



How Dangerous Is Common Sense to Managers?

Published: August 4, 2011

Author: James Heskett

Summing Up

Does Common Sense Impede Change?

Common sense is the decision-maker's friend when the decision has to be made rapidly, with a minimum of research or formal theory, with no more than moderate risk or consequences, and by individuals who have accumulated experience and wisdom. If those conditions don't prevail, watch out. At risk of oversimplification, that sums up the responses to this month's column, in which most readers accepted to some degree author Duncan Watts' description of how common sense fails us.

First things first. Several offered definitions of common sense. Tomy Tharian, for example, said "common sense is quite often related to ... wisdom (from accumulated experience vs. the knowledge that the younger generation acquires so rapidly through social networks)." Noting that Webster's Dictionary defines common sense as "sound and prudent judgment based on the simple perception of the situation or facts," JR adds that "Common sense is not in the knowledge but in the application of the knowledge." Others placed emphasis on the word "common." S. A. Visotsky, for example, said that "Common sense is defined as beliefs or propositions that most people consider prudent ..." Duncan Watts himself found it "surprisingly hard to pin down. Roughly speaking, it is the loosely organized set of facts, observations, experiences, insights, and pieces of received wisdom that each of us accumulates over a lifetime...."

Common sense had its defenders. C. J. Cullinane commented that "Common sense and experience for all their faults are fast." Phil Clark added that "how man reacts to a situation is driven by habit and choices gained through experience." Atul Gulrani cited the quotation, "In simplicity lies the ultimate sophistication."

Many agreed with the author while placing common sense in a broader context. Herb Brotspies quoted Peter Drucker to make his point: "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic." Rebecca Mott commented that "Managers who use only common sense to make decisions can fall prey to short-sighted thinking." Ajay Kumar Gupta cautioned that "we tend to forget many things" and "tend to exclude external dynamics that were present" at the time previous decisions served or failed us.

Most felt that common sense had its place in combination with formal systems of knowledge, research, and planning. As Michael Aschenbach put it, "If you get lost in the woods, it is good to have survival experience. Having a map is nice, too." Jamie Hsu said that "It is the combination of theory and common sense that makes a great leader and decision maker." Jeremy Pooley asked, "Could it be that planning and testing helps us better understand the questions we need to be asking and answering before we try and architect solutions?"

Seena Sharp left us with the interesting question of whether, to the extent common sense reflects what has worked in the past, its overuse reduces our acceptance of change? Does common sense impede change? What

do you think?

Jim Heskett's latest book, [The Culture Cycle](#), will be published in September.

Original Article

Some of the more interesting writing that is relevant to management these days is found in out-of-the-way places in my local bookstore. In addition to the management and economics sections, you should check out neuroscience, psychology, and sociology--the research being reported there on how the mind and body work is thought provoking.

For example, in [Everything is Obvious, Once You Know the Answer: How Common Sense Fails Us](#), sociologist Duncan Watts' thesis is that, in predicting outcomes and acting accordingly, we give far too much credence to such things as our own experiences, our ability to determine what is important, and history itself—mainly because complex phenomena are based on events that never repeat themselves and can't be examined scientifically. Once we know the outcome of a situation, we rationalize the reasons why it occurred and convince ourselves that we've learned something from it that we can use in making future decisions. As a result, we give unwarranted credit to such things as experience, intuition, and even common sense.

Watts challenges our ability to assess the validity of experiences on which common sense is based, thereby raising the question of whether common sense based on accumulated experience can be of any help to decision-makers forced to predict the future in complex situations. Watts questions much of the recent work that purports to identify causes and effects in complex, unique situations involving such things as tipping points and many of the phenomena examined by the [Freakonomists](#). In fact, nearly all writing about management and behavioral economics that seeks to credit performance to one cause or another is suspect. Anything based on this faux knowledge, including our common sense, is challenged.

If this research were valid, Watts argues, why wouldn't we be able to predict the success of a strategy, a new disruptive technology, a product, or an advertisement? The reasons he gives are that these phenomena are too complex, involving so many variables that they can't be repeated or even tested effectively. (The Vanguard Group's founder, John Bogle, has been arguing this for years, concluding that mutual funds are more successful when they are not managed.)

