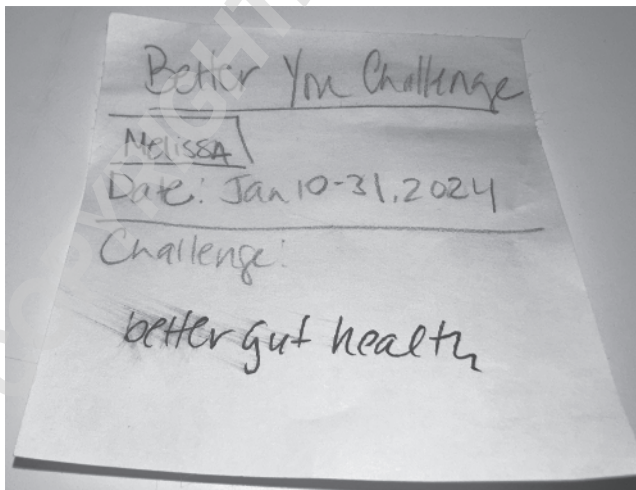


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Trusting Your Gut Embracing Intuition as a Leadership Tool



JANUARY 10, 2024, is a date I will always remember.

I was jolted out of my sleep in excruciating pain. Leading up to that time, my inner voice had been telling me “something is not okay,” and for the weeks I laid in a hospital bed across the country from my home, I hadn’t even remembered the Post-it Note I had written just weeks earlier.

It was a note I wrote with my family on December 25, 2023, as we openly spoke about a “Better You Challenge” we would do together. One person said daily planks, another said she will brush her dogs’ teeth daily, another said hydrate more regularly. My note said, “Better Gut Health” and I admittedly wasn’t sure how I would accomplish this, but I had planned on a month-long cleanse, starting on January 10, 2024.

Starting that cleanse took on a whole new meaning on January 10, 2024, when I was jolted out of my sleep at three in the morning, rushed to the ER just two hours later, and underwent emergency surgery by 1 p.m. because my intestines had twisted 365 degrees, and I was hours away from going into septic shock.

My woman’s intuition had been speaking to me for over a year, and I wasn’t fully listening. All I knew was that something was off and what was manifesting inside was getting louder and louder.

Often described as the ability to instinctively understand without conscious reasoning, intuition has long been undervalued, or not fully believed in modern society. However, through real-world narratives and scientific insights, you can see how it serves as a profound force that shapes decisions, fosters resilience, and transforms lives. This chapter explores that impact, interweaving personal stories like mine with studies from psychology, neuroscience, and emotional intelligence. From the duality of cognitive processes explained by William James to the rapid decision-making capabilities highlighted by Malcolm Gladwell, intuition can be a dynamic and indispensable tool to harness. Paired with practices like mindfulness, breathwork, and heightened emotional intelligence, “trusting your gut” can offer a pathway to greater self-awareness, creativity, and purpose in both personal and professional domains. In this chapter we will explore the correlation between trusting your gut and intuition, the role of emotional intelligence, why we often ignore the signs, and how to break those habits.

“I need a timeout in life,” wrote Shirley Ramos Roseman, author of *Thoughts of a Butterfly*, on a piece of paper in 2009, four days before she had a stroke at the age of 29.

When we explore the power of intuition, it can often feel abstract. By studying both time and history, we find numerous demonstrations that intuition exists in a very real way. In Shirley’s case her gut and her inner self were speaking to her, not so dissimilarly to how mine was speaking to me. On the outside she was a burgeoning mortgage broker, she was social, thriving, and in her stride, but inside she very much knew something was off and her body was asking her for a break.

Shirley would later learn that she had a hole in her heart and that a blood clot traveled through that hole and made its way to her brain. She’d had a stroke. She was fortunate to be awakened by the tireless ringing of her phone as her mom frantically looked for her when she didn’t show up for her brother’s party. But Shirley’s recovery wasn’t seamless, and she needed to evaluate and make life adjustments. While she didn’t understand how to decipher what her inner self was whispering to her pre-stroke, what it did open was an awakened spirituality. It opened a closer connection with her thoughts and her actions. It led her to write feverously each day, to slow down, and it taught her to listen more intently to what her mind and body were telling her.

