

Sixth Sense Intuition
A White Paper in the series on A Sixth Sense for Project Management®
Tres Roeder, MBA, Project Management Professional (PMP®)
Founder and President, Roeder Consulting, Inc.

Abstract

Overly-bureaucratic and systematic approaches to project management and decision making can slow down projects and result in poor outcomes. PMI's study "Researching the Value of Project Management" presented statistically valid data showing that successful project managers adapt their approach to the situation. But, how do project managers know when and how to adapt their approach? Intuition is a large part of the answer. Experienced professionals across various fields often rely more on intuition than formal decision-making approaches, policies and procedures. This is particularly true in a crisis. Captain Sullenberger did not have a policy to land US Airways flight #1549 in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009. He used his intuition. Experienced project managers can learn from the overwhelming body of knowledge in other professions to deliver improved project results.

Introduction

Project Management can be defined as turning strategy into results. How do you turn strategies into results? Part of the answer is the tools and methodologies learned in the *PMBOK® Guide*, referred to in this paper as "technical skills." However, the *PMBOK® Guide* and the technical and process skills it represents cover only one of three legs essential for a project manager to achieve successful results.

Project managers who focus solely on technical skills may find themselves in a constant struggle to obtain executive support, as well as support of fellow colleagues and team members. When Project Management is defined more broadly, as a balanced approach with three distinct skill sets, project managers will realize better results. Project Management is a tool to get results. In and of itself it is not a complete tool to guide successful change.

The crucial second leg of this balanced approach is the human component – the people side of projects, one that is often overlooked. It is what Roeder Consulting refers to as A Sixth Sense for Project Management®. Intuition is in this category.

The third and final leg is business acumen. Business acumen refers to the skills and knowledge of specific types of projects worked on. Wikipedia, "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," includes this definition: *Business acumen is a concept pertaining to a person's knowledge and ability to make profitable business decisions.* Intuition and business acumen are intertwined. Stephen Leybourne and Eugene Sadler-Smith published a paper in 2005 named "The Role of Intuition and Improvisation in Project Management." They found that project managers who use their intuition are more likely to be focused on their project's outcomes. In other words, project managers with intuition are more likely to have business acumen.

By incorporating these three balanced "legs" in a project managers' skill set, the individual will be better equipped to take responsibility for their projects, as well as its results.

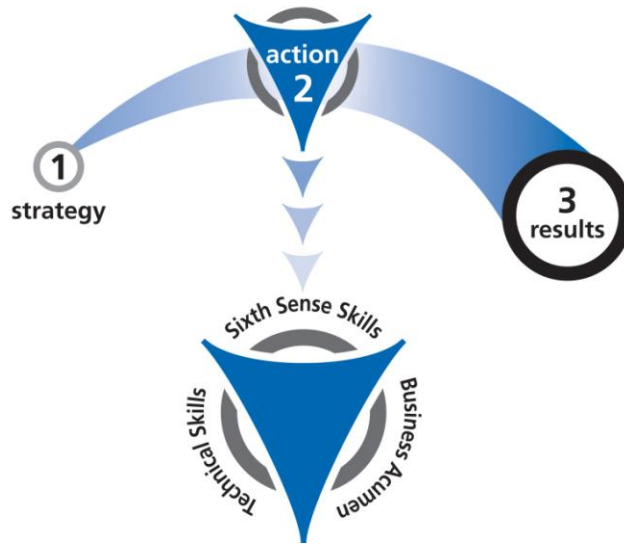


Exhibit 1 – A Balanced Approach

What is Intuition?

“Intuition” is derived from the Latin word 'intueri', which means 'to look inside' or 'to contemplate' (source: wikipedia). Consider the following facts about intuition:

- Psychologist Carl Jung identified intuition as one of four personality types in his 1921 book “Psychological Types”
- During the time of World War II, Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers were looking for a way to help women entering the workforce. They build a questionnaire based on Jung’s research that would eventually become the “Myers Briggs Type Indicator”. This is one of the most widely used personality profiles in the world and one of the main attributes it measures is intuition
- Intuition can lead to faster decisions, improved quality of decisions, and a critical tool in a well-rounded “tool kit”.

Intuition is a critical skill for professionals striving to be at the top of their field. Yet, few people are formally trained on intuition. This paper will focus on what we have named “Experienced Intuition”. Experienced Intuition occurs when there is a synthesis of deep awareness and experience into intuitive insights.

