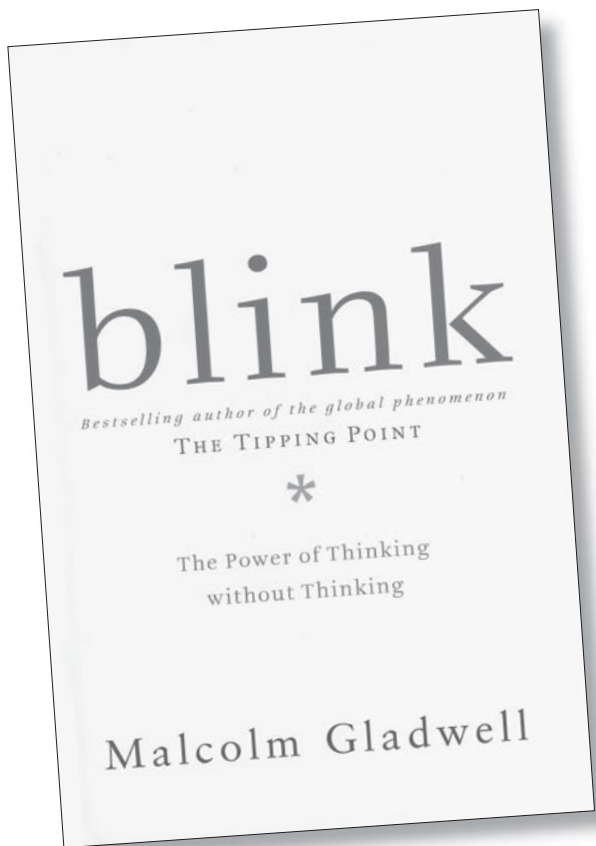




STANFORD MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE  
BUSINESS BOOK SUMMARIES

# BLINK

Malcolm Gladwell



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## The Power of Thinking Without Thinking

**W**hy are some people so much better at making decisions than others? Is it intuition? Is it the questions they ask themselves?

Good or bad decisions will change the course of your company's, your children's, and the world's future. So isn't it important to understand how you are making them?

Well, don't **Blink** or you may miss the answer.

Drawing on cutting-edge neuroscience and psychology, this summary shows you how the difference between good decision-making and bad has nothing to do with how much information you can quickly take in, but on just a few particular details on which you focus.

From this summary you'll learn:

- When snap judgments are good and when are they are not. And how you can improve this ability to make a measurable difference in your business and life
- The reason why months of extensive research by the experts mistook a modern forgery for a \$10 million dollar relic
- How a Doctor can predict with 95% accuracy if a marriage will last 15 years or more

The truth is that in the first 2 seconds when you meet someone new, see a house you are looking to buy or meet your future partner for the first time, you make rapid conclusions.

It's thinking but thinking that is almost immediate, gives highly accurate information and operates a little more mysteriously than conscious decision making.

And it could be the key to unlocking both your personal and career potential.

You will never think about thinking the same way again.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malcolm Gladwell covered business, science and medicine for the *Washington Post* from 1987 to 1996. He has written more than 60 articles for the *New Yorker* and it was while covering the AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s that Gladwell began to relate epidemics to social behaviour and wrote his bestselling book *The Tipping Point*.

## THE FIRST 2 SECONDS

Let me tell you a story. In September 1983 an art dealer named Gianfranco Becchina approached the J. Paul Getty Museum in California about a piece he had in his possession. It was a marble statue which – he said – dated back to the 6th century B.C. This particular kind of statue is known as a **kouros** – a sculpture of a male nude, arms at his sides, left leg forward.

There are only about 200 kouros in existence and most have been recovered either in fragments or quite badly damaged from archaeological digs. But this one was almost perfectly preserved. Standing close to 7 feet tall, its light-coloured glow set it apart from other ancient works. It was a truly remarkable find. Becchina's asking price was close to \$10million.

The museum moved cautiously, conducting a thorough investigation process that lasted 14 months. Top geologists examined the surface of the statue using painstaking care and the latest technology.

They concluded the statue was made of dolomite marble from an ancient quarry on the island of Thasos, and the surface was covered in a thin layer of calcite. This was significant – the geologist told the museum – because it takes hundreds, if not thousands, of years for dolomite to turn into calcite. The Getty museum was convinced of the authenticity of the statue, and it went on display for the first time late in 1986.

