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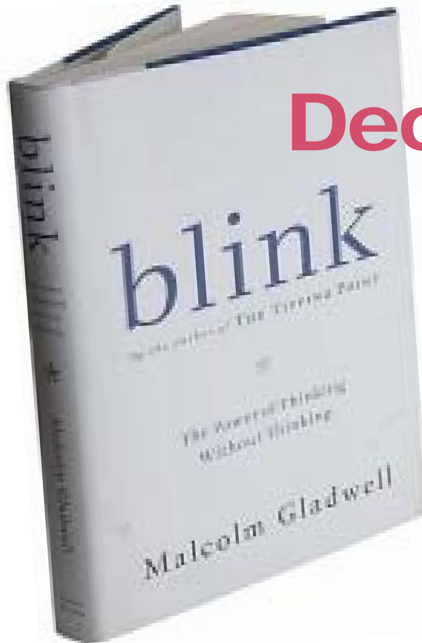

Decision Making in the Blink of an Eye

– written by **Donald H. Kidd**

On February 4, 1999, Sean Carroll, Ed McMellon, Richard Murphy, and Ken Boss, four plainclothes officers from the New York Police Department's Street Crimes Unit, were patrolling in the South Bronx area at 12:30 in the morning when they observed a young black male who seemed to be behaving oddly. Carroll and McMellon get out of the car and McMellon calls out, "Police...Can we have a word?" The individual, Amadou Diallo, turns and runs toward a building and the police pursue. Diallo reaches an inner door of the building, twists his body sideways, and reaches for something in his pocket. Carroll yells out, "He's got a gun!" When Murphy and Boss observe Carroll and McMellon begin firing, they jump out of the car and also begin to fire. Diallo, who was reaching for his wallet, was killed by these officers who fired a total of forty-one bullets, nineteen of which struck Diallo.

The Amadou Diallo case received widespread publicity with thousands rallying on Wall Street on March 3, 1999, demanding that the four police officers be indicted. On March 30, 1999, hundreds of off-duty police officers rallied in support of their four colleagues. The four officers who shot Diallo were indicted on March 31, 1999, on charges of second-degree murder. The trial was moved from the Bronx to Albany, New York, because of the pretrial publicity. On February 25, 2000, twelve jurors acquitted the officers of all charges. The Civil Rights Section of the United States Department of Justice refused to intervene. On January 6, 2004, New York City settled civil claims brought by the Amadou Diallo family for $3 million dollars.[1]

In his book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell examines the Amadou Diallo case as part of his study about **rapid cognition**—the kind of thinking that happens within the blink of an eye. The Amadou Diallo case serves as an example of rapid cognition gone terribly wrong. However, Gladwell notes that when it works, it can be truly spectacular. As

[1] Anthony J. Sebok, *The Amadou Diallo Case*, Find Law Legal Commentary, 1/12/04

[2] *Terry v. Ohio*, 392 U.S. 1 (1968)

a manager, you can modify the environment in which policing decisions are made to promote successful rapid cognition. (For instance, by implementing and following proven policies and procedures.)

In this issue of the *Management Quarterly*, we will briefly explore some of the leadership lessons that Gladwell shares in his book—particularly those learned in times of high pressure and stress—where this instant decision making process has been unbelievably powerful.

Less is More

Managers who are trained in the decision making process are typically instructed to obtain all relevant facts and information before making a decision. However, Gladwell casts doubt on the proposition that the more information decision makers have, the better decisions they make. He illustrates with information from Cook County Hospital.

This hospital, where the emergency room is so busy treating gunshot wounds and injuries that it inspired the television series *ER*, has resources stretched to the limit. It is Chicago's principal public hospital where hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans without health insurance must seek medical care. A significant number of individuals—worried they were having a heart attack—filled the emergency room each day. Doctors, trying to gather as much information as they could, ordered numerous tests which could often take hours for the results to be obtained. As a result of medical caution, the hospital found itself spending more and more money each year on people who, while complaining of chest pain, were not having heart attacks.

Based upon research funded by the Navy, doctors were taught to combine the results of an ECG with three risk factors—pain felt by the patient; whether or not there was fluid in the patient's lungs; and whether or not the patient's systolic blood pressure was below 100. Because of this combination of factors, this decision tree was right more than 95% of the time.

When doctors were able to zero in on just a few critical pieces of information and ignore everything else like the patient's age, weight, medical history, and the results of numerous tests, they became extremely proficient at diagnosing chest pain.

Patience is a Virtue

Gladwell also draws on lessons learned and taught by Paul Van Riper, a member of the United States Marine Corps who later served as head of the Marine Corps University at Quantico, Virginia. On Van Riper's first tour in Vietnam, when he would hear gunfire in the distance, he would get on the radio and ask the troops in the field what was happening. After several weeks of this, he realized that the people he was calling on the radio had no more idea than he did about what the gunfire meant.

On his second tour of Vietnam, whenever he heard gunfire, he would look at his watch and wait five minutes, keeping in mind that if his people needed help, they would ask for it. After five minutes, if things had settled down, he still would not do anything. His theory on these crisis situations was that you had to let your people work out the situation and determine what was happening. The danger in calling them too soon was you were diverting them from resolving the situation. They would tell you anything to get you off their backs, and if you acted on that information, taking it at face value, you could make a mistake.

