Blink of an Eye
Leaders need to blink twice.

by Malcolm Gladwell

Blink is about rapid cognition, about thinking that happens in the blink of an eye. When you meet someone for the first time, or walk into a house you are thinking of buying, or read the first few sentences of a book, your mind takes about two seconds to jump to a series of conclusions. Blink is about those two seconds, because those instant conclusions that we reach are powerful and important and, occasionally, really good.

The word intuition never appears in Blink because intuition strikes me as a concept we use to describe emotional reactions, gut feelings—thoughts and impressions that don’t seem entirely rational. But what goes on in that first impression is perfectly rational. It’s rational. But what goes on in that first impressions that don’t seem entirely reactions, gut feelings—thoughts and concept we use to describe emotional thinking has the drawback that it we are supposed to be making. This needs a lot of information.

The Second Mind
In situations where the stakes are high, where things are moving quickly, and where we must make sense of a lot of new and confusing information in a short time, our brain uses two very different strategies to make sense of the situation.

The first is the conscious strategy. We have some experiences. We think about what we’ve learned. We develop a theory, and then we put two and two together and eventually come up with an answer. This strategy is logical and definitive. But it takes several iterations to get there. It’s slow. It needs a lot of information.

The second strategy operates quickly. It starts to kick in early, and it picks up the problem almost immediately. We may even begin making the necessary adjustments long before we are consciously aware of what adjustments we are supposed to be making. This thinking has the drawback that it operates—at least at first—entirely below the surface of consciousness. It sends its messages through weirdly indirect channels, like the sweat glands on the palms of our hands. It’s a system in which our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that it’s reaching conclusions.

How can thinking that takes place so quickly be useful? Don’t we make the best decisions when we take the time to carefully evaluate all available and relevant information? Certainly that’s what we’re always been told. Our society is dedicated to the idea that we’re always better off gathering as much information and spending as much time as possible in deliberation. As children, we are taught: haste makes waste, look before you leap, stop and think. But there are many situations—particularly at times of high pressure and stress—when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions offer a much better means of making sense of the world.

Some years ago, the Emergency Room doctors at Cook County Hospital in Chicago changed the way they diagnosed heart attacks. They now gather less information on their patients: they zero in on just a few critical pieces of information about patients suffering from chest pain—like blood pressure and the ECG—while ignoring everything else, like a patient’s age, weight, and medical history. Now Cook County is one of the best places at diagnosing chest pain. It was hard to convince these physicians to go along with the plan, because they believed that more information is always better.

There’s a wonderful phrase in psychology—the power of thin slicing—that says that we are capable of making sense of situations based on the thinnest slice of experience. Our thin-slicing skills are unbelievably powerful.

On the other hand, there are bad cases of thin-slicing, of jumping to the wrong conclusion, when rapid cognition goes awry, when first impressions formed in those first two seconds derail every other consideration and exert a powerful hold over our thinking.

I’m interested in figuring out those situations where we need to be careful with our powers of rapid cognition. For instance, I talk about what it means for a man to be tall. Almost all CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. are tall. That’s weird. There is no correlation between height and intelligence, or height and judgment, or height and the ability to motivate and lead people. But for some reason corporations overwhelmingly choose tall people for leadership roles.

That’s an example of bad rapid cognition: something is going on in the first seconds of meeting a tall person which makes us predisposed toward thinking of that person as an effective leader. I think we make these errors in many situations—particularly when it comes to hiring. With Blink, I’m trying to help you distinguish good rapid cognition from bad rapid cognition.

There is a lot of psychology in Blink, but those ideas are illustrated using stories from every corner of society. I just want to get people to take rapid cognition seriously. When it comes to something like dating, we all readily admit to the importance of what happens in the first instant when two people meet. But we won’t admit to the importance of what happens in the first two seconds when we talk about what happens when someone encounters a new idea, or when we interview someone for a job, or when a military general makes a decision in battle.

Blink is concerned with the smallest components of our lives—with the content and origin of those instantaneous impressions and conclusions that bubble up when we meet a new person, confront a complex situation, or have to make a decision under stress. We ought to pay more attention to those fleeting moments. If we did, it would change the way we think about the world, the way the products we see on the shelves, the ways that get made, the way police officers are trained, the way couples are counseled. The way job interviews are conducted—and if you combine all those little changes together, you end up with a different and happier world.


ACTION: Use your power of rapid cognition.