However, the kouros had a problem. **It just didn't look right.** Foremost experts on Greek sculpture from around the world all saw it differently, all explained it in their own way, but they all saw it.

Federico Zeri, an Italian art historian who served on the Getty's board of trustees first saw the kouros in the museum's restoration studio in December 1983. He found himself staring at the sculpture's fingernails. **He couldn't**

**articulate it, but they seemed wrong to him.**

Next was Evelyn Harrison, one of the world's foremost experts on Greek sculpture. In the first moment she saw the sculpture all she had was a hunch. **She instinctively sensed that something was just amiss.**

Expert after expert saw the statue and all immediately voiced their concerns.

*"It seemed 'fresh'. And 'fresh' is not the right reaction to have to an ancient statue."*

*"Anyone who has ever seen a sculpture coming out of the ground could tell that thing has never been in the ground."*

*"I felt as though there was a glass between me and the work."*

Further investigations revealed more questions about the statue's authenticity. Now, beside the picture of the kouros in the Getty's catalogue is the notation:

*"About 530 B.C., or modern forgery."*

When each of these people looked at the kouros and felt an 'intuitive repulsion', they were absolutely right. **In a single glance – the first 2 seconds – they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than an investigative team with all their fancy equipment could understand in 14 months.**

**Blink is about the power of those first two seconds.**

## SNAP DECISIONS

Let's get right to the 'blink' core. Here are the crucial facts about snap judgements that bubble up from your subconscious in those first and powerful 2 seconds.

### 1. Fast and Frugal

Snap judgements are enormously quick and they rely on the thinnest slices of experience.

### 2. The Locked Door of the Internal Computer

Snap judgements and rapid cognition take place behind a locked door in your mind. The internal computer of your unconscious is constantly processing things beyond your knowledge and awareness – behind a locked door. A locked door that you don't tend to deal with very well. It's



one thing to acknowledge the enormous power of snap judgements and thin-slices, but it's another thing to trust the mystery of that process.

### **3. A Different and Better World**

What would happen if you paid attention to the particulars of fleeting moments, if you took your instincts seriously? If, instead of examining the world, you examined your own decision making process? I believe you would change the way you work, teach, learn, police, market, prescribe, and vote. And it would be a change for the better. As the curator of the J. Paul Getty Museum said when the truth about the kouros emerged,

*"I always considered scientific opinion more objective than esthetic judgements. Now I realise I was wrong."*

#### **RAPID COGNITION**

We live in a world that is suspicious of this kind of rapid cognition. **We assume the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it.** We ask for more tests, a second opinion. We tell our children: Haste makes waste. Look before you leap. Stop and *think*. Don't judge a book by its cover.

Acknowledge that while this kind of deliberate conscious thinking and decision-making has its place, immediate snap decisions that bubble up from your unconscious are equally valid, valuable and powerful. It's all contextual. **Sometimes it pays to stop and think, at other times a blink will do... that's when thinking will, in fact, cause problems.** Identify which time is which and learn how to prepare yourself to 'blink' well.

How do you start? The so-called holiest of promises, marriage, will give you the first step and it may even hold the key to the success of all your future relationships!

#### **MARRIAGE MORSE CODE**

A young couple – I'll call them Bill and Susan – came to visit the laboratory of a psychologist named John Gottman at the University of Washington some years ago. They were in their twenties, quite stylish, the kind of couple that is easy to like – intelligent and funny in a droll, ironic kind of way.

That much is obvious in the videotape Gottman made of their visit.

They were led into a small room, and they sat down about five feet apart from each other on office chairs mounted on raised platforms. They both had electrodes and sensors clipped to their fingers and ears, measuring things like their heart rate, how much they were sweating, and the temperature of their skin. A "jiggle-o-meter" under their chairs measured how much they each moved around.

Two video cameras, one aimed at each person, recorded everything they said and did. They were left alone for 15 minutes with instructions to discuss any topic from their marriage that had become a point of contention. For them it was their dog. Bill didn't like the dog. Susan did.

The videotape of Bill and Susan's discussion seems, at first, to be a random sample of a very ordinary conversation. No one gets angry. There are no scenes, no breakdowns, no epiphanies. They banter back and forth happily, both with a half smile on their lips.

