Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it**. This periodical – distributed by Rob Greenaway & Associates – shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, and others, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective.

This edition covers a bit of ground that I've discussed previously – how the brain works. A fascinating topic. And we all have one to play with.

Sway, Blink, Think

If I hadn't been standing under a cold bridge in Te Teko, taking photos of a rising river every fifteen minutes, I wouldn't have bothered finishing the book *Blink*. Author Malcolm Gladwell's self-evident hypothesis is that we should trust our intuition and our ability to make sound assessments based on very limited information – a process he calls 'thin slicing' – unless our intuition is wrong, of course. In which case we need to spend years up-skilling in a specialist area so that we can, for example, spot a forged sculpture because it just looks wrong (we can spot the fake in an intuitive blink).[1] So, in the words of Samuel Goldwyn, the harder you work, the luckier you get.

How Gladwell spins his premise into 259 pages of exposition is a real journalistic feat. The same can be said of the slightly more interesting, but equally useful book, *The Decisive Moment* by another journalist Jonah Lehrer.[2] Lehrer's treatise is on how the brain makes a choice – how it processes information and makes up its mind. I bought the book partly because it has a big red plastic button on the cover with the words 'Don't Press'. I asked myself, why do I want to press that button? Perhaps this book will tell me?

Sadly, it doesn't. Lehrer doesn't even mention the button, which was probably put there by the publisher's marketing team and not the author. I bought the book on intuition and got it wrong.

Lehrer states that the more real-life experience you have of any situation (such as flying a plane) the better you will be at it. For a behaviour to become automatic, it needs to be administered at a subconscious level – by the primitive bits of our brain. It's hard to play the piano nicely if you're consciously worrying about key sequences. Or, as Lehrer would say, applying too much of your modern, slow, analytical brain – the prefrontal cortex.

Although both Lehrer and Gladwell attempt to point out how easily our intuition is fooled by the important issue of framing, neither stress enough that our innate fallibility means that we have to be really careful when relying on our intuition; unless we are very skilled and practiced in a relevant field, or are undertaking a simple task like running away from a tiger (and even then, practice probably helps).

Lehrer's crowning silliness comes with his recommendation about how to make complex decisions. Apparently, our modern brains (the conscious prefrontal cortex bit) can handle only a limited number of variables, and should be trusted only when making simple choices, like which vegetable peeler to buy. When it comes to deciding on a house, car or furniture purchase – where many complex variables are involved – the more we think about the options, the worse we feel about our final choice. Lehrer quotes some research to suggest that this can happen: the more we angst over complex options, the less happy we'll be with whatever we choose. However, Lehrer recommends that if we let our intuition lead, and rely on the more primitive bits of our brain – if we just wander around a prospective new house without thinking too much, and then see how we feel about it the next day – we've a better chance of a more positive outcome. That's because the primitive, subconscious bits of our brains can naturally handle lots of data, and give us feedback via emotion.

Of course, if we followed this advice we'd all be driving second-hand Alfa Romeos and running unhealthy mortgages. My prefrontal cortex says, when the going gets tough, the tough write a list. If you buy cars and houses on a daily basis, then your highly-trained and experienced intuition might do a better and quicker job (and you'll have a Toyota Corolla). Until then, blink at your peril. Leave 'thin slicing' to professionals and chefs. Happy people have a plan.

Economist Dan Ariely, psychologist Rom Brafman and MBA graduate Ori Brafman explain the perils of blind intuition in the excellent and similar books *Predictably Irrational*[3] and *Sway*[4]. These show that we are suckers for how data are presented to us – how information is framed – and anyone trained in advertising knows this. Have you ever walked onto a car-yard and had the salesperson say, "Just wander around and read the window cards." No – they look at which cars need shifting and will present them to you using their highly trained intuition to identify what is going to appeal to your primitive brain, and they will seek to develop a personal relationship which will make you feel guilty about buying from someone else. They will never say, as a French waiter recently did to us, "Here's your hot chocolate, but if you want a really good one you need to go to Pierre's in the 5th arrondissement."

Prospective employers run psychometric tests, phone referees and check your Facebook history. Taking someone at 'face value' is rather risky.

Our primitive emotive brain is a sucker for simple enticements. For example, Dan Ariely gave students the option of buying a luxurious Lindt Truffle for 15 cents or a standard Hershey's Kiss for 1 cent: 73% chose the truffle while 27% went for a Kiss. But when he lowered the price of each by 1 cent, 69% went for the Kiss, which was now free. The price differential was equal in both cases and the relative utility had not changed. Ariely uses another example where you walk into a store to buy a decent pair of high-tech socks, but walk out with two pairs of inferior quality because of a two-for-the-price-of-one offer. You'll regret the decision while plastering your blisters. The examples

[1] Gladwell, M. 2005. *Blink.* Back Bay Books
[2] Lehrer J. 2009. *The Decisive Moment – how the brain makes up its mind*. Canongate
[3] Ariely, D. 2008. *Predictably Irrational.* Harper Collins
[4] Brafman, O and Brafman, R. 2009. *Sway.* Virgin

of how our primitive brain fails us, and how marketeers know this, are numerous and convincing (Google the term 'spaving'). The last thing we want to do is blink our way blindly through life's major decisions.

Lehrer suggests that framing (although he doesn't name it as such) is a variant of the placebo effect. But a placebo gives us a potential benefit based on a physiological change in the body. Framing, even when it is part of a positive social development programme, is a means of conning us – of hijacking our primitive intuition by appealing, in the main, to the short-term benefits it enjoys: chips, chocolate and ice-cream. It takes a prefrontal cortex to order a salad. ❖

Lateral thinking

Over the past couple of years I have had the pleasure of working with architect Ian Athfield and landscape architect Megan Wraight on redevelopment planning for the Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve. Ath and Megan have been working on a masterplan (and now more detailed design) while I have been preparing the reserve management plan. One afternoon I watched the two of them scratching ideas on some butcher paper. Ath was scrawling artistically, while Megan was black-hatting on behalf of the client and the groups with whom we'd been consulting. It was impressive natural lateral thinking in full flight, and pretty cool watching two 2013 Arts Foundation award winners at work.

