

Chapter 1:
Intuition



“The quieter
you become,
the more you
can hear.”

Ram Dass, spiritual teacher and author

Intuition is defined as the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning. Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, described intuition as perception via the unconscious that brings forth ideas, images, new possibilities, and ways out of blocked situations.

We tend to say: “I have a hunch”, or “I have a gut feeling” when there is something we *know* even though we cannot rationally explain why we have that strong sense of inner knowing. Even though we are all familiar with those moments, most of us don’t know what to do with it, let alone trust it.

Nobody really seems to understand where this inner knowledge comes from, how to recognize it, or how to cultivate it. Yet over the years it has become very clear to me that the best leaders have this rare natural ability to tune into their intuition, instinctively, and they’re not scared of trusting it. Quite the contrary; they take it as one of the key inputs for decision-making. An internal compass if you will. And, needless to say, it takes intuition to spark creativity and innovation. Novel ideas emerge from a creative source, which is yet to be defined scientifically.

Possibly the closest thing to a scientific explanation is described by Dr Daniel J Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) School of Medicine. Based on his research, he describes intuition as “being in touch with the wisdom of the body”. According to Siegel, the right hemisphere of our prefrontal cortex receives information from the body,

including our heart and intestines (gut), and uses this input to give us a ‘gut feeling’. An inexplicable experience of ‘that little voice’ informs us in a non-rational way which actions to take. Siegel makes the distinction between wise decisions versus logical ones. The first one being the result of an integrated functioning of both the left and right side of the brain, versus the logical decisions, which are based primarily on a rational way of thinking, informed and dominated by parts located in the left side of the brain. And even though recent research from the university of Utah, led by neuroscientist Dr. Jeff Anderson, is debunking the myth of people being more right- versus left-sided thinkers and personalities, Dr Jeff Anderson is also stating that, “It’s absolutely true that some brain functions occur in one or the other side of the brain. Language tends to be on the left; attention or mindfulness, more on the right.”

The point is that our current society – especially the corporate world, as well as the academic world – is set up in a way that we are evaluated, valued, and rewarded based on our analytical, rational performance. This was also beautifully explained by Sir Ken Robinson in his famous Ted Talk ‘Do schools kill creativity?’ It starts all the way back in primary school and continues through high school and onwards. At the top of the list of priority courses we have mathematics and languages. You are seen as ‘smart’ only when you are good at either one, or both, of these. This trend is continued after graduation, when we start working and parenting, etc.

So unless you are an artist, poet, or dancer, it’s just not acceptable to tell people in a professional environment: “Do what feels right from the gut. Be mindful!”

Both leaders and employees are looking for something more tangible to hold on to. And yet we feel confined and chained when we are bound to rules and structure that don’t stimulate the joy and space needed for optimal motivation, productivity, and creativity.

While recent studies are showing the positive effects of mindfulness on an individual’s performance, there is still very little data on the effects of a leader’s mindfulness on the happiness and productivity of their teams. Based on my experience with senior-level executive clients as well as my own background, I know the immense effects a mindful leader can have on the people around him, if he is fully observant to what is going on, right now, within himself and the people around him. If he is alert and *aware* of what he is thinking *and* feeling, and acts based on both intuition and rational reasoning, then he will have a profoundly stronger and more positive impact on his team. In other words: if we, as leaders, observe our own thought processes and feelings before we respond to what people around us are doing, I can guarantee a more effective and joyful work place for both the leader and the team.

In the 2014 article by Jochen Reb, Jayanth Narayanan, and Sankalp Chaturvedi published in the *Mindfulness Journal*, “Leading Mindfully: Two Studies of the Influence of Supervisor Trait Mindfulness on Employee Well-Being and Performance”, we can actually start drawing some tentative scientific conclusions that confirm the above. Although further research with more data points and more diverse samples is needed, the results from this study start suggesting that

the quality of attention and awareness that a leader possesses may actually have a direct impact on those she or he supervises. These results also fit well within broader mindfulness literature, suggesting that mindfulness improves social relationships through improved communication and an increase in empathic concern towards others. Mindfulness helps us build deeper connections. Deeper connections make us feel more inspired.