Emotional Intelligence and Intuition

The word “intuition” comes from the Latin *intuir*, which means “knowledge from within.” It is often defined as the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning. It involves quick judgments based on prior experiences and knowledge.^{1,2} The power of intuition is supported by a blended combination of psychological insights, neuroscience, and real-world applications, and our openness to receive and listen to the thoughts that penetrate our minds. It takes not only an awareness but a certain level of emotional intelligence and human cognition to trust the energy.

While it was once shrugged upon and dismissed by scientists, the opportunity of intuition is being embraced more widely today. Through

the advent of social media demystifying what intuition means and the sharing of more use cases and examples (some from those as young as three years old), there is a growing openness to the dialogue around the power of intuition. Scientists who study cognitive behaviors have begun to think of intuition *as a set of nonconscious cognitive and affective processes*. While the outcome of these processes is often difficult to articulate and is not based on deliberate thinking, the processes have validity and have been proven to be effective.

If we look at the studies of Malcolm Gladwell,³ his research suggests that intuitive decisions can be made in seconds, *if we allow it*. And those decisions can be as accurate as analytical ones in certain situations, especially when under pressure, based on one's subconscious processing of information—tapping back on prior experiences, knowledge, and the gut. Through his study and analysis, Gladwell suggests that our brains are capable of synthesizing vast amounts of data rapidly, allowing us to recognize patterns and draw conclusions without conscious deliberation.

Couple Gladwell's studies with the insights of William James,⁴ a philosopher and psychologist who was instrumental in establishing Harvard's psychology department in the late 1800s, who believed that cognition takes place in duality—on one end of the spectrum it takes place in an associative manner that is more spontaneous and "effortless," and on the other side it takes place in a rational manner that is analytical with concerted effort and more methodical. He viewed intuition as a way of knowing that bypasses analytical reasoning, allowing individuals to grasp concepts or truths quickly and often without conscious awareness. James also suggested that intuition is informed by past experiences and emotions, enabling people to make judgments based on a holistic perception of a situation. This of course begs larger questions when we see intuition displayed in very young children, but also validates the possibilities of its innate possibilities.

In his work, James also argues that this instinctive knowledge can be as valid as rational thought and recognizes intuition as a powerful cognitive tool that complements rational processes in navigating life's complexities.

However, to embrace intuition, it is not experiences and knowledge alone that enable the action of acting upon it. It also takes the maturation of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is linked to the act of intuitive decision-making. People who demonstrate high EQ are often more attuned to their feelings and those of others, enhancing their intuitive capabilities.⁵ It has been shown that women tend to be more attuned to our EQ than our male counterparts, as we tend to score higher than men in areas of empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility.⁶ But still we too often dismiss or suppress our intuition capabilities.

Neuroscience of Intuition and Why We Ignore the Signs

In my case, my intuition and my EQ were telling me I was not myself, yet I suppressed both. And if I listened with more acceptance and urgency, I could have been making wiser decisions for my well-being sooner. Why does this happen? Is ignoring the signs more human nature than not?

Scientifically, the right-brain and the left-brain relationship pulls on our tensions of logic and creativity. Studies in neuroscience suggest that intuitive thinking is associated with the brain's ability to process information unconsciously, often utilizing the left hemisphere (logic) more than the right (creativity).⁷ In his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Damasio explores the interplay between emotion and cognition in decision-making and the tension between the right and left brain.

It's not a perfect balance, and depending on our natural affinities and tendencies, some of us are more naturally predisposed to logic and some to creativity. Those more heavily weighted in creativity have a more organic openness to exploration and acceptance of the less tangible and therefore embrace new experiences with more comfort. For those who live more in logic, the unknown and the seemingly inexplicable are harder to grasp and accept. When we have more freedom from logic, we are more likely to trust in and react from intuition, or what may feel like more impulse decisions.

Let's put this in practice. Have you had a jittery feeling in the morning but were not sure what you felt so anxious about? Have you ever felt more “off” in your day and instead of pausing to say, “Maybe there is a reason I keep dropping things, or tripping, or missed that train,” you ignored the situation? Have you ever had something stop you in your tracks from moving forward but you couldn't understand what was causing such hesitation? Personally, I have felt all those at various points, and more often than not I can trace those feelings to a subsequent “event.” Once, while I was shopping for a new pair of shoes, a woman stole my bag, which held my wallet and numerous personal items. Another time, I missed a stabbing I would have otherwise walked in on had I not missed my train. Sounds crazy but both are factual occurrences that happened on the same days I felt all those uneasy feelings and unexplained jitters prior to the actual event.