"Thin-slicing"

Making sense of situations based on past experiences is described as **"thin-slicing**." If the past experiences, influences, and training of an individual have been good, spur of the moment decisions that come up from our unconscious can help us make sense of situations and a case can be made for the fact that it is possible to know without knowing why we know.

Within the context of law enforcement, Gladwell notes that in life-threatening situations our mind drastically limits the range and amount of information we have to deal with. Sound, memory, and broader social understanding are sacrificed in favor of the heightened awareness of the threat directly in front us. This narrowing of the senses can allow law enforcement officers to perform better because they are focused on the threat in front of them.

In examining the thinking that goes on in the unconscious, *Blink* examines work done by Gary Klein, a decision-making expert who conducted interviews with fire department commanders in Cleveland as part of a study

of tough, split-second decisions. One of the situations was a kitchen fire in a one-story house in a residential neighborhood. The lieutenant and his men broke down the front door, laid down their hose, and doused the kitchen fire with water. The fire should have abated but it didn't. The men sprayed again but it didn't make any difference. As the firemen retreated backward, the lieutenant thought to himself, "There's something wrong." He turned to his men and said, "Let's get out, now!" Moments after they did, the floor on which they had been standing collapsed. The fire, it turned out, had been in the basement.

The lieutenant had no reason why he ordered everyone out, yet Gary Klein refused to accept this as an answer. For over two hours, Klein interviewed the lieutenant about the events of the day in an attempt to document what he knew and did not know. The first thing was that the fire did not behave normally. Kitchen fires should respond to water but this one did not. Then the men moved back into the living room. The lieutenant, who always kept his earflaps up to get a sense of how hot the fire was, realized that this was a very hot fire, hotter than a kitchen fire should be. Often a sign of expertise is noticing what doesn't happen, and what surprised the lieutenant was that the fire wasn't noisy. This didn't make sense given how much heat there was.

In retrospect, all of those anomalies make sense. The fire didn't respond to being sprayed in the kitchen because it wasn't centered in the kitchen. It was quiet because the fire was muffled by the floor. The living room was hot because the fire was underneath the living room, and heat rises. At the time, the lieutenant made none of those connections consciously. All of his thinking was going on in his unconscious.

The most striking fact about this case is how close it all came to disaster. Had the lieutenant stopped and discussed the situation with his men and tried to figure out what was going on—had he done, in other words, what we often think leaders are supposed to do to solve difficult problems—he might have destroyed his ability to jump to the insight that saved lives.

Everyone in law enforcement is aware of an action by some law enforcement officer where a stop was made which led to the breaking of a big case. While courts have focused on "facts and circumstances" and rejected conclusions or intuition,[2] the breaking down of the instant decision making process focused on by Klein helps to explain why some excellent law enforcement officers are capable of making sense of situations based on their "thin-slicing skills."

Thinking Ahead

What police training does, at its best, is teach officers how to keep themselves out of trouble to avoid unnecessary subjectivity. Gladwell cites work of James Fyfe, head of training for the New York Police Department, on a project in Dade County, Florida, where there was an unusually high number of violent incidents between police officers and civilians.

What Fyfe found was that the officers were really good when they were face-to-face with a suspect and when they had the suspect in custody. In these situations, they did the right thing 92 percent of the time. But in their approach to the scene, they were frequently wrong and only did the right thing 15 percent of the time. When Dade County zeroed in on improving what officers did *before they encountered the suspect*, the number of complaints against officers and the number of injuries to officers and civilians plummeted.

According to Fyfe, "You don't want to put yourself in a position where the only way you have to defend yourself is to shoot someone. If you have to rely on your reflexes, someone is going to get hurt unnecessarily. If you take advantage of intelligence and cover, you will almost never have to make an instinctive decision."

Do Unto Others...

Blink also provides food for thought on interpersonal relations. For example, an analysis of malpractice lawsuits shows that there are highly skilled doctors who get sued a lot, yet there are also doctors who make many mistakes and never get sued. At the same time, the overwhelming number of people who suffer an injury due to a doctor's negligence never file a malpractice suit.

The analysis showed that patients often file lawsuits because they feel they've been harmed by shoddy medical care and have objection to how they were treated, on a personal level, by their doctor. Patients say they were rushed, ignored, or treated poorly. Doctors who treat

patients like human beings are the ones who don't get sued.

Conclusion

Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* deals with psychological research that has not been written about for the general audience. It is a book concerned with the content and origin of instantaneous impressions and conclusions we make when we meet a person, confront a complex situation, or have to make a decision under conditions of stress. It deals with those instant conclusions that we reach in the blink of an eye, many of which are really important.

Law enforcement officers frequently confront complex situations under conditions of stress. This book focuses on the decision making process in these complex situations. It has food for thought on everything from the way job interviews are conducted, police officers are trained, individuals are counseled, and managers deal with crisis situations. It is an easy read with which all law enforcement managers should acquaint themselves.

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