What are we to do? According to Watts, it may mean confining our use of common sense to everyday routine decisions for which recent experience can truly be helpful, such as the best route to take to work to avoid traffic. Newer technologies such as the Internet, social networks, and specialized hardware may come to the rescue by providing easy ways of surveying customers, testing product features, and conducting business experiments. Rapid-response systems may, in some cases, eliminate the need to predict the future by allowing managers to respond only to events that have just occurred. A variation on this was proposed years ago by Henry Mintzberg in his critique of strategic planning when he suggested that instead of long-term planning, managers should practice "emergent" strategy formulation in which long-term predictions are replaced by efforts to better understand what is going on at present.

According to Watts, leaders run the risk of injecting too much common sense into decisions, uninformed by experimentation that could be designed to identify cause and effect. Does Watts have something here? Are too few strategies based on testing before investing? Do we make too much use of our common sense under the wrong circumstances? Do we use it unreliably to emphasize some and ignore other information? Do we give common sense too much credit for success? What do you think?

Reference:

Duncan J. Watts, [Everything is Obvious, Once You Know the Answer: How Common Sense Fails Us](#) (New York: Crown Business, 2011) [WK](#)

Reader Comments:

1. In my experience managers do not have much time to decide what option to take in the majority of issues. The operational decisions often have to be made fast (and sometimes furious). Common sense and experience for all their faults are fast.

The time and ability to test our assumptions are a luxury we may not have at the time the decision or direction has to be made. Experience and 'gut reactions' are often the only option a manager/executive has when a decision has to be made. The methodology of the academic may not be timely enough for the executive in the real world.

I think we would all like to have more time and input to study the decisions we have to make but often we do not. President Carter studied all decisions and studied all options, President Reagan did not! Who do you feel was more effective?

Charlie

CJ Cullinane

2. Descartes said that "Common sense is the best distributed thing on earth since everybody thinks that they have enough. But not everyone can be right." Four hundred years ago! The problem with common sense is that you never know what you are talking about so you can never be the judge to one's decision. Usually, however, you are talking about someone who is lazy enough not to study complex subjects and takes decisions based on chance. It's probably not well studied how many of these people were effective, and how many ended up in disasters.

Paulo Costa-pinto

Director

VC County, Portugal

3. There is no short answer to Professor Heskett's question, "How Dangerous is Common Sense to Managers? The dangers posed by common sense are reflected on the managerial decisions made and how much risk (unintended consequences) is acceptable in the decisions being incorrect. Also, what do we mean by common sense? (Gravity on earth is common sense to many since Newton explained the phenomenon and we experience it every day but weightlessness in space is probably not common sense to many) Do we assume that any manager would make a decision (exactly) the same way given the same information? If we assume that no two managers are alike (in many respects), how likely are they to make the same decision given the same information? Also, it depends on the possible set of decision outcomes and their complexity. It depends on the static/dynamic environment of the issues to be resolved. It depends on the window of opportunity to make the decision (the more time a manager has the more time the manager has to reflect consciously/unconsciously on the decision based on common sense if the manager desires). It depends on the managers' approach to decision making: common sense is one of several methods or the only method employed by the manager. It depends on the managers' risk profiles and how likely the managers are to be held responsible/censured for making the incorrect decisions. Is it thoughtful or thoughtless common sense?

Ravindra Edirisooriya

Senior Accounting and Finance Major

Missouri Southern State University

4. There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom.

Knowledge comes with exposure. The young generation has in abundance through the net and social networks. What they lack and what the elders should have in abundance is wisdom ..which develops with experience in life. And life is the best teacher.

Common sense is quite often related to the wisdom one has and not always the knowledge one possesses. It is wisdom which enables a person to convert one's knowledge into judgement especially in times of emergencies.

In times of crisis or novelty or when one is required to make sense out of nonsense, it is the emotional, social and intellectual maturity (what we may call as common sense or gut reaction) governed by the wisdom which assists one in making effective decisions.

I am tempted to believe that common sense (in that sense) is very much required in today's competitive, time constrained corporate existence.