I consider myself to be a fairly creative spirit, but I definitely have a pragmatic approach. Sometimes creativity and spontaneity win, but from time to time logic leaves me overanalyzing a situation and it pauses my ability to “trust my gut” and embrace my intuition. Sometimes logic paralyzes my ability to decode what my signs of intuition are trying to tell me. Or sometimes I simply deprioritize the importance of listening to what my inner sense is telling me. Nowadays, I try to accept the free flowing more openly and allow it to let me see what I may not otherwise be able to see.

A Look at Mindfulness and Intuition

For Shirley, whom I introduced earlier in this chapter, her near-death experience reacquainted her with her relationship with intuition. In her journey of acceptance and recovery, she began reevaluating life, her connection with nature and with the elements, and became more open to the energy around her. She started journaling daily, worked with a medium as she embarked on her journey to start a family by studying her body and fertility, and found ways to clear out her mental clutter and find a state of presence. In doing this, she found numerous connections between the unconscious mind and true, tangible outcomes and life events.

“We can’t always change what’s happening around us, but we can change what happens within us.”

—Andy Puddicombe, Headspace co-founder⁸

There are a number of ways to embrace mindfulness, and over time those practices will open a deeper relationship with gratitude and ultimately lead to a greater acceptance of the possibilities of an intuitive mind. One avenue toward a mindfulness practice is through our relationship with nature.

Making space for time in nature fires up synapses that we often don’t even realize have stopped snapping. (We’ll explore this further in Chapter 7.) Whether it’s starting by making space to see a sunrise or sunset (my personal favorite), embarking on a walk down a nature trail, or sitting next to a pond and hearing the sounds of running water—finding our space with nature allows in a quietness that simultaneously opens up cognitive space. Mindfulness has also been shown to improve self-insight as well as fear modulation, linked to our brain’s middle prefrontal lobe area. A mindfulness practice silences the intense stimulation of daily life and awakens a sense of presence (which we will further explore in Chapter 5) that is often aligned with feelings of gratefulness and fosters an awareness and connection to intuitive thoughts. It also opens our ability to visualize and create thought—what our minds are meant to do.

A Deeper Look at the Power of Breathwork and Mindfulness

As we age, our breaths become shallower and shallower. Muscles involved in breathing, like the diaphragm, can weaken over time, and lung tissue may lose elasticity, leading to narrower airways. *Your lungs mature by the time you are 20–25 years old. After about the age of 35, it is normal for your lung function to decline gradually as you age.*⁹

To celebrate my 40th birthday I took refuge at Miraval Resort, a wellness destination designed to help guests create a life in balance through mindfulness. There I had one of the most cathartic moments I can remember.

One activity involved climbing a ladder that took me four stories in the air, then walking a tight rope that spanned two city blocks. I remember being so exhilarated by the thrill of it that fear was a detached feeling for me. I was wearing my Alo Yoga outfit and my cute sneakers, and had ensured my hair was photo ready! As I climbed to the top of the ladder and looked out across the Sonoran Desert landscape of Tucson, Arizona, all I could take in was the beauty of this triumphant moment, and I was ready to make it across the tightrope. About one-third of the way, my brain began to process what my body was doing:

“Walking on a tightrope, four stories in the air, with only a cord attaching to a person holding me from the ground.”

As that mind-body connection took place, an overwhelming feeling of panic took over my entire being. Not only did I shake from head to toe, but I shook the tight rope so fervently that my coach standing below was in full physical vibration with me. At this point, I was proud of myself that I had gotten even that far. I was fully satisfied with my bravery and yelled down, “I am good, I am going to jump down now.” Before I could take the leap, my coach pleaded with me to trust him, to hold off giving up, and to allow him to guide me. This guidance included me closing my eyes and just listening to his words—words that guided me into deep breathing, into embracing the power of each breath in and out. Without my conscious noticing, his words led me to complete stillness. Suddenly I heard him say, “Melissa, do you feel that?”

