

Swept by intuition: Bad decisions of good leaders

By Abhinayan Sridhar & Kanchan Mukherjee | Mar 9, 2023

Pattern matching and using emotional information have honed our intuition. But the complexities of the ever-changing modern world demand a more nuanced approach even to the 'gut feeling'. Here's a look at some examples of bad decisions of good leaders



Pattern matching and using emotional information have honed our perceptions and instincts to ensure our survival through the ages. However, in the complex, ever-changing, modern world, these same mental processes can lead to faulty decision-making Image: Shutterstock

What do Brigadier General Matthew Broderick, chief of the Homeland Security Operations Center during hurricane Katerina and the Australian cricket team currently touring India have in common? All of them, despite being highly talented, met with failure due to flawed judgments driven by their distorted intuitions. How did this happen? The answer lies in the way the human brain processes information that can lead the most astute decision-makers astray.

Human intuition works on two principles, pattern recognition and emotional tagging, both complex unconscious processes involving multiple regions of the brain. We store our experiences and judgments in our memory. The emotions associated with these experiences, often the consequences of the decisions we make, also attach themselves to these memories as emotional tags. When we encounter a new situation, we subconsciously do pattern matching by comparing the current situation to the past experiences stored in our memory. The closest match in this process, along with the associated emotional tags, guides and informs our intuitive thinking and decision-making. This is what we call “gut feel”. This process allows a master chess player to assess a complex position on the board and come up with a quality move in seconds. Neuroscience research has shown that when the emotion processing centres of our brains are damaged, our decision-making becomes slow and impaired even though our analytical abilities remain intact.

Pattern matching and using emotional information have honed our perceptions and instincts to ensure our survival through the ages. However, in the complex, ever-changing, modern world, these same mental processes can lead to faulty decision-making. In August of 2005, Brigadier General Matthew Broderick filed a report to the POTUS that hurricane Katrina had, in fact, not breached the levees in New Orleans despite multiple contrary reports, thus delaying relief efforts and resulting in disastrous consequences. Broderick had significant experience, both domestically and abroad, in on-ground operations during past hurricanes. His prior experience told him that early reports in these situations are often false and that he should wait for a credible ground report before acting. However, his pattern matching was misleading in this case, due to a subtle but crucial difference. New Orleans was a city below sea level, and all his earlier experiences were with cities that were above sea level. The emotional tags from his earlier successful decisions, combined with the superficial similarity of New Orleans to other cities, caused his intuition to betray him.

Almost 17 years later, the Australian cricket team's decision to sweep their way out of the second Test match in the Arun Jaitley Stadium in Delhi on February 19, 2023, provides another opportunity to understand how the human mind makes decisions and what can be done to avoid these seemingly natural decisions that go woefully wrong. Australia scored merely 113 runs in their second innings and lost to India by six wickets on Day 3 of a five-day match.

THE PATTERN It is well known in cricketing circles that higher silt and organic content and the resulting lower plasticity index of Indian soil provide an opportunity for skilled spinners to feast in the Indian subcontinental conditions. This feature has been the guiding principle for touring teams to prepare against India. A central component of this preparation is the sweep shot. Joe Root, the prolific English batsman, in an interview just before the first test in the England tour of

India in February 2021, said that sweep was one of the shots where he could generate the maximum power. He went on to explain that risk assessment was key to playing the sweep shot and that in the recent tour of Sri Lanka, the sweep shot was the low-risk option considering the state of the pitch. Root scored 218 runs in the first innings of the Test match, leading England to one of only two times India has lost at home in the last decade. Tom Latham, the New Zealand opener, also admitted to using the sweep shot to counter Indian spinners and that it was one of his most productive shots. Hence, there seems to be a pattern to competing in India: Master the sweep shot and hope the bowlers can deliver when the time comes.

THE EMOTIONAL TAGIn the first Test, Alex Carrey repeatedly swept and reverse swept India's spin trio and provided the working proof of a successful technique. The Australian coaching brass presumably took notice and prepared for the next Test. So, what went wrong? This is where the parallels with Broderick's hurricane Katrina debacle emerge. In their pattern matching, the Australians seem to have neglected the difference between Nagpur's red soil and Delhi's black soil. Given that the ball did not bounce as much in Delhi and coupled with the lack of experience of most Australian batsmen in such conditions, Australia lost six out of the nine wickets on Day 3 to the sweep shot. About 11 percent of all balls bowled to Australia were met with the sweep/reverse sweep. India, on the other hand, swept just 1.4 percent of all the balls across both their innings.

WHAT CAN BE DONEWhat can be done in such situations for better decision-making, one might ask? We have two recommendations. First, invite fresh perspectives. The more minds on a matter, the greater the chance that a pattern mismatch will get picked up. The current Australian team could do well to get inputs from former players like Matthew Hayden and Adam Gilchrist, who have done well in India with their sweep shots. Second, be tactically flexible. Don't get too attached to your Plan A, especially if you are a part of the leadership team. Pat Cummins' decision to slog-sweep the first ball he faced when the team was precariously placed at 95 for 6 appears to be an emotional, instinctive expression of defending his failing tactics. By reflecting on one's decisions and understanding the underlying mechanisms, it is possible to educate one's intuition, and that's what good leaders do.

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