Experienced Intuition

Experienced Intuition is frequently reported from people who have deep knowledge and experience in the area where they are receiving intuition. For example, a surgeon who finds unusual circumstances during a procedure may use their intuition to determine the best course of action. It may be difficult to determine if the surgeon’s actions are guided by their training, by their experience, or by some sort of intuition that synthesizes their collective

knowledge and experiences into an action. Recently, I had dinner with a friend who is a hospice doctor. She explained many circumstances where she uses intuition to determine the best approach. She said it's difficult to say if her intuition is coming from her years of training in medical school, her decade or more of experience, or some other source. This melding of knowledge, education and insight is a common characteristic of "Experienced Intuition".

Spontaneous Intuition

A second type of intuition, beyond the scope of this paper, is "Spontaneous Intuition". Spontaneous intuition occurs when people receive a vision, a message, or a feeling from undetermined sources. People might ask themselves, "where did that come from?" Unlike Experienced Intuition, in Spontaneous Intuition it is not possible to trace the intuitive moment to formal education or one's professional experiences. For example, a person has a bad feeling about walking into the grocery store. She acts on this feeling and turns around before walking in the front door. Moments later there is a thunderous roar as a piece of equipment just inside the door comes crashing down. If she entered the door she surely would have been hit. This intuitive moment can't be traced to formal education or work-related experience. Something else is going on and that's a marker of "Spontaneous Intuition". More research is needed to understand Spontaneous Intuition. For the remainder of this paper we will focus on Experienced Intuition.

Intuition is often best understood through examples. We will look at several examples to bring light to the dynamics of intuition.

Examples of Experienced Intuition

On January 15th, 2009, US Airways flight #1549 successfully landed in the Hudson River. The Airbus A320 was piloted by Captain James Sullenberger, aka "Sully", and First Officer Jeff Skiles. Both engines in the airplane were incapacitated by a bird strike. In an interview with Katie Couric from CBS news Captain Sully reported that just after seeing the birds he "felt, heard and smelled the evidence" of the bird strike. After conquering his initial reaction of disbelief, Sully went through a logical decision-making process. Should I immediately turn around, he reasoned, to land at the same airport where I took off? No, that will take us over a densely populated area putting the lives of many on the ground at stake as well as everyone on the airplane. Can I make it to another airport Sully asked himself? No. Can I restart the engines? Maybe, I am going to give it a shot. Sully and the first officer executed engine restart procedures without success. By a process of elimination Sully came to the grim conclusion that his best option was to land the plane in the Hudson River. Then next action was certainly guided by intuition. He did it! He had never landed a commercial airliner in the water before. Simulators are not able to fully replicate the experience either. Captain Sully knew that he needed to touch down with "the wings exactly level, the nose slightly up ... and ... just above our minimum flying speed but not below it". Then, he did what was thought to be impossible by many people. He landed the plane in the river and everyone survived. Captain Sully called on a deep awareness of the situation and years of experience to make decisions and take unprecedented actions. Captain Sully does not report having hunches other than saying, "I was sure I could do it". People experiencing intuition often report "knowing" that a certain outcome is correct or a certain action can be successfully completed.

Captain Sully's story shows how years of training and deep experience can meld with deep awareness to create intuition. In the case of Flight #1549 intuition led to spectacular results. At the time of the flight Captain Sully had 42 years of flight experience. However, this flight experience would not have mattered without his awareness. His awareness told him why the airplane experienced a loss of engine power. Also, his situational awareness told him where he was, how much time he had before touchdown, and other important pieces of information required for a successful outcome. This story highlights the important role awareness plays in intuition.

Next, consider the fascinating story of Argentinean race car driver Juan Fangio. Mr. Fangio drove Formula One cars in the sport's early days. In 1950 he won the Monaco Grand Prix by famously avoiding an accident. The accident occurred in a turn that was ahead of him and out of sight. Even though he could not see the accident, Mr. Fangio slowed down. How did he know to do this? After the race and some thought, Mr. Fangio said his view of the fans told him there was trouble. He was the lead car. People, he reasoned, usually look at the lead car. With people looking at him he should see a lighter blur as he drove by. Instead, Mr. Fangio explained, he saw a darker blur indicating hair from heads that were turned. People were looking ahead of him indicating there must be some kind of trouble. Mr. Fangio's intuition led him to victory.

Both of these situations depict seasoned professionals applying their deep knowledge and expertise in unconventional ways. Intuition is a deep awareness coupled with experience to lead the conscious and unconscious mind to deliver exceptional insights. Our unconscious mind runs in the background processing information. Intuition, in part, comes from an ability to listen to these messages and decipher them. Deciphering is required because the unconscious mind often works in images and abstractions.

