

# Intuition

## in Decision-Making



Are you missing one of the most powerful decision-making tools of all?

By Erika Oliver

This past year I worked with the director of a nonprofit program operating under the umbrella of a larger organization. She needed to decide whether to continue under the larger organization or apply for her own 501(c)(3) status. She consulted with similar programs, read books, and talked to professionals. Still unable to decide, she formed an advisory team to look at the situation from all angles.

The advisors confirmed the results of her research: Breaking away as an independent organization was too risky. It was better to

stay under the protective arm of the larger organization.

With all this information and advice, she still couldn't make a decision. Watching her go through this decision process was painful, as she suffered sleepless nights and countless days deliberating what was best for the mission.

After yet another meeting to discuss the pros and cons of both choices, I asked to see her alone in her office. Taking a quarter from my wallet, I told her, "Heads, you stay with the umbrella organization. Tails, you become a separate entity."

She laughed as I threw the coin into the air. The coin was covered in my hand when I asked her, "What do you want it to be?"

With no hesitation, she said, "Tails."

As decision-makers, we often know exactly which option to choose but feel uncomfortable because our choice must be ade-

quately justified. We forge ahead because our pro-and-con list shows more pros than cons. We look to past experiences, other people's opinions, and cultural norms instead of our own internal barometer. Later, our inner voice reminds us that we knew deep down the decision was a mistake.

Intuition lets us speed-sort information.

### What Is Intuition?

Intuition is a valid source for making decisions. It lets us speed-sort information and make connections before reason can assemble data. It makes sense of the millions of pieces of information we take in to create an idea, make a decision, or have an inspiration.

Intuition isn't new, but it's newly recognized as an important component of decision-making.

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Deciding on something like how to structure a new program requires a glimpse into the future where anything is possible.

Research shows that deductive thinking (linear, logical reasoning) and intuition are two sides of the same coin. Each is equally crucial.

Reasoning considers what we consciously know, such as facts, figures, and past experiences. The problem with using reasoning alone is that we never have all the information. We're limited by our perceptions and inability to predict the future. Intuition is necessary for the unconscious compilation of our internal raw data. Deciding on something like how to structure a new program requires facts, but it also requires a glimpse into the future where anything is possible.

### What Are the Implications for Your Organization?

For nonprofit leaders, the importance of intuition in decision-making is encouraging. Nonprofits have been pressured to be more "businesslike" and to operate more like for-profits. This is often a good idea but not at the expense of what makes nonprofits so great – the ability to respond quickly and creatively to social needs. Intuition is central to our missions, resourcefulness, and passion for important work. Intuition helps us reach people who seem unreachable and solve problems that appear unsolvable. And even better, it's the combination of reasoning and intuition that results in the best decisions!

The nonprofit environment abounds with intuitive thinking and action. All nonprofit initiatives begin with an idea of "the right thing to do." A problem presents itself, and someone is compelled beyond logic to fix it. Nonprofit leaders are masters of finding scarce resources to accomplish mighty goals. Intuition plays a vital role in choosing the right collaboration partners, launching new programs, and selecting the best communication sources to share our missions.

The Logic Model evaluation tool, required by more and more funders, is a good example of using both



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logic and intuition. The Logic Model requires reporting numbers in the form of outputs (reasoning) but then goes further and asks the organization to connect outputs to outcomes (intuition). Outcomes are an opportunity to express real changes in behavior, skills, and culture. Reporting outcomes can feel difficult because it requires intuition, and the intuitive part of our decision-making isn't as well developed as the logical part.

### How Can You Increase Your Intuitive Capacity?

Most of us have highly developed deductive reasoning because we were trained to use a linear decision-making model throughout our schooling. Our culture strongly supports this method by reinforcing lists, facts, figures, and proof.

You need to make a concerted effort to balance this form of knowing with your intuitive side. Strengthen your intuition with these steps:

#### Trust yourself.

First, make the commitment to incorporate intuition into your decisions. Be willing to trust your gut feelings. Realize that these feelings aren't irrational. Rather, they come from your inner ability to compile many sources of information without consciously knowing how you're reaching your conclusion.

#### Pay attention.

Determine what your intuition sounds like by listening to yourself. Does intuition show itself as a voice inside your head, a feeling in your stomach, or a sense of something being right or wrong? Look back at times when you "just knew" and remember what it felt like.

#### Nurture your creativity.

Intuition doesn't show itself under rigid circumstances. That's why you often wake up in the morning with a new idea or think of something in the shower. Stimulate your imagination with hobbies you enjoy, such as cooking, jogging, or playing chess. Develop your artistic side by drawing, singing, writing, or engaging in other activities that allow self-expression.

#### Use visualization.

Next time you face a decision or problem, visualize a variety of solutions in as much detail as possible, and check to see how your body is responding. Are you smiling, relaxed, and excited about the possibilities? Or are you tense, with a sick feeling in your stomach?

Visualization is a powerful way to see the outcome, because you can experience how you really feel about each choice. The trick is to listen, have faith that your intuition is on to something, and heed its advice.

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#### Practice.

When my family goes to the grocery store, we take turns guessing what the bill will be. Our shopping goes like this: no list, can't remember what we need, four people in different aisles gathering items and throwing them in the cart. How easy would it be to estimate the bill just before check-out using reason alone?

Logic can't assimilate that quickly, but intuition is amazing. My son

has been within 47 cents of the correct total, and we're all surprisingly accurate. Best of all, our guesses get closer each time as our confidence increases.

How does this work? Our brains are processing, comparing, and counting all the time. Usually we don't listen because we can't believe we could know this information without a calculator or a formal reasoning method. Listening to ourselves and trusting what we hear will bring remarkably accurate information.

Try the grocery-store game yourself, and think of other ways to test your intuition. Such activities are fun, safe ways to exercise your intuitive muscles and learn to trust your internal voice.

### Create an intuitive culture.

Develop an organizational culture that encourages intuition. Try visualizing as a group. Support decisions without requiring mountains of "proof." Begin with small decisions and, as people come to accept the intuitive process, move to more important or risky decisions.

Equipped with reasoning skills and a strong, identifiable intuition, your organization will boost its decision-making capacity. Your organization's mission and vision are powerful tools that will be enhanced by incorporating intuition into your decision process.

### Postscript: Was It the Right Decision?

After realizing that she knew the right answer the moment the quarter was in the air, the program director felt the first peace she'd had in two years. She assembled a highly skilled working board, filed the paperwork with the IRS, and has attracted her first large grant.

As she moves forward, resources and opportunities present themselves, and it's clear she did the right thing. Now she wonders why she didn't listen to her gut feeling in the beginning. ■

### Resources

Hollingsworth, A.T., "Creativity in Nonprofit Organizations: Preparing for the Future," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 7, No. 3.

Lauer, Larry, "Using Your Organization's Culture to Build Productivity and Reputation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 6.

Lemberg, Paul, "Seven Ways to Be Unreasonable," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 5.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members).

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*Erika Oliver (269-760-6325, [erikaoliver@prodigy.net](mailto:erikaoliver@prodigy.net), [www.erikaoliver.com](http://www.erikaoliver.com)) has many years of experience working with national and local nonprofits in the areas of communication, leadership development, and fundraising. Erika has many more tricks up her sleeve to help your organization hear and trust its intuitive voice.*

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