sort.

To return once more to our disaster metaphor, the Heritage Preservation's Lessons Applied Initiative (n.d.) reminds us why we conduct planning. They investigate the aftermath from and response to disasters by libraries, archives, museums, and similar organizations in order to "convert analysis to action." Without action, whether it be a practice drill or real, planning is just talk.

A smart organization does not wait until there is a fire to figure out what to do. Similarly, a wise manager runs "fire drills" on daily operations and upcoming changes to work out all the kinks in plans and procedures. Reasoned analysis will feed everyone's intuition.

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