

## Why “Blink” Matters: The Power of First Impressions

By Susan M. Heathfield

Professional speakers and trainers have long asserted that people make up their minds about people they meet for the first time within two minutes. Others assert that these first impressions about people take only thirty seconds to make.

As it turns out, both may be underestimates. According to Malcolm Gladwell, in *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, the decisions may occur much faster - think instantaneously or in two seconds. His findings have serious implications for organizations. According to Gladwell's research, we think without thinking, we thin-slice whenever we meet a new person or have to make sense of something quickly or encounter a novel situation. He says, snap judgments are, first of all, enormously quick: they rely on the thinnest slices of experience they are also unconscious. □ (p. 50)

We thin-slice because we have to, and we come to rely on that ability because there are lots of hidden fists out there, lots of situations where careful attention to the details of a very thin slice, even for no more than a second or two, can tell us an awful lot. □ (p.44)

Whenever we have to make sense of complicated situations or deal with lots of information quickly, we bring to bear all of our beliefs, attitudes, values, experiences, education and more on the situation. Then, we thin-slice the situation to comprehend it quickly. The implications of this concept have astonishing significance for our personal reactions to most situations.

It seems to me that this ability to think without thinking, to make snap decisions about situations and people in a blink, has significant implications for how we interview and hire staff. It plays havoc with how we view ourselves and our ability to interact with people who are different than ourselves. It impacts how we develop friendships with people at work. It affects our networking and business relationship building. It affects who we believe in a work disagreement or confrontation.

### **Controlling the Blink**

Gladwell offers hope. He believes that our awareness of the fact that we make snap (often unconscious) judgments about people and situations can provide the opportunity for controlling our blink response. He cites, as an example, the fact that many try-outs for orchestras are now held with the applicant musicians playing behind a screen. All sexual, racial and physical characteristics are eliminated so selectors can concentrate on listening for the best musician.

At the same time, this ability we have as humans, to quickly make judgment calls, saves lives, provides interpersonal insight, recognizes fake artifacts, allows us to assess situations and take action quickly and can even predict the future of a relationship. So, it's not an ability you want to discard, even if your first snap decisions or judgment calls can also be terribly wrong.

The key is constant awareness of your ability to thin-slice and think without thinking. Gladwell participated in an experiment to test whether he would respond more positively to images of white people with positive or negative words describing them, or pictures of black people with positive or negative words associated with the image.

Of course, as most of us would, he predicted there would be no difference in the time it took him to assign positive and negative words to the pictures of black or white people. He was wrong. The test results indicated a subtle preference to associate positive words with images of white people. Gladwell was particularly struck by the results of this test as his mother is Jamaican and he would have expected himself to be more color blind. He cites similar results of tests assigning gender-biased words such as "entrepreneur or homemaker", with male and female connotations in our culture, to pictures of males and females.

### **Applying Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking***

The key take away from the book is the necessity for each of us to be aware of and control our thin-slicing. After reading *Blink*, I'm more convinced than ever that we make snap decisions about situations and people, unconsciously, that bring into play all of our biases. All candidates for positions deserve the same treatment and the same attention to factors other than race, religion, appearance and size.

Any decisions that we make based on our thin-slicing must be accompanied by the recognition that we do make important decisions using this process - unconsciously. Take the time to gather a larger pool of data before going with your initial gut reaction. While you may be right, you can be wrong. And, there is the constant opportunity to unconsciously discriminate, make poor hiring and networking choices and to trust or distrust employee stories for all of the wrong reasons. We are challenged to work with people who are not just like us. After we notice the differences (blink), we need to constantly demonstrate that we honor and appreciate the differences.

At the same time, Gladwell tells us not to endlessly develop more and more information. Sometimes, we need to trust the "blink", the thin-slice decisions that we make. He gives, as one example, the story of the Getty Museum buying an ancient Greek kouros which turned out to be a more modern forgery. Many outside experts were consulted and scientists tested the

material of the kouros for authenticity. The outside expert information pointed to an authentic statue.

Others, more involved in the art and collectibles industry, had reservations about the ten million dollar kouros. One expert cited the kouros as looking too fresh. Another objected saying, "You haven't purchased this yet, have you." They "thin-sliced" their view of the kouros and found "something" not right.

Gladwell encourages us to cultivate our ability to thin-slice by spending time with people who are not just like us. If our thin-slicing, snap judgments involve things such as art works or situations such as burning buildings, confrontations with suspected law-breakers and/or instantaneous assessments of safety situations at work, total immersion in the field helps as do years of experience and study.

I recommend you purchase and read the book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. It has serious implications for all of us every day at work and in our personal lives as well.