Now, I'm sure you are thinking like I was. **How much can you learn about Bill and Susan's marriage by watching a 15 minute videotape? How can you tell if their relationship is healthy or unhealthy?**

I suspected a discussion about a dog wouldn't tell us much at all. You'd have to gather much more information about important things that effect relationships, like money, children, jobs, in-laws, in constantly changing combinations.

Gottman has proven that we don't have to do that at all. Studying over 3,000 couples in his 'love lab', Gottman has dubbed a coding system over the videotapes. This coding system – like a kind of marriage morse code – has 20 separate categories corresponding to every conceivable emotion married couples might experience during a conversation.

Categories including disgust, contempt, anger, defensiveness, whining, sadness, stonewalling, neutral and so on. Gottman's staff are trained to read every emotional nuance in people's facial expressions and how to interpret seemingly ambiguous bits of dialog. Each second is coded, so a fifteen minute videotape is translated into a row of 1,800 numbers: 900 for the husband and 900 for the wife.

Listening closely, Gottman's staff point out that Bill is



being very defensive. On the surface it looks like he's pleasantly agreeing, but he was cross-complaining and engaging in 'yes-but' tactics – appearing to agree but then taking it back. Bill was also coded as defensive for 40 of the first 66 seconds of their conversation.

As for Susan, on several occasions she rolled her eyes very quickly, which is a classic sign of contempt. She'd reply by closing her eyes and assuming a patronising lecturing voice. And never during the whole session did she show support by nodding or saying 'uh-huh' or 'yeah', which no-one realised until they did the coding.

At no time did either of them show any overt signs of hostility, only subtle things that popped up for a second or two. "You don't get the sense that they're an unhappy couple, they're just completely inflexible whenever they have a disagreement. What seems positive isn't actually positive at all. I wonder if there's enough positive emotion there to get through the 7-year wall?"

Gottman's findings show that for a marriage to survive, the ratio of positive to negative emotion in a given encounter must be at least 5 to 1. All marriages have a distinctive pattern, a kind of marriage DNA that surface in any kind of meaningful interaction. That's why Gottman asks couples to tell the story of how they met because that pattern shows up right away.

Although he studies the vast array of emotions in marriages – in his most ambitious work, *The Mathematics of Divorce* – Gottman identified the core, what he calls The Four Horsemen: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism and contempt. So he only needs to look for a thin-slice of specific information and Gottman and his staff can predict with astonishing accuracy, 90-95%, whether a couple will still be together in 15 years based on as little as 3 minutes of videotape.

**The truth of a relationship and marriage can be understood in a much shorter time than anyone ever imagined.**

#### THIN-SLICING

Gottman doesn't make snap judgements in 'the first 2 seconds'. There's nothing instinctive about his approach. He painstakingly analyses videotapes second by second, a classic example of conscious and deliberate thinking. But Gottman introduces us to a crucial part of rapid

cognition known as '**Thin-Slicing**' – **the ability of your unconscious to find patterns in situations and behaviour based on very narrow slices of experience... like the first 2 seconds.**

Do you often seek a second opinion and further information, even when you have an initial insight or a strong first impression? This extra information or explanation might make you feel more confident, but too much information actually prevents you from being able to thin-slice.

#### THIN-SLICING & SALES

You show me a great sales person and I'll show you thin-slicing in action. Let's say you observe a prospect for the first time. How is this person feeling? Insecure and nervous? Maybe they are confident and certain of what they want? Maybe they know nothing about you or your product and want someone to guide them step by step?

The point is that a successful salesperson has the ability to gather in all that information, in the first couple of moments, process it and then adapt their behaviour accordingly. If a salesperson can't do this then they run the risk of approaching the prospect in the wrong way and losing the sale.

The less skilled salesperson would simply notice how the prospect looks and let that first impression overshadow all other pieces of info they gathered in that first moment.

How do you alter your ability to thin-slice? Well, the challenge is that those first impressions are occurring outside your normal awareness. They rise up from the unconscious, and how do you change something that is coming from that area of the mind?

Well, fortunately impressions are created by what you experience and your environment. Change the way you experience something, alter your environment, and you will change the way you thin-slice.

#### PRIMED FOR ACTION

Imagine that I'm a professor, and I've asked you to come and see me in my office. You walk down a long corridor, into my office and sit down at a table. In front of you is a sheet of paper with a list of 5-word sets. I ask you to make a grammatical 4-word sentence as quickly as possible out of each set. It's called a scrambled sentence test. Ready?