Cdr. Tomy P Tharian
Senior Consultant - Talent Mangement
INSPIRONS

5. The common sense says that it's the success that makes efforts worthwhile. The manager who succeeds would prove her strategies right and the manager who fails would be blamed for her flawed logic. Experience in any field involving human behavior encourages the practitioners to associate any favorable outcomes to their decisions. It is the distinctness of the thought process resulting in success that identifies leaders in most of the fields. Distinctness of the thought process resulting in failure means end of careers for many. I think that discrimination between success and failure is the most common malpractice around the globe.

Gaurav Goel
DGM
RCom

6. Algos rule. When 80+ percent of market decisions are relegated to algorithm-driven computers, nothing seems to make sense to us primates. The 1.4 trillion dollar arithmetic error at S&P was refreshing, somebody actually did it. Making business decisions is similar to battling the computer on Jeopardy!, who or what presses the button first becomes the game.

Tom Dolemba
Founder
New North Institute

7. "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic." -- Peter Drucker

Herb Brotspies

8. One of the smartest men I've ever met, Dr. James Buell, told me this very early in my consulting career and I've always found it has served me well when making difficult decisions ...

There's nothing inherently good about common sense and nothing common about good sense....

Cheryl Moody

President/CEO
Three Parameters Plus, Inc.

9. Webster's Dictionary defines it as "sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts."

If I go to bed tonight and wake up tomorrow morning and find 6 inches of snow on the ground, what can I deduce? Empirically speaking, I must assume that it snowed last night. However, if I'm living in Florida, in the middle of August, what can I deduce now? A prank? A miracle? A freak of nature?

Common sense is not in the knowledge but in the application of the knowledge.

JR

10. There is nothing wrong with common sense. Unfortunately, common sense.....isn't common.

Rodney L. Hendrix
Purchasing Manager

11. Thank you Professor Heskett for another thought provoking question! Perhaps under the guise of "common sense" we allow ourselves a proxy of too much certainty and confidence in our assessments of cause and effect and the "rightness" of our decisions as leaders. Perfect knowledge of causality is generally unattainable even with great rigour, yet alone relying on "common sense". On the other hand we need to make our best choices to act to produce the best results we can in any venture or cause often without the benefit of as much time as anyone would like. As I have often said in acknowledging this challenge to my teams, and perhaps in doing so said as much to myself, "Just because it [the pursuit of a better way, better results] is difficult [highly complex and uncertain] doesn't mean we shouldn't try [for the sake of our mission and those we serve]". Nonetheless, in doing so, we and those we serve are better served when we allow ourselves a generous dose of humility in our capacity and certainty to determine and implement that which is best; to do the right thing right. My antidote of choice is openness to continuous learning and growth; to continually testing my assumptions (although I am still surprised when I catch myself in one) and giving myself and others a little grace for our very human desire for certainty in a vastly uncertain existence.

Gerard Bremault
Chief Executive Officer
The Centre for Child Development

12. Managing organizations, both strategically and tactically, is akin to looking through a keyhole, attempting to discern what's on the other side. Management decision making is always conducted and cursed with imperfect information. Good managers accept this, 'buck up', and move toward problem resolution, not delay it hoping for better information. Excellent leaders have the discipline and humility to conduct continuous post-mortems and plan initiatives with built-in checkpoints that accommodate late-breaking updates and allow for course corrections.

Dennis Hopwood
Director of Human Resources
Eastern Oregon University

13. "Common sense" is relative to one's life experience. What is common sense in one culture may not be so in another culture. Managers who use only common sense to make decisions can fall prey to short-sighted thinking. This is acceptable as long as you are not looking for your company to grow or innovate beyond the borders of a specific community. We all know that concept is not realistic in today's

complex business world. Today's managers must balance aggressive goals with a practicality that some label "common sense." I call it being realistic.

Rebecca Mott
Project Manager

14. The question has to do with how we use various kinds of intelligence to make decisions or solve problems. The planning approach emphasizes vision. The anti-planning approach emphasizes adaptability. Thirty plus years as a consultant and business entrepreneur has taught me that both approaches work best when combined. It is good to develop skills for responding quickly to emergencies (putting out fires) and it is good to have a structured project management plan. If you get lost in the woods, it is good to have survival experience. Having a map is nice too. The problem with "common sense" is that it often uses old maps.

