

Chapter 1

The Forces Behind the Invisible Game

A professor at the University of Växjö asked over 200 managers at Swedish companies how they make decisions. A small majority of managers claimed they relied on their hunches, with 32% saying they decided intuitively and 19% according to their feelings. Some 26% said they decided situationally with a ‘focus on detail’, and 23% said their decisions were analytically driven.¹

These results are intriguing, because they mask a fact that helped inspire us to write this book. We are all players in the Invisible Game without necessarily being aware of the response patterns hard-wired into our brains. How actively and how well we play the Invisible Game, however, is a much different story. We cannot opt out, but at the same time, we are not powerless. Far from it! Starting with the building blocks of situational awareness, we will codify the behaviours deeply ingrained in each of us and show you how to use them to your advantage.

The foundation of situational awareness rests on a small number of vitally important behavioural, psychological, and neuroscientific concepts

that every salesperson needs to master: the concept of System 1 and System 2 thinking, the concept of relativity, and the concept of anchoring. Understanding and building on these concepts is your first step to develop your own new success model for your negotiations and their outcomes.

System 1 and System 2: Partners, not rivals

Before we get to specific selling situations, we need to take a step back and understand how our brains operate. Our brains have evolved to protect us, guide us, and help us solve problems in adversarial situations.

The starting point is the way that Kahneman distinguishes between fast thinking and slow thinking: 'I describe mental life by the metaphor of two agents, called System 1 and System 2, which respectively produce fast and slow thinking.'²

System 2

As twenty-first-century professionals, we all recognize and value Kahneman's System 2 thinking. It is the collective term for how our mind processes data, picks the numbers, juggles and cross-checks them, and then assesses all of the 'on-paper' stuff: the economic and financial impact of proposals and counterproposals. System 2 serves as our sophisticated problem solver in the Visible Game. It produces good results in complex situations that require analysis and broader, more creative, thinking. You rely on System 2 if you are looking for an innovative idea, for a way to see connections between seemingly disparate things, or for an 'out-of-the-box' answer. System 2 works well with open-ended questions, where the answers can be surprising or ambiguous, or become better with time and critical thinking.

System 2 is what guides salespeople as they ponder, draft, rewrite, and edit a lengthy proposal or response. System 2 also has an on-off

switch. Disengaging System 2 is what the Americans called ‘vegging’ or what the Dutch have started to call ‘niksen’, the art of doing absolutely nothing with the goal of recharging. This disengagement is important, because System 2 exhausts itself quickly and needs to recharge frequently. It explains why creative teams need frequent breaks or changes of scenery in order to bring in new stimulation or allow thoughts to develop further.

Situation 1.1 provides a look at our first real-life situation, one familiar to anyone who has sat in a conference room during a presentation.

Situation 1.1: Time out! Their eyes are glazing over

As the bright sun warmed up in the crowded conference room, you could feel the energy rapidly disappear. The clock seemed frozen at 1:45 pm. You clicked to another slide, your 37th in this deck, and then blanked out for a moment. What was your point again? You weren't sure anymore, and if you had asked the audience, most would also have been just as clueless. The in-person attendees sat as if they were in suspended animation. The folks on the Zoom call did their best to stay on camera and look attentive. You didn't have the next 'bio break' scheduled for another 45 minutes, because lunch wasn't too long ago. What's going on?

We have all been in these situations during very dense PowerPoint presentations. We all tend to exhaust our audience with too much information, too many words, and too many slides. When people reach a saturation point for information, they become restless, upset, tense, and tired.

What is the science behind this? System 2's effectiveness and attention span erode quickly. It is hard to digest information properly on the fly, especially after the amount of information we have received has exceeded our saturation point. Your brain needs the time to absorb and process information, reset emotions, locate potential misinterpretations, and avoid overreactions. To accomplish that, you need an opportunity to step back and interact with others, to paraphrase what you have heard, review your notes, and maybe ask yourself some challenging questions.

What is our recommendation? The brain – not the bladder – should be the biological driver of when you need breaks and how long they should last. Timeouts should not only be frequent, but also purposeful so that people can absorb and process what they have heard so far. Prepare yourself to see people’s attention take a first dip after 15 to 20 minutes.

We advise taking a break every 45 to 60 minutes. In our own experience, we know how challenging it can be to adopt such a best practice, especially if you are expected to squeeze two days of content into one day. At some point, people need real timeouts with a change of pace, scenery, or format. Working sessions are for information hunting and gathering, but you need breaks to digest all that mental food and stay on track.

We also consider timeouts to be very valuable tactical manoeuvres in any complex business negotiation for the same reasons that they are valuable in team sports. They allow a team to re-group when things start to get out of hand. We recommend agreeing in advance with your customer party on timeout opportunities that allows each party to withdraw to separate conference rooms or even a dedicated WhatsApp chat. The intent is for your group to have pre-planned opportunities to realign or simply to allow everyone’s mental systems to re-calibrate.