1. him was worried she always
2. from are Florida oranges temperature
3. ball the throw toss silently
4. shoes give replace old the
5. he observes occasionally people watches
6. be will seat lonely they
7. sky the seamless grey is
8. should now withdraw forgetful we
9. us bingo sing play let
10. sunlight makes temperature wrinkle raisins

That seemed fairly straightforward, right? Wrong. Believe it or not, after finishing that test you would have walked out of my office and back down the hall more slowly than you walked in. With that simple test I affected the way you behaved. How?

Scattered throughout the list are certain words such as ‘worried’, ‘Florida’, ‘old’, ‘lonely’, ‘grey’, ‘bingo’, and ‘wrinkle’. It seemed like just a language test, but I was also making part of your brain – the adaptive unconscious – think about the state of being old. It didn’t tell the rest of your brain about its sudden obsession, but it took it seriously and you acted old. You walked slowly.

This test – invented by psychologist John Bargh – is an example of a priming experiment. Many fascinating variations of this experiment have been conducted, all showing just how much goes on behind the locked door of our subconscious.

One such test at New York University sprinkled words like ‘aggressively’, ‘bold’, ‘rude’, ‘bother’, ‘disturb’, ‘intrude’, and ‘infringe’ through a scrambled-sentence test for one group of students. A second group had words like ‘respect’, ‘considerate’, ‘appreciate’, ‘patiently’, ‘yield’, ‘polite’, and ‘courteous’ sprinkled through their test.

Both groups of students were then instructed to walk down the hall and ask the person running the next experiment for the next assignment. But when the student got there, they made sure the experimenter was busy, locked in a conversation with someone else for ten minutes. Bargh wanted to learn whether the people primed with the polite words would take longer to interrupt the conversation than those primed with the rude words.

*“We thought we’d be measuring the difference in milliseconds. I mean, these are New Yorkers. They aren’t going to just stand there.”*

The people primed to be rude eventually interrupted – on average after about 5 minutes. But of the people primed to be polite, the overwhelming majority – 82% – never interrupted at all. *They just stood there.*

Priming is not like brainwashing. But its effects are not trivial either.

Two Dutch researchers conducted a study with 42 fairly demanding questions from the board game Trivial Pursuit. Half of the students were asked to think for five minutes beforehand what it would mean to be a professor and write down everything that came to mind. Those students got 55.6% of the questions right.

The other half of the students were asked to think about soccer hooligans. These students got 42.6% of the questions right. That’s a huge difference. The students weren’t any smarter or more focused or more serious. But priming had made an enormous difference – the difference between passing and failing.

An even more extreme version of this test used black college students and 20 questions taken from the standardised test used for entry into graduate school. When students were asked to identify their race on a pre-test questionnaire, that simple act was sufficient to prime them with all the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans and academic achievement – and the number of items they got right was cut *in half*.

As a society, we place enormous faith in tests because we think they are a reliable indicator of the test-taker’s ability and knowledge. But are they? Or are they more a reliable indicator of how we’ve been primed?

#### **SPONTANEITY IS NOT RANDOM**

Paul Van Riper (Rip) was the commander of Mike Company (First Marine Division) in South Vietnam. He was strict and fair. He was a student of war, with clear ideas about how his men ought to conduct themselves in combat. He was a gunslinger, who didn’t command his troops from behind a desk, but led them from the front. Van Riper was selected to head the opposing Red Team



in a war game aimed to test the government's new surveillance equipment for future conflicts. The Pentagon had anticipated that the United States – which is always the Blue Team – with its superior intelligence-gathering capabilities, its total informational superiority, and its carefully delineated leadership structures, would crush Van Riper's enemy Red Team.

Even with the most sophisticated equipment on the planet and going to every possible length for success, the Blue Team just had no chance. Rip and his Red Team were too unpredictable and instinctive. The Blue Team lost.

Rip believed you couldn't lift the fog of war, no matter how much surveillance and information you had access to. You couldn't see inside the other man's mind. Rip's men knew they were in command but out of control. He thought and planned first, and acted in the moment. And he gave his men authority to decide and act in the moment as well. Their meetings were short; no explanations of their actions were required. They were instinctive, spontaneous. And they won.

