

Snap Decisions by Boss are Okay

Susan Pinker
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Dear Susan,

In my work, I am often called upon to provide detailed analyses so that my bosses can decide about business projects. I am meticulous and the answers are usually nuanced rather than clear cut. Nonetheless, my bosses make their decisions quickly based on isolated factors identified in meetings without taking the time to read my analysis. I am not insulted that they don't read my work but I find it weird. These are important decisions that seem to be made in a superficial manner. Should I try to convince them to be more careful?

Yes, But

Dear Yes:

No. Your job is to amass the evidence. Along the way you develop an angle that you express in these meetings – either overtly or in the way you present the facts. You are not a robot. There must be points you choose to emphasize by pulling them out of mountains of conflicting data. Maybe you even jab the air with your finger while you talk. Whether or not they read your report, your interpretation, combined with the bosses' collective experience and motivations ultimately sway them in a deal. Having done the spade work you have an impact on what looks like a snap decision.

Following intuition and being quick to jump is revered in business. To challenge this trend by playing devil's advocate won't score you points right now. Just look at few popular business titles: Jack Welch's *Straight from the Gut*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Confidence*, Marcus Buckingham's *The One Thing You Need to Know*, and Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*. All champion a simple formula for making decisions. It's not only Gladwell's one word title that distills his notion of the virtues of split-second thinking. Consider online publications like *Feed* or *Slate* and magazines like *Simple*,

Wired or Wallpaper. Their names say it all. This less-is-more philosophy has catapulted Gladwell, formerly a mere journalist, into the business stratosphere, where he is now number 27 among The Top 50 Business Gurus, according to Fast Company, and Accenture, the consulting group that did the ranking (G.E.'s Jack Welch lagged behind at number 34 and British business magnate, adventurer and beknighted Richard Branson placed 45th).

If your bosses take your work and jump to conclusions, why resist? Like the Golden Arches or Coco Chanel's little black dress, an uncluttered idea has influence and immediate appeal. Feel free to mention caveats in an aside, but in the final reckoning choose an angle backed up by your research. Then flaunt it like crazy.

Dear Susan:

I am in charge of evaluating the employees in my sector and am considering changes. Should we use one or two grades to evaluate employees? Should there be one for achieving results against objectives and a second for the competencies the person demonstrated, or should everything be results-oriented, as it is now?

Here Come The Judge

Dear Judge:

In a perfect world competence and results would match. There would be no distractions, everyone would get work commensurate with their skills and projects would chug along like the Little Train That Could. But Dorothy, we're not in Kansas anymore. For most employees the outcome of their work is determined by their own labour, to be sure, but also by factors they can't control. To shine your high beam exclusively on results is to punish them for that fact. I've heard about projects that soared until the sponsorship scandal hit, about teams reaching targets only to have their objectives changed at the 11th hour, about research budgets suddenly slashed despite stellar results. And that's just this month's gossip.

The point is that ignoring competence in favour of results alone will restrict your field of vision. You'll reward the apparent successes but you won't learn a thing from hidden scores, near misses or outright failures, a phenomenon called selection bias. That's when you look at a slice of information that's not representative and assume you're getting the whole story.

The most famous example of selection bias is a study of WW 11 aircraft that were badly scarred by enemy fire. When examining returning planes, experts first assumed that the most seriously damaged parts should be reinforced in airplanes scheduled for future runs. That was where the aircraft were most vulnerable, they thought. But an American statistician, Abraham Wald, suggested that the least damaged parts should be better protected. Those showed where the planes that *didn't* return got hit. To look at only the success stories missed a critical piece of the picture.

Selection bias will sway your evaluations if you pre-select your objectives and measure staff against that one yardstick. You'll miss important information. Instead, when evaluating staff, assess results – not just successes but near and complete misses – and competencies separately using more than one lens. That's one aspect of 360 degree reviews. And don't forget to meet with each employee fact to face to find out how close they are to meeting not just organizational objectives but their own goals. That's when you'll find out that they may be doing fine by your scorecard, but they could be flying longer and farther than you ever expected.

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