Intuition can be cultivated through the practice of mindfulness. Have you ever wondered why we are called ‘human beings’ instead of ‘human thinkers’ or ‘human doers’? It is good to allow ourselves to just sit still and be in a state of effortless being for a little while every day in the early mornings; more so if you have a busy day ahead, and around sunset to connect to our inner wisdom through silence. By focusing on being, we get more and more in tune with our inner voice, with who we truly are. But before we get to how we can do this and tune into this source of intuition, it is worthwhile to understand how we ‘lost’ it. Because in the end, our natural state is one where we are connecting both sides of our brains and are mindful throughout the day, without it being a conscious effort.

Just look at a child playing outside, and you will understand what I mean. When did we lose the ability to be mindful naturally, to be in the moment, in tune with who we really are? This is where our thought process and our stories come into play.

The stories we tell ourselves

As human beings we are known to be notorious storytellers. Our whole life experience is based on the stories we tell ourselves. Think about it. Isn’t every experience you recall a personal commentary, a thought, a perception, even an interpretation of occurrences? Two people can attend the exact same concert yet have two completely different thoughts about it and, as a result, two totally different stories to tell afterwards. You probably describe the last company outing very differently than some of your colleagues or team members might describe it. And what happens when we add the opinions and expectations of people around us to our own thoughts? The mixture of all these thoughts and opinions becomes our story and description of who we are, or who we *think* we are.

Our thoughts create our stories, which in turn create our life – or rather, it creates how we *experience* our life.

In essence, our characters and personalities are a result of the stories we create about ourselves, as well as the people that influence us, especially at a younger age. I don’t want to go too deeply into this as it could be a topic for a separate book, but the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu summed it up perfectly when he wrote: “Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.”

The thoughts and words Lao Tzu refers to are literally the stories we tell ourselves and others, over and over again.

So then, how exactly does this relate to intuition?

In essence: our fears and desires are a direct result of the stories we tell ourselves, and in turn these stories reinforce our fears and desires, and the vicious cycle begins. As a child, you weren't scared to speak your mind. And yet, over time, you got conditioned to sometimes bite your tongue. You might have been humiliated (or felt humiliated) when you spoke up and people reacted adversely, so the story you told yourself was that when you speak up in certain situations, you get 'punished', which turned you somewhat introverted. As David Lynch (director and screenwriter) pointed out so eloquently: "We think we understand the rules when we become adults but what we really experience is a narrowing of the imagination."

This same principle applies to the workplace. I've worked in environments where people are governed by fear. And guess what? Most likely, the leaders in those workplaces have many fears within themselves. We all know the insecure overachiever profile. I was even recruited by one of my first employers because I was one of them. But when an insecure overachiever gets to be in charge, they will demand the same work ethic from the people who work for them. I can guarantee you fear is never the best adviser.

The first time I became a leader, I wasn't leading with awareness at all, and it was reflected in how my team was operating. I didn't realize a lot of my words and actions were driven by my own insecurities, and it resulted in my team behaving in the same way. Fear makes people shut down, and nothing is more detrimental to creativity than fear.

The point here is clear: people around us mirror who we are and what we radiate. If we are mindful and at peace, the people we lead will become more mindful and more at peace. Professor Mark Beeman, who specializes in cognitive neuroscience at Northwestern University, has conducted one of the most groundbreaking studies on insights and where creative problem-solving comes from. He has shown different patterns of brain activity in high-insight versus low-insight anagram solvers, when people are completely at rest. The key conclusion was that insights do not come from logical reasoning, but are a sudden knowing that pops up in a restful state. They emerge out of a moment of nothingness. They emerge from what I would call intuition.

So how do we tune into this magical source called intuition? It is actually simpler than you might think, yet at the same time, its simplicity is also one of the hardest things to achieve, especially in our digitally 'always on' society.

First of all, it's important to realize that your intuition is already present. It's inside of you, so you don't need to go anywhere or do anything! I have participated

in many corporate and self-help training programmes out there, seeking tools to become a better person. Drumming sessions to build better teams and drum out the frustrations? Why not? Phrases like ‘limiting beliefs’ and ‘growing edge’ are thrown at you from all directions. I’ve seen colleagues break down, weeping, in some of these workshops, because they feel lost.

It was only after I took a break from going to these workshops that I could see what the main learning point was. The key is to *remove the barriers* we have put in place, versus searching to find that holy grail as if it is something *outside* of us. Over the years, we have become so skilled at protecting ourselves, our image, our status, that in the process we have also killed that which makes us the best leaders: our inner wisdom. We have become externally driven versus internally driven. You must recall those moments where you feel this tinkling in your gut. When all of a sudden you get an idea, or you are interviewing someone for a job and you *know* that it’s a bull’s eye. You just know it!

