# The Target ‘Mark’

In *Blink*, by Malcolm Gladwell, the reader is taken on an entertaining journey to the ‘locked door’ of the unconscious mind. By citing research studies and anecdotal evidences, Gladwell paints a picture of the power of the unconscious mind with regards to decision making. He posits that, in many situations, the unconscious mind actually makes better, faster judgments than the conscious, analytical mind. After he establishes this, Gladwell proceeds to build the framework within which his theory stands and attempts to set the limits and bounds. He talks about when the unconscious mind is at its most powerful, when it is likely to make errors and what actions we can take to limit or exacerbate those errors.

# Results of Espionage

One of the most useful ideas that Gladwell points out is that experts are effective with their unconscious judgments where neophytes are not. This supports the concept from Doctrine and Covenants where the Lord says, “Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man.” (D&C 84:85) And again, “But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong." (D&C 9:8-9) In other words, informed snap judgments are effective because we have a frame of reference from which to draw. Conversely, uninformed ‘blinks’ often lead to critical mistakes.

This becomes useful with regard to *any* decision making opportunity. According to Gladwell (and Thomas S. Monson) once the time to act arrives, the time for preparation has passed. The idea here is simple yet profound. Gladwell would encourage a person to review the scope of possibilities that they see coming and prepare accordingly. The Lord would seem to agreed. However, once a person has positioned themselves as an ‘expert’ on something, they need to be ready to act without further consultation and deliberation in order to avoid thwarting the power of their unconscious mind.

The other key learning point revolves around bias and unconscious influence on decisions. By recognizing the effect of the unconscious mind, a person is better able to make level-headed decisions in a given situation. Rather than simply falling prey to their impulses, recognizing the ever-presence of the unconscious mind helps a person to have better control. This allows a person to better ‘bridle their passions’ and be ‘no respecter of persons.’

The ironic point is that these two learnings are in opposition to one another. On the one hand, a person needs to train their conscious mind so their unconscious mind can feed off the information at a moment’s notice. On the other hand, they need to suppress their unconscious mind in order to ensure rational decision making abilities. This conflict of key points causes some confusion regarding the actual point of the book.

In the end, the main advantage a reader gains is the opportunity to introspect. In reading about the effect of bias, environment, physical space, experience and expertise, the reader is presented with a number of self-tests. These tests give an opportunity to come face to face with some of the key problems, forcing the reader to confront their own bias and stereotype perceptions. The net result is an opportunity for the reader to reflect on their own methods for decision making and identify the areas where confounding variables may be having a powerful impact.

# Insufficient Data

The most pressing question following the reading of *Blink* is ‘so what?’ While the stories are entertaining and, at times, compelling, the research is all descriptive. Gladwell never really digs into a theory-based exposition of *why* things happen the way they do. Instead, he employs a metaphor of the ‘locked door’ to preclude a need for explanation.

Another troubling question is ‘how?’ In the introduction to the theory (and book) Gladwell promises to teach some keys to train the reader on how to better harness the power of the unconscious mind. The promise itself is only ever flirted with through the remainder of the narrative. While Gladwell offers advice on how to frame an environment and cautions to consider, he never defines a ‘training plan’ or any other implementation tool.

# Gained Strategic Advantage

I dislike departing from my previous voice but this segment requires a report on personal application so I digress.

I think the application for me comes from not second-guessing myself. I’m a very analytical person at heart and I like to be able to sit back and puzzle out different alternatives, consequences and benefits. This can make my decision process burdensome, at times. However, I am also a decisive person, based on Carla Fugit’s TriMetrix Assessment. It ranked me high in both the analytical and decisive categories, putting me internally at odds with myself. Blink reinforces that conflict but also reminds me about the idea that, after study and prayer, the gut feeling is probably right.

On the one hand, this is a relief for me with respect to my chosen career path. When I got my offer from Ford, I was excited but felt it was wrong. The more I thought about it, the less-wrong it felt. Still, I knew, deep down, that it wasn’t the right choice. All the analytical signs pointed to ‘yes’ but my unconscious said ‘no.’ I feel like I made the right decision in rejecting the offer, frightening as it has been since then. I also feel like what I’m doing now is what I *should* be doing now. The idea is that I need to be enriching my mind and spirit at all times so that when it comes time to ‘blink,’ I’m ready to act and not to be acted upon.

The other key place where I can apply this concept is in my interpersonal relationships as I begin to network in the publishing industry. I will need to be very careful about the snap judgments I make about the people I meet because I have no idea where my next lead, my next project or my next opportunity will come from. Already, I’ve drummed up some on my own but I’ve had more dropped in my lap than I ever had the initiative to find myself. If I want to keep that trend going, I’ll need to be very careful about how judgmental I tend to be and also the first impressions I give off as a result. If I want to make friends and leverage them in the future, I’ll need to *not* come off as a self-important, cocky, little MBA when I meet people. That will require me to rein in my tendency to quickly categorize and compartmentalize people when I meet them so they can have a chance to prove their true colors. It will be difficult but it’s a task that’s within reach and under my control.

# Future Viability of the Target

In the end, *Blink* is an entertaining but somewhat useless dive into the concept of snap judgments, termed ‘Blinks.’ While the narrative moves at a nice pace and Gladwell displays a great ability to tell stories, there is very little real substance in his writing. Instead, Gladwell writes cyclically, each chapter making the same propositions in the same order as the previous chapter but none of them giving any real focus or purpose to the overall work. This reality is made abundantly clear in the end when he gives an admitted half-answer about the question of when to ‘blink’ and when to use a more standard, more analytical reasoning process. In the end, he brings up a provocative subject but merely presents the data, offering no analysis or explanation or reasons.

In effect, *Blink* becomes a well-written book report on a number of research studies that ‘prove’ common sense while touting how uncommon it is. Gladwell himself confesses, in his afterword to the second edition that *Blink* is “a simple adventure story – a journey into the wonders of our unconscious.” He had no real objective at the time of writing (he has since added a goal post hoc) and, in support of the words of the Cheshire Cat, he got *somewhere*, he just had to keep going long enough.

The praise for the book, and its relation to talent management, would come only from the thoughts the narrative provokes. The presentation of research, couched in effective storytelling, helps to deliver an introspective message. *Blink* makes a reader think about their own biases, stereotypes and prejudices. It helps a reader think about their own process of judgment and the potentially nefarious, hidden effect it is having on their decisions. This would come into play on a range of topics, from hiring and firing decisions to promotion and performance review. However, these points and the introspection they inspire, could have just as easily been conveyed through a 5-6 page article instead of a 276 page book.