But System 2 is not the set of thought processes in our brains that enable professional referees – or anyone else – to make split-second, high-stakes decisions with confidence. That primary thought process is known as System 1.

System 1

The idea behind System 1 is that humans have a separate mode of operation that works automatically and comprises the primal mental functions of our minds.

From an evolutionary standpoint, the responses generated by System 1 are potent and effective. Otherwise, humans would have become extinct eons ago. So much of what we think and do – or don’t do – runs on autopilot. Have you ever shown up somewhere by car, but you can’t remember

much of the drive at all? Have you seen an empty bag of crisps or cookies, but you cannot recall finishing it? Those are just two of a nearly infinite number of ways that System 1 keeps us going and keeps us safe. It is an enormous evolutionary strength that allows us to do many things at one time.

These functions are hard-wired into our brains to such an extent that every sales negotiation takes place between cavepeople at some pre-conscious or subconscious level. No matter how much we try to disguise or suppress these primal mental functions, they will inevitably exert their influence.

System 1 produces quick decisions with good results in business-as-usual situations. It helps us to respond in situations that tend to be information poor. System 1 responds well to closed questions, such as yes/no questions or simple multiple choice.

Think of social media usage as a helpful illustration. System 1 is what leads us to immediately tap an emoji to like or dislike a post. In contrast to System 2, however, System 1 does not have an on-off switch. It only has a dimmer switch. It is not only frighteningly fast, but also *always* on. You can't pause the Invisible Game or decide not to play. There is no airplane mode.

The journey to better sales performance is not about feeding System 2 – neither yours nor your audience's – an overwhelming amount of data and information. If the discussion devolves into two teams trying to outdo each other in terms of System 2, then the negotiation has stalled. If System 2 alone could resolve a negotiation, we would no longer need salespeople and could turn the entire sales department over to artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms. What accelerates and enhances the journey to better sales performance is the addition of contextual

references that feed, sharpen, and improve the instant judgment provided by System 1.

The risks and benefits of System 1 thinking

The evolution of System 1 has made us very efficient and effective in many ways, but it comes at a cost. It assumes a certain level of environmental consistency and stability that is often not truly there. If we aren't careful, others can capitalize on those illusions and the speed of System 1's responses. The upside is that System 1 is an equalizer. The more we understand that we are much more similar than we think, the more we can learn how to use System 1 to our own advantage. Instead of fighting hunches and signals, you facilitate them and learn to trust them because you have expanded your knowledge base, the well of accomplishments and experiences that System 1 draws on. This is comparable to the way we train System 2 through traditional educational approaches.

Another characteristic of System 1 is that it has neither the ability nor the time to construct a lie. No matter how finely tuned someone's System 2 is, it cannot prevent System 1 from reacting authentically to any given situation in the blink of an eye. We often draw the comparison between the race car and the snail. For almost any question, the race car (System 1) gets to the finish line labelled 'answer' long before System 2 even gets a chance to react.

What does this mean for the salesperson? It means that any instant reaction from a negotiation partner has a high chance of being authentic. The more attuned and attentive someone is to observe these reactions, the more likely they are to detect unequivocal clues that would otherwise be hidden in micro-expressions, micro-behaviours, or a seemingly innocuous Freudian slip.

Once your situational awareness starts to reveal these subtle System 1 signals, you will be surprised how obvious they can be and how often they

appear. Gaby has experienced situations in which her negotiation partner said 'I really like your offer' while noticeably shaking his head at the same time. The purchaser was apparently oblivious to his 'no' gesture, but Gaby wasn't. It compelled her to check on her team's position and, indeed, she found out that a competitor of hers had just submitted a new offer that the buyer found attractive. By recognizing and then acting on the 'no' gesture, Gaby and her team modified their approach and ultimately outmanoeuvred the other bidder.

Here is a simple exercise to allow you to practise recognizing these gestures and improve your own situational awareness. The next time you receive a verbal compliment – someone likes your product, your suit, or your pet – try to make a conscious effort to observe what the person's head does. Even the slightest nod confirms the compliment. Once you start making these types of observations, you will be surprised how often a positive message is accompanied by a 'no' gesture, a headshake, which means there is a conflict between words (System 2) and what the person really feels (System 1). The gesture does not always mean the person is outright lying to you. There are no such rigid, black-and-white interpretations. There are also cultural differences to take into account. In India, for example, the headshake may have several different meanings depending on its form or context.

But we can say with confidence that the gesture in Western cultures does indicate that something is off. If you are in a sales negotiation, it means that you should not take praise at face value or assume success. Your System 1 is warning you to step back and find out what is causing the discrepancy between what you heard and what you saw.

To test this and get more practice in a no-pressure environment, keep an eye out for how actors and actresses deliver the line 'I love you' in a movie or a TV show. When things build up to that romantic moment when one character confesses to have fallen in love with the other person, watch how the person's head moves when they utter the words. Often you will



notice that they will shake their head slightly, for a fraction of a second. Even Academy Award winning actors can't avoid that tell. The culprit is System 1, which cannot suppress the fact that the words and the emotions are artificial.