So how to bring back what we seem to have lost?

You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you are able to silence the mind. The word ‘mindfulness’ has become extremely popular these days, giving it both a mystical as well as an unreachable status. Nothing could be further from the truth. It basically comes down to being able to stop thinking, stop talking, stop doing, and listen. Still the rational mind. The mind that society has put on a pedestal, where we think we can outsmart life. But the fact

of the matter is that the rational mind doesn’t know everything. And, often, it can hinder us to find the right answers.

I challenge you to take 10-15 minutes of silence every day. Alone. Just switch off your phone, your laptop. And don’t switch on the TV or radio either. Sit still, even if it feels uncomfortable or boring at first, close your eyes and just focus on your breath. If you are having a hard time sitting still, you can also take a walk while doing this. The key is to not interact, not think back over things that happened or things that you want to do. Just be. Of course, thoughts will come up. Let them. Don’t resist. Just keep being still, whether by sitting still or while in motion. Be still.

Case study: Intuition in stillness

An interview with Emile de Beer, founder of SilverRed, Dubai



When I was thinking about who to interview for the topic of intuition and leadership, one person directly came to mind: Emile de Beer, founder of SilverRed. SilverRed supplies and customizes work-wear for companies in the oil and gas industry, petrochemical industry, steel industry or any other environment that requires work-wear with quality fabrics, good designs, and extreme comfort.

Why? Because Emile did something quite remarkable: he started a (by now) multi-million-dollar company single-handedly in Dubai after following his 'gut' or intuition, that told him he had to do it.

In my opinion, he is the embodiment of intuition-led leadership with awareness. Emile is one of those people with a very special kind of spark in their eyes, and since I met him, I've been trying to understand what the source of that spark is.

Emile is based in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, so we conducted our interview over the phone. It was early evening for Emile and the crack of dawn for me, as we have a ten-hour time difference. As it was the middle of the summer, it was a staggering 110 degrees Fahrenheit on Emile's side of the world, with a humidity averaging over 90%, which made me gain a newfound appreciation for the comparatively mildly sticky summers in New York. Emile and I have known each other for years, and we have a history of spending hours discussing anything from the meaning of life, to what to do when we retire. I was excited to get his viewpoint on the concept of intuition.

Emile, can you please tell us a little bit about your background and how you ended up where you are now?

Sure. I grew up in the town of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, raised by my French mother and Dutch father. I come from a family of four, three boys and one girl. Music is in our blood and I've been educated both as a professional violin player as well as a business economist, though I've been an entrepreneur for as long as I can remember.

While in college I started a few companies, and after college I started working for a company that specialized in safety clothing. In 2007 I gathered my courage to pack my bag (literally one bag!) and left for Dubai to start my own company, SilverRed. We focus on designing, manufacturing, and distributing work-wear that is comfortable, well-designed, and most importantly, creates a safer work environment.

Now my company is big enough and complex enough for me to have a team of talented people around me to help manage and further grow the business. I'm still the managing director and I oversee all major accounts and business development.

What do you do when you don't work?

To me, my family – which includes my wife and two kids – are my main priority and joy in life. After work, I love to come home, put the kids to bed, and enjoy a nice meal with my wife. I enjoy kitesurfing and just love nature in general. And stillness. The very early hours in the day are especially sacred to me. While everyone is still asleep, I get up and enjoy that time of day, just before dawn. It's the perfect time to be still. I enjoy the stillness. It helps me gather my thoughts but, most importantly, it helps me connect to my core, to my intuition. That little voice we all have inside but gets drowned out by the noise of everyday hustle and bustle.

I will ask about that connection with your intuition in a while, but can you please tell us a little about how you found the courage to start SilverRed?

SilverRed really was a calling. It wasn't so much a rational decision as a 'knowing' I had deep inside that it was something I just had to do, as strange as that may sound. From the very start, SilverRed didn't feel like a project or assignment. It didn't feel like something I should fear either. It actually felt like a path, if that makes sense. It felt like a path without a specific goal, but with a clear vision. But the path in and of itself felt like the goal.

