

The Sixth Sense

An IM (instant message) appeared on the screen. "Important news." It was a request to chat from a young friend. As it turns out, this young friend is about to undertake a breathtaking journalistic assignment which will lead him across two continents and will displace him for the next six months.

The assignment holds the potential of being a career maker. The resulting story could garner a Pulitzer Prize and international acclaim. It could also pose imminent personal danger.

"I have to confess," he continued, "The whole thing scares seven different kinds of sh*t out of me."

"But you're going to go, right?"

"ABSOLUTELY." He shouted in all caps. Then, typing quietly, "I have to."

As the conversation progressed he explained that he felt instinctively that this was the right thing to do at this stage of his life and career. His instincts had served him well in the past, gaining him a significant foothold in a career venue that can be closed, even insular and unforgiving. This latest venture was the result of a relationship cultivated during a previous assignment.

Some things work that way. Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book about the phenomenon of instinct, entitled *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, based on the premise that a trained mind can make what could appear on the surface to be impulsive actions but are in fact the very best decisions in a given circumstance.

In his book, Gladwell related an example of a firefighter who instinctively knew something wasn't right with a kitchen fire he and his crew were fighting. Moments after the firefighter ordered himself and his crew out of the house, the kitchen floor collapsed.

After two hours of questioning, the firefighter was finally able to consciously relate the basis for what turned out to be a life saving decision. He explained

that the fire didn't respond as it should have, it was abnormally hot and that it was too quiet to be in such close proximity. As it turned out, the fire was in the basement rather than in the kitchen, and what the firefighters encountered was merely a fraction of the actual blaze. The firefighter had drawn on years of experience to make a split-second decision that likely spared the lives of his entire crew.

There is also personal experience to support this phenomenon. Some years ago, an invitation arrived for an awards dinner and fundraiser. The invitation also presented the opportunity to repay a good friend who had been especially generous. However, at the time money was extremely tight and income prospects were nonexistent. The prospect of spending an extra \$10, let alone the \$100 required for two tickets seemed both extravagant and ridiculous. Still, instinct insisted that this would be a worthwhile investment, so the tickets were purchased, and the friend gladly accepted the invitation.

The night of the dinner arrived and during a conversation it was established that "networking," in the sense of introducing oneself to potential business or career prospects was not a long suit to either party. There was, however, a ready solution at hand.

"The next person we see, we are going to go up and introduce ourselves," the friend declared. And that was that.

That next person happened to have an upcoming project which subsequently became a major professional project for three years, until the present.

Coincidence? Not likely. The awards dinner was well attended by influential individuals in the field of social activism, and featured a collegial atmosphere, given the occasion. It presented a valuable opportunity to meet people face to face who are otherwise totally inaccessible to "outsiders." That \$100 was perhaps the best \$100 ever spent.

Of course, there is no guarantee that instinct will work like synchronicity, or even that it is foolproof. Still, instinct is a powerful tool at an organizational as well as at an individual level, and when utilized as a compliment to strictly "logical" strategies, can provide a distinct advantage. Especially in coalition building, providing direct services, community organizing or other work involving interaction with people, instinct can guide an organization's strategic planning and visioning processes, enhance its vitality or even ensure its ultimate survival.