I had not realized until then that I had transformed from so much fear that it overwhelmed my body to the point that I physically vibrated us both, into a state of complete groundedness and calm, a transformation so powerful that I then just walked across to the end of the rope without hesitation. It was metamorphic, it was cathartic, and I had a natural high the rest of the day. But what I took with me—and still feel seven years later—was a newfound belief and trust in the power of breath.

When immersing yourself in nature isn’t an option, and time is less abundant, there are alternative methods to have in your tool kit as well. Breathing is one of the most important things our body does and the ability to breathe with intention is a muscle most people underwork.

Breathwork can have a calming effect on several glands in the body, primarily through its influence on the autonomic nervous system. It can help lower the production of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline (which we will explore in Chapter 2) by promoting relaxation. It can influence the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which plays a key role in stress response. It can help enhance relaxation and improve sleep quality, indirectly affecting melatonin production. As we embrace the things that give us a sense of groundedness, we also give ourselves the space, the stillness, and the courage for the deeper exploration needed to find our purpose through self-discovery.

As with many of the women I interviewed, we can find a deeper connection to purpose through meditation, breathwork, and yoga, as the stillness helps us connect with our higher self and make clearer choices. These practices help us deal with triggers and find peace and calm in challenging situations. Just as I found peace through breathwork during a tightrope walk, the power of breath can transform your state of mind.

The Interconnectedness: Intuition, Emotional Intelligence, and Mindfulness

As we reflect on the interconnectedness of intuition, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness, we can see that trusting our gut is not merely a theoretical notion but a deeply rooted cognitive and emotional process that has the power to transform our point of view on our lives. My experience, along with that of Shirley Ramos Roseman's and countless others, demonstrates that intuition is not random; it is the culmination of subconscious processing, past experiences, and heightened self-awareness. When we attune ourselves to these inner signals, we open doors to clarity, resilience, and, ultimately, our mental well-being.

Our reluctance to trust intuition often stems from societal conditioning that favors logic over instinct, the tangible over the abstract. However, as we see through scientific research—from Malcolm Gladwell's exploration of rapid cognition to William James's dual-process theory—intuition is just as valid as rational analysis, if

not more so in moments of urgency. The brain's ability to synthesize information beyond our conscious awareness highlights the necessity of embracing this inner wisdom.

Yet intuition does not function in isolation. It is intimately tied to our emotional intelligence, which allows us to navigate our internal and external worlds with greater awareness. The higher one's EQ, the more attuned we are to our emotions, fostering a deeper connection with our intuition.

The ability to truly harness intuition requires more than just awareness—it also requires practice and discipline. Mindfulness can serve as the bridge between logic and intuition, creating space for clarity amid life's noise. Through mindfulness practices such as breathwork, meditation, and engagement with nature, we can strengthen our ability to listen to our inner selves. As Shirley discovered post-stroke and as I experienced on the tightrope four stories in the air at Miraval, mindfulness does not just offer moments of stillness; it sharpens our instincts and deepens our trust in them.

Breathwork, in particular, acts as a tool for recalibrating the nervous system, alleviating stress, and heightening our ability to sense subtle emotional and physical cues. The science behind breathwork and its impact on the autonomic nervous system (which we will further explore in Chapter 2) illustrates its ability to calm stress responses, enhancing our capacity for intuitive thought. When we engage in deep, intentional breathing, we allow ourselves to step out of fear, into trust, and into an alignment with our inner knowing.

Our intuition is always speaking to us, whether through a whisper of discomfort, a persistent thought, or an inexplicable knowing. The challenge lies not in its existence but in our willingness to listen, and to trust it.

Intuition in Business as Leaders: On a Path to Leadership

Ask an experienced CEO how they made a major decision, and their typical response is “intuition” or “gut feel.” Yes, analysis also plays a role, but intuition was found to be a major or determining factor in 85% of 36 major CEO decisions that we studied.¹⁰

If intuition is our innate wisdom, and we develop an openness to listening to it and the accompanying signs it shows us, we not only find a transformation in how we live our personal lives, but we also heighten our potential in how we navigate ourselves as leaders. It gives us a deeper level of wisdom on planning for situations, our relationship with people, and—with practice—our innate intuitive abilities will become clearer and second nature (no pun intended). Another muscle we must practice is getting in tune with ourselves as individuals because as we uncover those layers and find foundational grounding in who we are, the more receptive we then become to the power of intuition.