I did have a business plan, of course. And I spent a lot of time on it. But the finances or business results were not my main focus in the beginning. Instead, I was focused on getting that first client and making sure I delivered and over-delivered for that client. Then one client turned into two clients, turned into three, etc. And each time, the clients turned into bigger accounts. Before I knew it, I had to look in more detail at the whole financial picture, as projections started to matter. But that was only after I fully let myself be guided by my intuition; then I stayed focused on the path without thinking too much about the outcome.

Now we're in a place where we are growing at least double digits year on year, and companies are calling *us* instead of us chasing them, based on what they see on our website or from what they've heard from people in the industry. It really all happened without me purposefully being too focused on the outcome, but

rather by tuning into my intuition or inner voice along the way, and staying true to that inner voice.

So let's go back to what you said earlier about intuition, about that inner voice, and finding ways to connect to it.

Well, as I mentioned earlier, making the decision to start SilverRed was a direct outcome of listening to my intuition. I had to do it. And knowing I had to do it came out of a moment of stillness. It came from the stillness of my mind. It came out of 'nothingness'. Once, I literally even had an image or vision, seeing myself walking in the desert with an enormous feeling of power and strength. And that was when I was still living in the Netherlands. Based on my intuition, I quit my job and really had trust, deep inside. But it didn't happen overnight. After I quit my job, I had a full year where I wasn't working. I was preparing for all this, even though from the outside it looked as though I was doing nothing. But it was from that phase of doing 'nothing' that my true path emerged.

Even though things have been stressful at times, I purposefully let things flow. And I continued to trust. I completely trusted my intuition on this venture. I think that has been core to my success. I kept trusting even though things were not always under my control. Control over the numbers or business results. Control over whether a potential client would say yes. But really giving it my full 100% and trusting that business would come if I continued giving it my all with a concept I truly believed in. Of course, the phase of following your intuition,

without looking too much at the numbers and results, lessens once business starts growing. Now I feel I have more of a balance. Intuition is important, yes, but so is day-to-day management, the reality that comes with growing a business and serving clients, and making sure you always deliver. Now I have more focus on numbers, agreements, and exercising control. Much more than when I first started. But that's necessary.

What always remains is that feeling of trust. Trusting that you are making the right decisions and you are on the right path.

Again, moments of silence are crucial. Vacation time is crucial. It's very important to disconnect, so you are better able to perform at your best when you do connect.

Weekends are sacred to me. Unless it is really necessary, I choose not to work at weekends. My family and my wife are very important to me to recharge. I cannot work 24/7 and, quite frankly, it's really not something I want to do.

My home and my family are my sanctuary. As I mentioned, half an hour to an hour at the crack of dawn is very important to stay connected with my intuition.

The thing that's tricky about intuition is when you are on a running train. Perhaps if you've been in the same job or career for the past decade, it can become very hard to really identify something as your intuition. It is hard to break free from a path like that. How do you know that something (a thought or a feeling)

is your intuition? Often, you can clearly see it in hindsight, but in those moments where you feel this hunch, it's very hard to know it for sure because we tend to over-think and over-rationalize things.

So when does that switch from a hunch to actually knowing what it is? And what do you need to do about it? You tell me. That is something everyone has to try for him or herself. I can now see the consequences of my intuition from back then. But how difficult is it to follow your intuition daily? I think the key really remains to continuously connect to that inner silence. Your intuition is always within you, but you need to find a way to access it. And that way is through silence. It is by being in a flow and feeling freedom. It is hard to connect to intuition when you are tied down.

Suppose you are in a job or in a situation that is not true to who you are. You often feel very strongly that something isn't right. You may even feel what it is you need to do. But we often push those feelings away because we feel as though there is no way out. Just look at people around you who are in unhappy relationships. The ones who dare to break free – yes, they will have a moment of deep fear and mourning, but shortly afterwards often comes a period of immense strength and freedom. And that always takes you somewhere better.

It's important to have a vision, but it's equally important along the way to learn to let go of control. Yes, it's scary, but the rewards are much higher.

So where will you go from here?

Well, I can imagine in a few years I might sell the business, which will mean I can focus my energy on something else. I will do another deep dive into my intuition. I'm pretty sure SilverRed is not my last endeavour, and the thought of doing something completely different in a few years excites me a lot. I think sticking to one industry or career is something society has imprinted on us, but I'm not sure it has been for the benefit of most people.