Ath was able to come up with a design idea, but after some prompting from Megan, abandon the concept and start from scratch. There was no tweaking of the first idea. It was just put to one side, and while not thrown in the bin, did not appear to inform the next sketch. Over an hour or so, the two of them worked up a whole raft of new ideas. It was clearly an evolutionary process, but Ath and Megan have the skill of being able to leap laterally, rapidly and without fetter, from one idea to another.

It takes me some effort to discard a potentially good idea, and then there is always a preference to tweak and fiddle with it. These two just moved smoothly from one option to another. Edward de Bono would, I expect, have been quite impressed.

De Bono – who developed the concept of lateral thinking – likens the mind to an easily eroded featureless plain.[5] As water is poured on the plain, it forms erosion channels. As more water is added, it will tend to follow those original landscape features. Intellectually, once we have developed a method of thinking, or a concept of interest, we will naturally tend to stick to that method or idea. It's easier for our brains to follow the original route formed by the first flow of ideas, or our traditional attitudes, than it is to start a new channel from scratch.

In fact, it's probably an evolutionary advantage to be able to see the start of some developing pattern and then leap to a likely conclusion. Consider the game of muddling all but the first and last letters in the words in a sentence. Baeirzrly, tehy are all rebadlae. We are masters at pattern spotting, but that comes with the handicap of a limited ability to think afresh.

De Bono challenges us to learn to leap laterally from our conceptual ruts to new ways of thinking. This takes a bit of effort. I liken it to the palpable mental exertion needed to overcome the natural inertia we face when starting to write a new report on a warm, sunny day. Fortunately de Bono recognises that we can't simply ask our brain to get out of its rut. We need tricks to play on it. And there are many – just drag some of de Bono's books out of your local library. They also seem to be pretty common and cheap in second hand book stores. I'm never sure if this is a good sign.

To de Bono, our mental cup is at least always half-full. In his *Letters to Thinkers* he states, "Man's relative stupidity is probably his greatest resource." [6]

Considering the Middle East, I suspect that de Bono is not being sexist, but is certainly being optimistic.

He suggests that we're a bit dim compared with most animals because we think in fuzzy ways. A fawn knows what it's about from an early age, and goes about doing deer-ish things very efficiently. In contrast, humans have evolved to be muddled thinkers, relying on learned experience, complex and variable emotional responses and imprecise languages. But muddled thinking can lead to creativity as well as the ability to solve simple technical issues, like getting to the Moon and back. De Bono asks, however, why are we pretty hopeless about solving seemingly intractable social issues? The Middle East is a good example. He wonders why we can travel at more than the speed of sound, but still have "wars and crime and inhuman behaviour … poverty and ignorance?"

De Bono muses: "Are these areas only susceptible to emotional solutions through religious thinking or value changes?… It could be that human matters are so complicated by interactive change and feedback loops that our ordinary linear thinking is unable to cope."

He suggests that one problem is our reliance on evolved social orthodoxies, which are the equivalent of a fawn's basic intelligence. "They have a certain usefulness at first, but then prevent further progress," says de Bono. "Institutions evolve in order to serve a purpose, but then reach a point where they prevent further evolution." Others might call this 'bureaucratic inertia'. When an orthodoxy confines and channels thinking, the only winners are purveyors of the orthodoxy. De Bono's solution? Well, he recommends that it's something that we need to think about.

Sending Ian Athfield to Syria is probably not going to be a winning solution to our social failings, although a few supporters of the one-way roading system in Christchurch might think so. However, it's worth spotting and supporting the ideas people – the creative challengers of orthodoxy – otherwise we really are stuffed. ❖

For Your Interest

Over the past decade my work has featured a lot of energy-related projects – 35 wind and hydro schemes. This load has faded – energy demand in New Zealand is pretty flat. However, there seems to be more interest in marine work. I've enjoyed reviewing the Ministry for Primary Industry's Initial Position Paper on the Snapper 1 fishery for the NZ Sport Fishing Council, consultation for the Christchurch Coastal Pathway, more work on the wreck of the Rena, a review of the recreation effects of the Whareroa marine outfall for Fonterra and the South Taranaki District Council, evidence for the Marlborough District Council on the King Salmon marine farming applications and a review of the iron-sand mining proposal off the Taranaki coast for Trans-Tasman Resources.

Inland work has continued with reviews of a pipe bridge over the Rakaia River for TrustPower, esplanade reserve provisions for the Nelson City Council, evidence for reconsenting the Nzone Skydive airstrip in Queenstown, evidence for the Hurunui Water Project and the Hurunui and Waiau River Regional Plan in Canterbury, reviews and consent condition analysis for the Matahina hydro scheme reconsenting for TrustPower, updating my 2009 recreation assessment on the Lee Dam, completion of the reserves general policies for Tasman District Council and work on the Waitaha River hydro scheme proposal for Westpower.

Over winter we headed to Europe for two months. We looked at wind farms around Skye and Glasgow, and had a good snoop around various parks, gardens and walks. It was a great reminder of how well we deliver recreation services in New Zealand. We really are world-class in our urban and backcountry amenity management.

[5] de Bono, E. 1970. *Lateral Thinking.* Penguin

[6] de Bono, E. 1987. *Letters to Thinkers – further thoughts on lateral thinking.* Pelican