Michael Aschenbach
President
Emerging Vision Media

15. This is a great topic. It is as old as mankind and will remain a puzzle to our end. We can study it, dissect it, and theorize about common sense, but bottom line...how man reacts to a situation is driven by habit and choices gained through experience. As events unfold we rationalize what is going on based on our knowledge and, in the end assume, we have learned something. Sometimes yes...sometimes no. We often don't know what we don't know. So how can we develop a rationalized reason for the event?

It isn't that we are just guessing but simply trying to make sense of the world around us so we can "safely" function in it. Basically, living and surviving.

CJ Cullinane has it right. Many times we have only moments to make a decision. There is not time to think long and hard. As others mentioned about long-term planning...the world changes daily so without the ability to adapt you will once again find yourself left behind. We are at the mercy of the world and must learn to deal with it. Naturally, this is very difficult for those who think they are in control or want control.

Phil Clark
Clark & Associates

16. It has always been easy and fast to employ common sense in decision making. Many managers make mistakes by looking and depending on their vast experience, while ignoring the current situation or environment. I have been a manager of a vast Multinational Corporation since 2007. I have been challenged many times new employees, low level managers and customer in my decision making process.

Common sense works when all things are constant and the environment is stable, However, in times like this (when things are changing daily, new law and legislation) Managers need to make decision based on understanding of the environment and the effects of those decisions on both their customers, Shareholder expectations and most of all the society. Managers need to be quick in making decisions but with the commitment to remain ethical for the benefit of man kind.

Mathews Daniel Kapito
National Directr
Notebook Solutions

17. We all love spending time watching movies variably from action-packed to emotional love-hate stories

in spare time. Does all the story make sense?

The mysterious thing is that why we love watching movies that amazingly irrational and does not make sense all the time and moreover they usually hit box office more than often. Well, the fact that we love watching these movies-our behaviour, is in fact a 'common sense'. We love watching people assaulting other people in movies but we decline that from happening within our real live. Actually we unconsciously making 'uncommon sense' type of decision more often than we realise.

I think we should welcome this paradox element into our management practice and into our decision making process.

RSB

18. Good article. Common sense is most dangerous to an organization when used out of context.

Common sense should be defined first so we are all talking about the same thing. Common sense is defined as beliefs or propositions that most people consider prudent and of sound judgment, without reliance on esoteric knowledge or study or research, but based upon what THEY see as knowledge held by people "in common", the collective.

Thus "common sense" is accepted as the knowledge and experience which most people already have. The decision making process used by Managers that others around them do not understand, is usually more Pragmatism than common sense. Pragmatism was founded on the idea of finding a scientific concept of truth that does not depend on personal insight (revelation) or reference to some metaphysical realm. The truth of a statement should be judged by the effect it has on our actions, and truth should be seen as what the whole of the scientific community agrees on, or the advent of "true Risk Assessment" in getting to the truth.

Common sense is never the view of the individual, "common" meaning widely accepted as what most would do in any routine situation, very surface oriented.

The two are usually often confused by those who read way too much into everything, and that in and of itself, is proof of those who feel threatened because they don't feel as smart as those making the decisions. Hence, their constant need to dissect every decision made by Management. Such individuals usually blurt out the phrase, " why don't we just do it like this, it's common sense", which is actually their own need to dumb a situation down so that they themselves can understand it, giving the decision legitimacy, at least in their view.

Common sense decisions are reserved for problems that come up routinely and have a low level solution, eg. don't run with scissors. Complex decisions are "one-offs" and cannot be decided in a "common" sense, and are understandably confusing for those in a lower paygrade, usually lacking senior management skills, to include sound decision making experience. That's why Management make the decisions, something all organizations have, "in common".

Dr. S A Visotsky
Chairman & CEO
Vitech Group LLC

19. Actually it is the other way round. Companies hardly try to use " Common Sense" Even after knowing the answer. Though justifications are build with common sense after knowing the answer, yet the pool of sense does not want to keep it as a common solution for the next issue. Because that would be too mundane for one to qualify as a strong manager.