It is easy to imagine Mr. Fangio telling himself not to worry about a blur of fans. How often do we do this in our own lives? We get a feeling about something but we tell ourselves the feeling is trivial or incorrect. People at the top of their field learn to listen to these gut feelings.

Developing Your Intuition

Intuition is facilitated by stillness, awareness, experience and training. One's intuition is improved by developing each:

STILLNESS –The first step towards intuition is to do nothing. Literally, try not to do anything. Create quiet time for yourself. Relax in a comfortable setting. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Clear your mind. Stillness facilitates intuition. This does not mean intuition happens only during quiet times. You may be taking a shower or running to the store when an idea pops into your mind. Indeed, Mr. Fangio was at the helm of a lightning-fast car when his intuition struck. However, it is likely that he quieted the “noise” in his mind to create room for exactly the type of message he received. After you slow down and create quietness tell yourself you are open to intuition. Intuitive messages are of no value if you don't accept them.

AWARENESS – After you open space for intuition to occur, the next step is to pay attention. “Look within” as the Latin derivation of the word intuition tells us. How do you make decisions? How do different situations impact you physically and emotionally? Expand your awareness by asking the same questions of other people. How do they process the world around them? What changes their behaviors? The third realm of awareness is situational. What are the physical characteristics of your surroundings? What is happening in the larger context? Are you working in a group that has just been down-sized? Is your organization struggling to keep up? Situational and environmental factors influence outcomes.

EXPERIENCE - The more experience you have, some studies show (Leybourne and Sadler-Smith, 2005), the more likely you are to use intuition. So, one way to improve your intuition is to be patient and let your career progress. However, there are “Experience Accelerators” that can help you develop intuition more quickly. One experience accelerator is to have a mentor. Good mentors share their experiences with us in a way that might make those experiences our own. They help us understand what is going on and why. Another experience accelerator is to put yourself in a position that stretches your abilities. Work on a

larger project, a different type of project, an uncomfortable project. This push on your abilities will improve your intuition more rapidly.

TRAINING – Perhaps the most powerful “Experience Accelerator” is professional and personal development. Attend sessions that challenge your thinking. Work on developing your skills related to the human side of change. Studies show that people skills are correlated to project success (Thomas & Mullaly, 2008). Also, professional development is a great way to meet other people and hear how they succeed. Think of these people as “one day mentors” who are accelerating your experience.

Intuition is a muscle that can be developed. By taking the actions above you will build this muscle. Initially, the muscle will be weak. Over time it can become strong and powerful.

When is Intuition Accurate?

Thoughts, visions and ideas are not always accurate. We need a complex system of cross-checks to validate these thoughts. Roeder Consulting calls this complex system “Whole Body Decisions™”. Whole Body Decisions™ incorporate input from your rational brain, your heart and your gut.

Whole Body Decisions™
Use Your Brain, Heart and Gut to Make Great Decisions



Exhibit 2: Whole Body Decisions

If your intuition tells you to take the project in a certain direction, check the data to see if it supports your intuition. Also, you may want to have a conversation with a few stakeholders to uncover their perception of reality. Intuition works the other way around too. Spend a lot of time studying the data then let your unconscious mind sort it out while you go for a walk, sleep, or do something else unrelated to the work. You may find moments of intuition after your full body has had time to process the data.

Many Project Managers Already Use Intuition

Intuition is a tool many project managers already use. Project managers often deploy intuition when there is too much data or not enough. Intuition may also be called upon when under a time crunch to make decisions. A project environment can often be fast-moving and dynamic. In this environment sometimes the facts are antiquated or insufficient. Intuition can be the perfect tool to find the path to clarity.

Interestingly, many project managers deploy intuition covertly (Leybourne and Sadler-Smith, 2005):

“Knowledgeable and experienced project managers are tasked to deliver outcomes within organisations quickly and incurring the minimum of risk. However, moving away from a documented plan is seen as risky, and the safety net of joint planning and agreement on schemas of action is removed when a project manager decides to improvise. ... In Agor’s study of intuition nearly half the respondents indicated that they kept the fact that they relied upon intuition a secret, whilst others reported a posthoc rationalization for decisions arrived at intuitively”

As the project management profession matures it is important to move beyond the over-weighted focus on technical skills. Technical skills are important but are not adequate to drive organizational change. Today, the new project environment calls upon project managers to be leaders. Organizations are looking to the project management function to deliver results. Intuition will help deliver those results.

Intuition offers the ability to see holistically what is going on in the project environment. Not just tasks and timelines, but also emotions, situations and hidden realities. As a profession, we must do a better job delivering project results. Intuition, when properly deployed, will help raise project management to a new era characterized by greater project success.

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