

# Professional standards research: developing intuition



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## Forget information overload – become smarter by thinking less hard

**The task of improving managers' rational thinking capabilities has occupied the learning and development profession for many years. But their intuitive capabilities have been given much less attention – until now.**

Successful leaders and managers in the 21st century need two key attributes when it comes to how they think. One is the ability to apply a rational and systematic approach so that they can produce convincing, business-focused action plans. The other is to think intuitively and creatively to generate innovative solutions and seize opportunities.

When managers face problems they can usually find more information to fuel their rational thinking processes, but this has a number of potential pitfalls. The external knowledge may not be available; they may inadvertently subject themselves to information overload if they do accumulate more knowledge; and, by the time they find the external knowledge needed to solve the problem, it may have changed, gone away or been solved by the competition already.

Intuition, on the other hand, is a non-conscious process that leads to feelings about a course of action or behaviour. The reasons for it are not easily verbalised, but they are derived from patterns in long-term memory, implicit learning and tacit knowledge, emotionally significant events or universal archetypes.

Intuition is reactive, automatic, non-verbal and holistic, but it may be combined with rational thought as a way of testing out gut feelings and hunches, and of detecting faint signals of new business opportunities or

threats. The important point about intuition is that it cannot be ignored, but it should not be followed blindly either.

Managers are often urged to develop intuitive thinking, but there seems to be little in the way of case studies and examples, let alone validations, of how such a capability may be learnt. But action-based research conducted in the UK and Israel has designed and validated a framework for the development of managers' intuitive awareness.

The programme consisted of two elements: an intuitive awareness workshop and intuitive awareness practice. The workshop comprised six hours of classroom-based sessions split into two parts: theoretical awareness and personal awareness. The first section covered the concepts of knowledge and intuition

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and the second covered techniques for developing intuitive awareness.

The techniques were based on the qualities of spontaneity, relaxation, bodily awareness, imagination and self-worth. Developing intuitive awareness is not so much about making it happen, but rather about allowing it to take place.

By way of illustration, a central precept in much intuition training is the importance of quieting the rational mind to give us access to knowledge that is below the level of our conscious awareness – hence the inclusion of meditation. Heightened awareness may also allow us to acknowledge and overcome the hasty decisions, judgments and bias that we may bring to decisions and problems.

The participants developed their intuitive awareness further during a two-month post-workshop period in which they applied the techniques we had taught them out of the classroom. We asked them to reflect on how useful these methods were to them in an "intuition journal". A tutor was available (for face-to-face meetings and via telephone or email) to provide feedback, coaching and guidance on how to use the techniques.

We analysed the participants' journals and observed the perceived effects of the intuitive awareness techniques on their confidence, concentration, awareness and serenity in the areas of decision-making, creativity and interpersonal relationships. They appeared to enhance individuals' confidence in their

creative capacities; their ability to concentrate and focus upon high-priority issues; and their awareness of themselves and others. A number of

participants reported that they also engendered a sense of serenity and calmness. Equally importantly, the techniques seemed valid and credible to the participants and were a source of stimulation for them. A longer-term project (with a group and a facilitator) will result in better outcomes through more structured reflection and feedback.

The final analysis is that the process of developing intuitive awareness opens up exciting new possibilities for leaders and managers. It should enable them to expand their awareness of their own untapped potential in order to develop the much sought-after capability of "intuitive thinking" – and maybe allow them to become smarter by thinking just a little less hard.

### PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS CONFERENCE

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