Decision making is not just about resolving issues, it is also a show of strength, power and glory of the manager in uniquely defining the solution. And it is this uncommon sense which is more disastrous.

If only the managers would learn that "In simplicity lies the ultimate sophistication". Most critical issues would be resolved with simple common sense.

Belief systems have to be separated from the common sense. These are potential clutter. Beliefs are our preconditioned minds, common sense is like the ingenuity which flows out of conviction. The one which finally delivers the innovation in decisions.

Let us not undermine Common Sense.

Atul Guglani
Director
Mantex Technologies

20. Common sense serves well when addressing "common" every day occurrences but not necessarily so when dealing with complex issues of medium to long term impact

AM
Group Commercial Devpt. Director

21. To have it in a statement of what I believe some of the comments have conveyed is that, "There is no such thing as common sense."

I learned long ago that what is common sense to one person may not be common to another. At the end of the day, whether common sense is dangerous to a manager will actually depends on a variety of factors.

As such, common sense for any manager on his/her best day will still be nothing more than guesswork, albeit some managers seem to do it better. (Maybe because their's are "Educated Guesswork"? - i.e. taking into account their experiences, information and time available at that particular moment)

At the end of the day, whether common sense is dangerous (or fatal) really depends on what "Common Sense" had the manager accumulated over time.

Chris T
Manager
RS Asia

22. The world changes so fast. The past "common sense" may not apply to now and in the future. The key is to keep ears and eyes open.

Bin Zheng
PepsiCo

23. This topic deserves a wider discussion. It has many perspectives. From an operational standpoint, what arte we saying when we say that decisions have to be made on gut feel or at a moments notice. Are key decisions made this way? Do we get a better result by planning and rapid prototyping or by gut feel? Is that the right question?

Could it be that planning and testing helps us better understand the questions we need to be asking and answering before we try and architect solutions?

Senge et al have long advocated that appropriate thinking, planning and testing helps us do this better and when we do this well we understand the root cause of problems. This process means we end up treating causes not applying band aid solutions to symptoms. Treating the cause allows us to go faster in the execution

And when we take the appropriate time to think, plan and test we also end up focusing on outcomes (which tend to have more value) rather than outputs (which tend to have less value)

Rapid prototyping, innovation, creativity if embedded as BAU processes provide us with the choice and flexibility to determine the speed at which we need to move.

This allows us to be proactive not just reactive. It is easy to be busy, produce outputs, and be good at reacting (managing BAU). It is hard to be proactive and focus on value outcomes in a way that leads growth. And (presumably) growth is the ultimate outcome we want?

Jeremy Pooley

Business Performance Executive
AMP

24. Dr. Deming, the guru who taught Japan the management principles, has said that ' Experience without theory teaches you nothing' It is the combination of theory and common sense that makes a great leader and decision maker. We must always use all parts of our brain, analysis and synthesis. As a individual who has lived in both the East and West, and has both industry and academic experience, I am finding the power of rigorous analysis with a strong dose of common sense. This is not an either-or choice (Western cultural inclination), but to seek holistic systematic solution (Eastern cultural approach)

Jamie Hsu

Professor
Lawrence Tech Univ.

25. With all due respect to Duncan Watts, I completely disagree with his opinion. Throughout my 30+ years in business, I have always found that those individuals that possessed a high degree of "common sense", that could actually think, had intuition, had initiative, gained wisdom based on their experiences, were highly motivated, were and are by far much more creative, contributed more, interacted well with others, and were more interesting people in general. Employees I've had, and people I've known, with multiple degrees from very good universities, and still couldn't figure something out, if they didn't have the instructions. Some were too arrogant to learn anything new, outside of what was taught to them in a classroom, and tended to not interact very well with others. They were "educated" and had impressive degrees, but that was about the extent of it.

I have ended up letting employees go that had impressive education credentials, but when it came to "putting the rubber to the road", they didn't deliver to the level the individuals did that had maybe a couple years of college, but had common sense, experience, initiative, creativity, and motivation in spades.