#### NO EXPLANATIONS

Whether he was conscious of it or not, Van Riper's instincts guided him to have a rule: decide and act on instincts, and keep discussion short. No debrief. He recognised that **insight is not a light bulb that goes on inside our heads. It is a flickering candle that can easily be snuffed out.** And you must protect that precious flame.

Verbal overshadowing is the effect that occurs when we have an insight and then try to use words to either describe our visual first impression, or to explain how we know what we know. When we discuss or debrief it, the actual impression is displaced, transplanted to a different part of our brain where first impressions lose their accuracy.

**Justifications and descriptions usually make us feel more confident, but the basic neurological effect is that the act of talking makes the story we tell much less accurate than our first impression.**

#### WARREN HARDING ERROR

Warren Harding was – most historians agree – one of the

worst presidents in American history. He served for 2 years before dying unexpectedly of a stroke. But how he came to become a presidential candidate holds some crucial lessons and warnings for us:

*“Why do we fall for tall, dark, handsome men?”*

When Harry Daugherty first met Harding – as they both had their shoes shined one morning in 1899 – Daugherty sized him up and thought: “Wouldn't that man make a great President?” Or a great-looking President. At the time Daugherty was the Machiavelli of Ohio politics, the classic behind-the-scenes fixer, and shrewd judge of character, or at least political opportunity.

Harding was worth looking at. At about 35 years old, his features, size and proportion attracted attention. The term ‘Roman’ was occasionally used in descriptions of him. He was classically tall, dark and handsome and appeared courteous, virile, generous, genuine and good-natured.

However, Harding wasn't a particularly intelligent man. He liked to drink, play poker and golf, and – most of all – chase women. He was vague and ambivalent on matters of policy. His speeches were once described as “an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea”. In 1914 he was absent for the debates on the biggest political issues of his time – women's suffrage and prohibition.

How did this man become President? He looked the part. **Consciously we listen to facts and political discussion. Unconsciously we respond to stereotypes and looks.**

Sometimes we can know more about someone or something in the blink of an eye than we can after months of study. But we have to understand those circumstances when rapid cognition can lead us astray.

Most CEO's fit Harding's description. In the US population about 14.5% of all men are six foot or taller. Among CEO's of Fortune 500 companies that number is 58%. Even more striking, in the general American population, 3.9% of adult men are six foot two or taller. Among my CEO sample almost a third were six foot two or taller.

*Is being short really a handicap?*



### NEVER GIVE TOO MANY CHOICES

Having set up her table of unique jams for tasting in an upmarket grocery store in California, Columbia University Professor Sheena Lyengar was ready to start her experiment. She wanted to test the conventional wisdom that says that the more choices a shopper has the more chance of them buying. A fair theory seeing as how more choice would give consumers greater chance of finding a product that suits their needs.

Alternating between 6 different jams and sometimes 24 different jams, she ultimately found that although conventional, this theory was not sound wisdom.

30% of shoppers that stopped by the 6 jam table eventually bought. Only 3% handed over money on the 24 jam booth. Why?

Because purchasing jam is a snap decision. By having too many choices your unconscious becomes uncomfortable and your ability to make snap decisions is affected. In a way you experience a type of paralysis. A very costly malady for many companies.

### WHEN MIND READING FAILS

#### **We're all old hands at thin-slicing faces and emotions.**

We do it all the time in conversations and relationships. Producers count on this fact when creating movies. They know we will focus on the actors' faces, and a large amount of dialog is unnecessary because of the innuendo, flirtation, desire, dread, suspicion and agendas that are portrayed via emotional face-play. There is an entire world of unconscious and unwritten 'mind-reading' type communication that we participate in every day.

However, **people with autism don't experience this unconscious aspect of mind-reading that the rest of us take for granted.**

Robert T. Schultz at Yale once did an experiment with a highly sophisticated brain scanner that gives a visual image of where the blood is flowing in the brain at any given time – hence, which part of the brain is in use.

Schultz put people in the scanner and had them perform a very simple task. They were given pairs of objects or pairs of faces and they were to press a button indicating whether the pairs were the same or different.

When most people looked at the faces they used a part

of their brain called the fusiform gyrus, an incredibly sophisticated piece of brain software that allows us to distinguish among the literally thousands of faces we know. When normal participants looked at a chair, however, they used a completely different and less powerful part of the brain – the inferior temporal gyrus – which is normally reserved for objects.

