

INTUITIVE *decision making*



by Jonathan Marshall

**Their
discoveries
came from
inspiration,
not
thinking.**

Many researchers claim that we make all our decisions from a place of self-interest. Presumably, then, Mother Teresa chose to help millions of people out of her own need to be needed, not because of a fundamental concern for others. However, through some recent interviews, I have discovered that there are at least a few, very successful leaders who have a different, powerful, and unselfish way of making decisions.

To find them, I looked for the most profoundly happy people alive. I reasoned that they would have the least interest in acting selfishly. I sought the help of the Centre for the Study of Non-Symbolic Consciousness as they have tracked down more than 1,100 people who show remarkably high levels of well-being. In order to understand the cause of their well-being, researchers have scanned their brains at Yale University and New York University. I recently spoke with Gary Weber, one of the participants whom scientists have most closely examined.

Over a decade ago, while doing a yoga posture he had done thousands of times before, he had an unexpected, sudden, psychological shift that led to profound, on-going well-being. Like others in this study, his remarkable happiness is associated with a permanent reduction in the amount he thinks. I asked him how thinking less has helped with decision-making. He explained that many of the remarkable achievements of humanity have come from a place of mental stillness, e.g., Archimedes who found his answers while stepping into a bath; Friedrich Kekule dreamed the solutions that made him famous; and Benjami Franklin watched a lightening storm. Their discoveries came from inspiration, not thinking.

“At board meetings,” he described, “people are only 10 per cent to 50 per cent present. And that’s optimistic. They are distracted by how to get even, what’s going on at home, or how much better everything would be if so-and-so were not around.” The quality of ideas is related to one’s ability to be present and discursive thinking can contaminate those ideas. So most people, like those board members, do not reach their potential at coming up with good ideas. Gary, by contrast, lets ideas “well up inside—as if they come from a place in the body.” Oddly, he is as surprised as anyone else with the content of these ideas. “When I speak aloud these inspirations,

they tend to be so good, I look like the smartest guy in the meeting!”

Gary, and others I met in this study, use this “thought-less” decision-making method in aspects of life that range from finding a parking space in rush hour to investing corporate funds. Gary’s success is evident. He became the senior vice president of a Fortune 500 company, PPG Industries, with 1,000 people working for him, five research labs, and a budget of a quarter of a billion US dollars. And, he rarely gets parking tickets.

To see if others could learn how to do this, I asked him to advise me on how to help a coaching client who was very stressed as he considered getting back with

his ex-wife. “After considering the main issues, your client should get into a state of stillness and he should ask himself ‘Should I get back with her or not?’ If his answer feels like it comes from his head, that’s not the right answer. If he feels it rise from some place deep within, that’s more likely to be correct. To re-test his answer, he should ask himself why he believes that is the right answer; if he gets an explanation in the form of discursive thought from his head, he should be suspicious. But if he gets no explanation but simply a sense of the answer, that’s probably the right way to go.”

Perhaps thought-less decision-making is not as odd as it at first seems. After all, it was only a couple of hundred thousand years ago that our species developed the capacity for conscious thinking. That is the twinkling of evolution’s eye. Perhaps Gary and the others in this study are so profoundly happy because they have rediscovered something we lost generations ago. In any case, it seems this technique can be taught, and, according to Gary, if we learn to trust the ideas that come from stillness, our decisions and our lives will be enormously better. In the case of my client that meant getting back together with his ex-wife. **GIA**

All details regarding coaching clients have been kept anonymous, and no identifying information included. Jonathan Marshall (jmarshall@nus.edu.sg) is an Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies at the LKY School. A psychologist and executive coach, he heads the School’s coaching project and maintains a consulting, coaching and counselling practice.