Recognizing the power of System 1

The conventional wisdom views the dichotomy between System 1 and System 2 as a battle between the irrational and the rational. That makes sense from the perspective of the cultured twenty-first-century professional, who would rather view the 'animal' side through the 'civilized' lens rather than vice versa. However, that perspective is flawed, because it evaluates

System 1 through the lens of System 2. In our view, *both* sides are rational in their own contexts. Both make intrinsic sense, and neither should be subordinated to the other. Both therefore need to be understood on their own terms and placed on equal footing when you are in a negotiation.

We believe that the autopilot of System 1 is not only undervalued, but massively undertrained. There are huge differences in the quality and reliability of a person's autopilot. It is not an 'either you have it or you don't' thing. The better your pre-programming is, the better your System 1 autopilot will perform. But most salespeople don't focus on pre-programming and refining this function. They don't realize how important it is to manage the experiences, accomplishments, and flows of information that fuel and fine-tune their autopilot.

Getting System 1 the attention it deserves is often an uphill battle. Witness how companies construct and conduct their sales trainings, which tend to emphasize System 2 and gloss over System 1. Companies err on the side of more facts, more data, and more hard analyses because data is the coin of the realm in today's digital age. This bias in favour of System 2 also manifests itself in the labels 'hard' and 'soft' skills, a distinction that belittles System 1. The fact that supposedly 'soft' skills defy easy quantification and black-and-white comparisons does not make them less powerful or more difficult to master than the hard skills that companies prize.

The food or fuel for System 2 is data and analyses. The food or fuel for System 1 is exposure and experience. Expanding System 1's knowledge base in this way is a modern expression of a primitive survival skill, from a time when automatic or intuitive behaviours meant the difference between life and death. Learning from successful experiences is a skill, even if the experiences are simulated. That's how professional athletes, musicians, and other people with superior performance gain an edge through practice.

In 2019, the Washington Nationals baseball team won the Major League Baseball World Series, and outfielder Adam Eaton had one of the

most important hits in the final game. How he accomplished that feat in a stressful, high-stakes situation is not only an example of System 1 overriding System 2 at a decisive moment, but also an example of how important time commitments and repetition are to training your personal autopilot.

Eaton practices hitting a ball off a batting tee every day, rather than having someone throw him a ball. And he makes the drill as hard as possible.³

‘High-inside tee is an uncomfortable drill, but it teaches body control’, Eaton explained. ‘I work on this every day.’

That hard work paid off handsomely with a contribution to a championship. In the live action of the do-or-die final game of the World Series, Eaton saw a pitch coming and told himself ‘No, don’t swing!’ But System 1 kicked in immediately. Eaton swung the bat and got a successful hit.

‘It was kind of cool to have a “blackout moment” where your body just takes over’, Eaton said. ‘It’s a beautiful thing and you think “how did I do that?” but there was hardly any thought process.’

Without his daily training, it is doubtful that Eaton would have had his ‘blackout moment’ at that critical time.

Achieving this well-coordinated combination between System 1 and System 2 takes training. Like muscle or endurance training, it becomes stronger and more effective the more frequently it is practised and honed.

Extending the analogy from sports to sales, we recommend you constantly push the boundaries of your own knowledge base. Seek to break your habits. System 1 needs more experiences and impressions to process, so that it has a greater array of images, patterns, and feelings to rely on when it makes snap judgments. You tip the scales in your favour when you have a greater set of experiences to base your responses on.

Learning to sell with System 1 and System 2 is like being ambidextrous. Suppressing System 1 while emphasizing System 2 is like playing tennis only with your forehand and or playing basketball by dribbling only with your right hand. You become predictable and easier to defend, because the other team can overplay against you and knows that your options are limited.

In other words, a key realization for situational awareness is that the processing of a situation is not a black-and-white case of only System 1 or System 2. The reality is that many decisions involve both sides working together. Think back to situations when you and your colleagues have conducted data analyses, did some scenario planning, and decided on an option, only to have one person have the courage and forethought to speak up and say 'That just doesn't feel right.' Those reactions deserve full exploration, yet in many cases, people tend to downplay them or dismiss them entirely. Conversely, many successful System 1 responses – such as Eaton's hit in Game 7 – occur because lengthy periods of analysis preceded them before the do-or-die situation arose. System 1 and System 2 should be treated as equal partners rather than as opposing forces or in a subordinate relationship to each other.

In negotiations, we see star performers excel in both areas. Their success depends on their ability to respond quickly and confidently in highly stressful situations. It also depends on their ability to distinguish between the authentic and the insincere, between true and false, and between threats (requiring a defensive response) and opportunities (requiring an offensive response). They outperform their negotiation partners through their excellence in both System 1 and System 2 processes. They learn to tap into the strengths of both systems and train their intuitive behaviours so that their responses are intentional rather than purely reflexive. The challenge for salespeople lies in deriving the greatest combined benefits from each force so that they can win both the Invisible Game and the Visible Game.

