



Becoming an Expert Learner Part 3A: Paying Attention to Your Cognitive Biases and Shortcuts

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“Finding a short cut is usually a good thing, but in [many] cases the short cuts serve to render our thinking inaccessible to correction; they lead us to a quite different destination from that at which we intended to arrive. What is worse is that we don’t even realize that we have arrived *somewhere else*. In good faith, we think we have really arrived at our destination and solved the problem put to us. We reason in an intuitive, impromptu fashion, and are often convinced that we have really reasoned. Hence, we insist on the accuracy of our intuitions and conclusions.”

— Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini,
Inevitable Illusions (1994)

In his synthesis of studies in which managers were observed intensively, Henry Mintzberg (1990) has found that “Managers seem to cherish *soft* information, especially gossip, hearsay, and speculation. Why? The reason is its timeliness; today’s gossip may be tomorrow’s fact.” He also states that managers often do not record what they hear. They

seem to keep all of this information in their heads, which might lead to their inability to delegate tasks. In this article, I present the argument that these managers’ reasons for cherishing *soft* information has more to do with the fact that they are operating under the influence of cognitive (thinking) biases and shortcuts, which, in turn, cause them to make poorly informed decisions and to take ineffective actions. In the next article, I focus on how teams also operate from cognitive biases and shortcuts, and the effect that these have on a team’s performance.

One must be able to identify and determine how biases and shortcuts operate at an individual level, and how they affect the individual’s everyday actions in the world. One of the best ways that I have found to examine a person’s cognitive biases and shortcuts is to use the *Learning Styles Questionnaire*, an instrument developed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1995). Individuals complete this questionnaire, and, through a process of validation, arrive at a profile that illustrates their orientation towards learning, decision making, and problem solving. The profile is based on a model that Honey and Mumford call *The Learning Cycle*. *The Learning Cycle* has four stages:

- **Stage 1:** Having an experience (taking action)
- **Stage 2:** Reviewing the experience (gathering information)
- **Stage 3:** Concluding from the experience (making sense of the experience)

- **Stage 4:** Planning the next steps (deciding and planning) These stages form a cycle of learning, decision making, and problem solving. The profile shows the stages in which an individual demonstrates cognitive biases and shortcuts.

For example, Mark is a manager. His profile shows biases (strengths) in stages 1 and 4, and shortcuts (weaknesses) in stages 2 and 3. This means that when Mark is making a decision or solving a problem:

- He uses information at hand and does not search out new information (stage 2).
- He quickly draws conclusions about the situation (stage 3).
- He makes a decision and plans to implement his decision (stage 4).
- He implements the decision, rather than delegating the implementation (stage 1).

Mark’s shortcuts in stages 2 and 3 may cause him to believe that he has enough information, and has drawn the correct conclusions, when, in fact, he has paid little attention to these processes. To others, Mark is seen as a *doer*, someone who is quick to make decisions, to solve problems, and to take actions. Mark may be seen as impatient with the reflection process. The result is that Mark inadvertently compromises his effectiveness in managing both people and work.

David Perkins’ research (1995) has shown that people develop experiential intelligence naturally throughout their lives (**InfoMine**, Vol. 3, No. 4). However, people do not develop reflective intelligence

naturally. The reason for this is that *reflective intelligence* occurs only at a conscious level, while experiential intelligence occurs at an unconscious level (i.e., automatic). Since it is easier for individuals to gain access to that which is automatic, they will use their experiential intelligence without any analysis. In the example above, Mark is probably not aware that he is shortcutting or biasing any learning orientation. In his mind, Mark is making informed decisions and taking effective actions, when, in fact, his thinking may be flawed. In order to become an expert learner, Mark needs to think about how he biases and shortcuts each stage of *The Learning Cycle*, and how this affects his decisions and actions.

When individuals tap into reflective intelligence, they are able to increase their capacity for solving complex problems, making informed decisions, taking effective action, and generating new knowledge about a complex world. Too often, however, people are not aware of their ability to tap into this resource, or they find that the effort required to tap into reflective intelligence *takes too much time*. As a result, people often make hasty decisions and take actions without considering the impact and consequences of those actions over time. They jump to conclusions by neglecting important evidence that contradicts their judgement, and perhaps create and/or worsen the problem through reliance only on their experiential intelligence.

Problems occur when an individual's experiential intelligence alone does not provide solutions for new situations. Problems may also occur when individuals rely only on their experiential intelligence to solve day-to-day problems, without

reflecting on possible alternatives. Without a firm foundation in using reflective intelligence, individuals cannot gain access to it, and must rely solely on their experiential intelligence, which may not meet the needs of the new situation. However, according to Perkins (1995), when people rely on their experiential intelligence, or intuition, they are unaware that "Intuitions can be unreliable. Good intuitions depend on our having built up the experiences."

One might think that, if people are smarter, more educated, and more experienced, they might be more able to use reflective intelligence. This is not the case. In fact, according to Perkins, being smarter, with a higher IQ, actually increases the chances for the biases and shortcuts to occur. "We found that participants with a higher IQ tended to produce considerably more elaborate arguments on their own side of the case, but not on the other side of the case." Argyris (1991) found the same thing occurring in his work with managers and senior managers. The higher the status in the organizational hierarchy, or the higher the level of education, the more likely managers were to display arguments (biases) on their own side of the case. In other words, having a higher IQ and/or a higher position or status may undermine one's ability to use reflective intelligence.

According to Mintzberg, "managers' effectiveness is significantly influenced by their insight into their own work." In other words, managers need to become expert learners. To do this, managers need to become aware of their learning orientation profiles (biases, shortcuts), and the impact of their profiles on the quality of their decisions and actions. Managers need to understand the difficulty of becoming more effective,

both in being aware of their biases and shortcuts, and in being able to give each orientation of the learning cycle the attention that it requires. Managers need to use reflective intelligence strategies that help them to use their brain pattern-recognition systems to their advantage, in order to increase their learnable intelligence (**InfoMine** series, Vol. 3, Nos. 4-6 and Vol. 4, Nos. 1-6).

Finally, managers need to learn that their insistence on using the excuse of *having no time* causes them to become less intelligent over time. The more that managers accept the cognitive illusion of *having no time*, the more they rely on their cognitive shortcuts to deal with the complexity around them. The more that they rely on the cognitive shortcuts, the more they produce problems. This over-reliance on cognitive illusions is what produces the ultimate illusion of *having no time*.

"The essence of management is defining and solving problems. Managers, for good or ill, depending on their level of problem-solving skill, are problem managers. Helping [managers] understand their learning styles can enhance managerial performance by identifying their underdeveloped problem-solving skills and devising a strategy to manage them."

— David Kolb, *LSI Learning Style Inventory User's Guide* (1986)

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