The difference in the sophistication of these two regions explains why you can recognise Sally from the eighth grade forty years later but have trouble picking out your bag on the airport luggage carousel.

However, Schultz found that **autistic people used the object-recognition area of their brain for both the chairs and the faces.** On the most basic neurological level – for someone with autism – a face is just another object. They don't look at faces very much and, in a culture where interpreting emotions from faces is an assumed skill, autistic people don't accurately mind-read faces when they happen to look at them.

While someone with autism may be highly intelligent, hold graduate degrees, and be well respected, they lack one basic ability: the ability to mind-read, meaning they may interpret emotions and come to conclusions that are socially completely and catastrophically wrong.

Their condition makes them permanently mind-blind. I can't help but wonder if – under certain circumstances – the rest of us could momentarily think like that as well.

**What if it were possible for autism – mind-blindness – to be a temporary condition instead of a chronic one? Could that explain why sometimes otherwise normal people come to conclusions that are completely and catastrophically wrong?**

### TEMPORARY AUTISM

I think **we become temporarily autistic when we're overly aroused and when we run out of time.**

Many police departments in recent years have banned high-speed chases. It's not because of the dangers of hitting some innocent bystander *during* the chase, although that's clearly a worry.

It's also because of what happens *after* the chase, since pursuing a suspect at high speed is precisely the kind of activity that pushes police officers into this dangerous state



of high arousal. The Rodney King-LA riot, the Liberty City riot in 1980 and the Miami 1986 riot were all caused by what cops did at the end of a high speed chase.

“When you get going at high speeds,” says Bob Martin, a former high-ranking LAPD officer, “Even if it’s only fifty miles per hour, your adrenaline and heart start pumping like crazy. You lose perspective. You get wrapped up in the chase. For new officers it’s almost hysteria. I remember my first pursuit. We got airborne a couple of times. Finally, when we captured him, I went back to the car to radio in and say we were okay, and I couldn’t even pick up the radio, I was shaking so badly.”

There are some rules in place to reduce the impact of this arousal. At the end of a chase, police officers are never supposed to approach the offending vehicle. They are supposed to stay at their own vehicle. But the arousal that rule is in place to manage is the exact same arousal that causes that rule to be broken.

Also, many police departments have moved toward one-officer squad cars. They are no safer in pairs than they are alone. And two-officer teams are more likely to have complaints filed against them. With two officers, encounters with citizens are far more likely to end in arrest or injury. Why?

*Because when police officers are by themselves, they slow things down, and when they are with someone else, they speed things up.*

Temporary autism can be avoided by what people – and police officers – do before they begin a game or encounter a suspect. You don’t want to put yourself in a situation where you have to rely on your reflexes. Slow things down, both your heart rate and your urgency. **Get back to a state in which you can rely on your instincts. At high speeds you’re autistic, and you can’t blink.**

#### WHAT MARKET RESEARCH IS MISSING

Market research misses out on massive hits not because it is too cautious, but because it is too one-sided. Spending all available time and resources on tests, surveys and collecting and analysing data, today’s market research methods miss out on the power of those first 2 crucial seconds.

Data shows what people have liked in the past, not what they like now or what they will like in the future. The

unfamiliar tends to rate poorly according to market research just because it is unknown, not because it is unliked. You also need to be careful of what you are actually testing – the taste of a sweet sip of Pepsi may outperform a sip of Coke, but by the end of one can and the opening of the next the popularity figures are reversed.

Embrace and include both forms of evaluation and decision-making. Prepare for both and benefit from both. To make sense of ourselves and our behaviour **you must acknowledge there can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis.**

#### HOW TO BLINK

So, to put it all in a nutshell, follow these 7 steps to ‘blinking’ your life into shape:

1. **Prepare** for Spontaneity and Rapid Cognition
2. Reduce the Effects of **Temporary Autism**
3. **Beware** the Warren Harding Error
4. **Prime** the Unconscious for Action
5. **Thin-Slices:** Too Much Info = Confidence, but not Accuracy
6. **First 2 Seconds:** Trust Snap Decisions/Insights, not Shallow Assumptions/Guesses
7. Don’t Kill Insights with **Explanations**



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