Degrees are nice, but only up to a point. I think an individual needs a certain amount of common sense to know how to put their schooled knowledge to work. If they have no idea how to put their knowledge to work, then what use is the time spent acquiring the degree?

Anonymous

26. The sense that we discuss now are based on the experiences of the past, that is why it is common today, the senses that we will experience now will be common tomorrow. It's important, therefore, to make a

good sense.

Shameer Khanal
Senior Advisor
GIZ

27. There's a thread on LinkedIn on the use of common sense in good strategy. Over 500 posts long.

Died-in-the-wool management strategists are welcome to read through all the posts. After all you should weigh all the information available.

Those who like to cut to the chase may just read the following summary.

What has been established there is that there are two distinct interpretations of the phrase "common sense".

One takes a literal view. "Knowledge that is common to all".

The other takes the idiomatic view: "Good, creative sense".

Expecting "common sense" to be "common knowledge" is understandable, if linear logic is the preferred blinker.

The "good, creative sense" school thinks of "common sense" as lateral logic. The ability to see the dots where none seemed to exist.

Managers can continue to use their best business school theories to analyze the Gordian Knot.

The one's with common sense will take a sword and cut right through.

Sumit Roy
Founder Director
Univbrands

28. Common sense reflects the past and is comfortable and familiar. It's beliefs or thinking agreed to by most people. If it isn't, we think it's strange or silly and therefore, not common sense.

Accordingly, in a constantly changing business environment, common sense must reflect what's current, which is known by few people. What we know, we have come to know and accept over a period of time, and therefore, it's not current.

This all relates to difficulty accepting change. We do accept it, but again, over a period of time, so that by the time we do, it's no longer current, but it does seem to be common sense.

When decisions rely on common sense, it's less likely to get the desired results because it doesn't include what's changing and emerging. That's the value of market intelligence or market due diligence, which details the reality of today.

Since decisions are only executed today, they need to be based on what's true today, and less on what was true yesterday (common sense.) This and more on the foundation for smarter decisions is detailed in Competitive Intelligence Advantage.

Seena Sharp
Principal and Author

Sharp Market Intelligence

29. The term common sense itself is a misnomer. Our visible blindness to so many simple facts or processes behind our every day social or official occurrences, which when simply taken in to consideration makes all the difference but unfortunately this trait is common among all of us. Common sense is a discovery process in which we come to realize that what we omitted or over looked as an option while making decisions, is an embedded part of our problem or solution. People who give us commonsensical oriented advice us get this wisdom about the common sense after they made a mistake or omission and that wisdom becomes an accumulated knowledge which remains helpful subsequently.

Common sense becomes effective only when there is an uncommon situation or an uncertainty. Otherwise it becomes routine sense! As assumed, if leaders inject too much common sense in to decision ether they are naive to its usefulness or overestimate it as a panacea for all problems.

Experimentation or simulations that we can conceptualize or design is based on probability of an outcome which amounts to predictability of an event which has its own limitation.

If we look at common sense as a one-size-fits-all-solution, it has an underlying assumption that there is nothing beyond that which defies the very logic of acceptability of common sense.

What do the advocates of common sense have to say regarding decisions made purely by "guts"?

Maturity in decision making under uncertainties about future events or outcomes is an art of blending common sense with other tools that at our disposal. Perhaps we ought to have this much common sense!

[Views expressed hereinabove are personal. Not in anyway attributable to the organization to which the author belongs]

Santhanam Krishnan
Saraswat Bank

30. Trouble with common sense is that it is remarkably uncommon. The phrase refers to something that has a single conclusion that would be determined by most people after reasonable consideration. It doesn't mean common as in ordinary. In other words something like the wisdom of crowds (but only loosely). Therefore any decisions made against common sense are consensual and by definition relatively simple enough for lots of people to understand with limited interpretation.

Any half-soaked leadership type numpty who reports making common sense decisions on their own, is in fact not making any decisions at all. Given their extraordinary lack of imagination (or naive lack of insight) they probably shouldn't be allowed to make any decisions anyway! So that's alright then.

Intuition triggers the senses to gather information that the brain rationalises into a few salient patterns that align with the established beliefs that form your personal landscape. A decision described as common sense could be a method of avoiding a real explanation or exposing a lack of pertinent experience? Nice article!

