

Your Judgments: Damaging or Helpful?

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Do you recall how weird it feels when some coincidence occurs? Two unrelated situations come together at the same time and you wonder, "How did that happen?" Some people refer to that as serendipity. I just know it happens far more frequently than you'd expect with random chance!

In the past month, I've read two unrelated books that have stimulated my brain. And today's column is the output that has resulted from the unexpected combination!

The first book is *How to Stop the Pain: Pain is Inevitable, Suffering is Optional* by Dr. James B. Richards. In this life, we can't avoid being offended occasionally by individuals and circumstances. But we can avoid bitterness and the desire for vengeance. The key is to avoid judgment of other people's motives. That's easy to say, but rather hard to do!!

The second book is *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* by Malcolm Gladwell. The concepts here explain the instant choices we make (in the blink of an eye). The book explains why we are not able to adequately explain the basis for some of the decisions we make!

I started *How to Stop the Pain* believing that I judge infrequently. However, the more I read, the more I realized that my self-image and the truth are quite different! Sadly, I make judgments continuously!

I'm a good decision-maker, which means I create many options for every situation I face. Then I choose from among the multiple options I've generated. How do I (and you) select the unique option that expect to execute? We make judgments, selecting one as better than the others.

Further, I advocate and teach "continuous improvement." Just what is improvement? It's moving from one condition to a better one. How do we know that the second state is "better"? Judgment.

How to Stop the Pain has made me aware of my frequency of judgment and its potential downside when I judge the motives of others. Then, as I'm pondering this surprising realization, *Blink* hits me with additional insights!

"Adaptive unconscious" is the term used to describe the ability we employ to make decisions quickly, based on a hunch or a feeling. Sometimes these decisions are just as good as those made cautiously and analytically.

I learned about "thin slicing," a term to describe the rapid recognition of patterns in situations and behaviors. This ability allows us to draw conclusions based on very little information.

When we think about "thinking," we usually focus on our conscious awareness of options and our choice among them. However, operating below the surface of our conscious awareness is another form of thinking that also directs our behaviors. When challenged about how we made a given decision or why we chose a specific action, we often can't explain our logic.

Blink explains our "implicit associations." That is, we are aware of our conscious or "explicit" descriptions of our judgment processes. However, the thinking that occurs beneath our conscious awareness sometimes conflicts with our conscious thinking.

For example, in my career, I frequently worked on race relations, helping black and white employees function effectively together. When a black individual hears a white person say, "I don't have any prejudices," that's a signal to be on guard! We all have our biases, often adopted at a young age.

The reason for this dichotomy in self-image and actual behavior is now much clearer to me! The implicit associations are the basis for the prejudice. These are below the conscious level, and the individual is not even aware of them. The conscious intent may be honorable, but the underlying perspective drives the body language and words of the individual.

Here's the bottom line for you as a leader. Know that you are not aware of your implicit associations and the power of your thinking that lies below the conscious level. So, what can you do?

Open yourself to feedback from others, so that you can learn about the effect of your behaviors.

Look beyond the obvious when you find yourself judging another person's motives.

And realize that your supposed logic may be driven by something deep within you that is influencing your conclusions in ways you may not fully understand! Yes, even you are biased at times!

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