When Nancy Berger, then chief revenue officer at Heart Magazines, left her career in publishing of more than 30 years, it wasn't because she had a solid plan for what was next but because she had an innate intuition it was time for something different. "It was a moment of combustion—I needed to do something personally purpose-forward," Nancy told me.

Nancy didn't just have a career in publishing; she had a track record of innovative thinking. She was and is known for seeing white space opportunities. She was always an "intrapreneur" with a legacy of birthing new ways to extend brands and revenue streams. She inceptioned the Marie Claire Power Trip, the Next Big Thing Pop-Up (which is how we met), and Cosmopolitan's Cosmo Trips Travel Product. She was an impact player and game changer, but eventually her work wasn't nourishing her soul the way it once had.

On a plane ride home from San Francisco in February 2023, her intuition stepped in to give her the clarity she needed to see that "it was time." As she worked on her cross-country flight, like she often did, she put a movie on in the background: *Mack & Rita* with Diane Keaton. The movie synopsis read, "The frustrated writer and influencer magically transforms into her future self: Aunt Rita. Freed from the constraints of other people's expectations, Rita comes into her own, becoming an unlikely social media sensation and sparking a tentative romance with Mack's adorable dog-sitter, Jack." When Rita is told, "You have been invited to the Marie Claire Power Trip, the most important trip for Women in the World," Nancy's inner being heard more than just an actor speaking. She intuitively heard her larger

purpose personified; she heard, “What I do is bigger than just thinking about magazines and media. I connect people and opportunities and new places that can make a difference.” By the time the plane landed, Nancy had drafted her resignation letter and a LinkedIn post that literally went viral with more support than she could have imagined.¹¹

Today, Nancy is thriving in her new direction with her new company Swag (Start with a Good . . . idea, product, story, mission, purpose). Her clients include Tribeca Festival, Art Basel, Daily Beast, Katie Couric Media, and many more. But more pointedly, Nancy is living her purpose pivot. She is leaning into her driving force and authentic passions of being a connector and her gift of identifying areas of growth and innovation across mediums and industries. For her, working with clients is about starting with a good idea, vision, and so on, to unlock the greatness in it. Trusting her intuition not only let Nancy pivot her point of view on her purpose, but also enabled her to nourish her soul in new ways as a difference maker.

When We Trust Intuition

Different from cognitive reasoning, intuition comes from paying attention to our emotions and being open to them. Typically, as leaders, we rely on facts and information, but that can also often be a circular conversation when depending on that alone, because there is usually incomplete information or conflicting points of view on the information at hand. When one can lean into and trust intuition as the additive layer, that trust becomes a valuable leadership competency.

As we close this chapter, we see that intuition, often dismissed as abstract or unreliable, is a profound force that connects our mind, body, and emotions in ways that logic cannot always explain. Whether through the life-changing experiences shared, the insights of my story or that of Shirley Ramos and Nancy Berger, or the scientific backing from pioneers like William James and Malcolm Gladwell, this chapter illustrates that trusting your gut is more than a cliché—it’s a skill that can be honed and can lead to a lifeline to self-awareness and purpose.

In Chapter 4, I will cover more about our personal PI (predictable indexes) and further explore our path to finding purpose, both personally and professionally. It is through self-discovery and exploration that we

can discover our tendencies, our drivers, our desires—how they serve us, and how at times they do not—and where we find our sense of meaning. All of these layers contribute to our level of acceptance of our gut feeling and intuition.

As a first exercise in our collective journey, here are some ways we can not only embrace a connection with intuition, or decipher that “gut feeling,” but allow the power of it into our lives in a spectrum of ways:

- **Be mindful.** Notice the signs or feelings and allow yourself to feel them.
- **Trust.** Give yourself the permission of acceptance. Avoid preconceived judgment and instead allow in your instinct.
- **Allow for exploration.** When the signs seep in, ask yourself what it means and how you can channel the energy.
- **Give yourself stillness.** Find time to step away or step out to find the space where you can silence the chatter and ruminate in quiet contemplation, maybe with the surroundings of nature and its elements or even mundane task.

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