Anonymous

31. Commonsense is a necessary tool for taking decisions on routine matters where indepth examination of issues is not necessary. Based on the experience and the gut feeling to action on such matters, proper results generally emerge. However, it is important that outmoded past experiences which have not been polished keeping changes/developments taken place are not utilised. Alert commonsense is, therefore,

what a good decision maker needs to possess. There are no short cuts when it comes to serious issues and we must not use only our commonsense but instead take the longer route of thorough examination and analysis. Once all details are properly gone into, at the final ok stage a bit of the commonsense may of course come very handy.

Kapil Kumar Sopory
Company Secretary
SMEC(India) Private Limited

32. In Latin America we have a saying that says "You can not put new wine in an old bottle". The entrepreneurs in many cases have to go by their intuition. The experienced manager depends heavily on his own experience. What is enough knowledge is not known? The answer is within you and how sure you feel of your own experience. No question asked. Sometime you have to fly by the seat of your pants others you have time. The problem is always the extremes.

Juan Aguirre
Chair for Entrepreneurship
Universidad Latina Costa Rica

33. Common sense, much like unconventional wisdom, is much maligned.

In any situation when faced with a choice it has less to do with the available sense one applies than the fact that one applies that available sense to make a decision.

One can take the approach of Dixit and Pindyck in their seminal HBR article on capital investments (opportunities/options). These large-scale investments are choices, which are irreversible and uncertain. The passing of time provides more information about making such large investment choices but ultimately the choice has to be made. Real options' modelling is useful in elucidating the outcomes or scenarios but someone still has to make a choice, albeit a very informed one.

In everyday life for large or small decisions, common sense is the only thing we have. As an example, take the Antegen Beacon of Hope case study, CEO Jim Mullen could have chosen not to disclose information about the adversely affected patients. Conventional wisdom or the textbook would say acting as a steward of only the shareholder; he should not exercise the choice of causing the share price to lose its steam. He however used common sense or unconventional wisdom in being honest and transparent with all stakeholders.

However, one extreme case would be in the case of company management where a CEO makes a loaded choice. A loaded choice as in does something to make a short-term gain or with blinders on as to how it affects other stakeholders. That is where a higher common sense through a Board of Directors or governance model chooses to moderate the organisation's common sense.

Another one would be where the mob mentality dominates as explained by John F Kennedy in Profiles in Courage. Sometimes one has to use one's common sense based on one's underlying moral principles rather than the common sense of the mob.

Yadeed Lobo

34. Loved this article. Very insightful. The core aspects to consider here is "whom does this decision affect first?"

If one can quickly divide it into physical harm and business risk, the decisions might be much easier to make. Then common sense will prevail and yet the magic of sheer spontaneity coupled with the

benefits of aggressive decision making through a systematized process can be enjoyed by Corporations and Brands. Physical harm to a business if possible from the immediate decision making process, cannot be risked. Physical harm can be anything from, immediate probable harm to the Brand, financial losses to the stakeholders or job cuts due to a complete failure of a product or service. These losses, if are the outcome of a quick business decision always could be refrained from. On the other hand, having a business risk, for eg. Lower profit margins, higher immediate operating costs, logistics issues, etc can be afforded to be risked as they can be monitored and corrected if things go awry. Also, it should not be time consuming for a manager or any senior executive to make his / her decision, about which side would the decision affect the most (Physical harm or Business Risk). Once, that's decided, decisions could be much more quick and simplified. The power of a Manager is the power and with it the responsibility to make quick decisions. If too much time is wasted on case studies or processes for every decision, the position the individual holds would not be justified. It would also make a major impact on "how the board or the organization" would see the decision making process. For in a more rigid 'hire-fire' organization, one would end up seeing managers taking ages to decide for the fear of loss of their own jobs too.

Common sense is very much needed, provided its use is justified for cautioning a third party or stakeholders loss in the short-run. Sheer Common sense cannot justify to any company the loss of implementing a strategy or an INNOVATION. So, when its only regular business risk, let the intuition and experience rule & grow.

One can't touch the stars with the constant fear of falling!

Ananth V

Ananth

CEO

Techdivine Creative Services

35. What might be the effect of motive on 'common sense'? Consider this among hundreds of possible examples: If the Federal Reserve 'prints' large quantities of money to forestall inflation, maintain financial stability, etc., is that common sense, or is the converse, for congress to pay down debt now so that things are better in the long-term, even though it may be painful now - is that common sense? Given your motive or viewpoint, either approach makes eminent 'common sense'!

J. Grantham

Senior Project Manager

UC Berkeley

36. Decisions are never final, regardless of the basis on which they were made. They must be continuously tracked and adjusted as the results of the decision evolve.

Joe Violette Project Manager Retired Bechtel Corporation

Joe Violette

Project Manager-Retired

Bechtel--Retired

37. Given the 7+ billion decision makers in the world, the untold thousands of external factors impacting each decision (to include the decisions of all the others), and the untold thousands of outcomes of each decision within a short timeframe or over many years, questions such as is common sense dangerous, used too much, better than something else, etc., are unanswerable. Chances are, they are irrelevant,

mutated by the factors external to the actual decision or by whatever means it was decided. If I always am associated with successful teams, will I always be successful? Will the answer be dependent on how I arrive at my decisions? How would a proper control environment be established to test a hypothesis?

Dennis Nelson
Quality Lead
SFS

38. This topic recalls a concern that I've long felt with the business school case method that attempts, in part, to extract lessons from the experience of the case protagonist. This "over-the-shoulder" wisdom can be suspect. For example, a case was developed about People Express - once the nation's fifth-largest carrier - and the genius of its founder, Donald Burr. A few years later, after its collapse, another professor wrote a case describing the reckless stupidity of - surprise! - Donald Burr. This process of identifying successful strategies from past experiences - whether personal or institutional as in the case of business schools - is akin to driving while watching the rearview mirror.

Anonymous

39. It is always better if we go for new and innovative solutions instead of relying on the past.

Rayees Qurayshi
Area Sales Manager
Vidhata

40. Great question! I don't think that common sense can be applied when making major decisions. If you don't have time to use more sophisticated methods, then you are probably already far too late to make a winning decision. There are a number of thoughts and references I'd like to mention: - We shouldn't be trying to predict what will happen when we make decisions. We should be trying to anticipate the responses and effects that our decisions (and their implementing actions) will engender. This is probabilistic, not deterministic (Heisenbergian not Laplacian). - Not all decisions are made in the same domain of human activity. A decision made about a well established production line is very different than a decision to act in a highly competitive marketplace. David Snowden has done some masterful thinking about this concept and captured it in the highly useful Cynefin model (www.cognitive-edge.com) - Steven Bungay has captured some good thinking in his investigation of Carl von Clausewitz. There are gaps between; what we can know and what we need to know in order to make perfect plans, between what our (necessarily) imperfect plans are and what actions are actually taken to achieve those plans, and between what actually happens in the real world as opposed to what we thought our plans (and the ensuing actions) would cause to happen. All of these gaps concatenate to create a different future than we proposed to create. That's simply life -- no quarterback throws an interception on purpose. - Finally, to quote Dwight Eisenhower, "Plans are nothing; planning is everything." It is the preparation of the mind that occurs during planning that equips us to respond to the differences between what we wanted to have happen and what actually happened -- this is why sports teams practice against the future opposition's plays. They want to be prepared.

Guy
Principal
Performance2

41. When common sense becomes "uncommon" nowadays, it is no longer "common".

Anonymous

42. The answer to the most important question on the future of humanity (in this day and epoch and all of the near future years that we will live on this earth) needs to be tested with our common sense given that everybody's (born and unborn) future depends on this question. The question is simple: does the US need a SMALL GOVERNMENT? However, one should not assume that US needs a BIG GOVERNMENT.

Recently, a famous conservative scholar said "What US federal government needs to do is to defend the borders and deliver the mail and that's about it." based on his interpretation of the US constitution. According to this definition, the small government does not need any (federal) regulation of markets, environmental policy, fiscal policy, monetary policy, trade policy, foreign policy, health policy, education policy, housing policy, research and development, infrastructure and etc..., which should be left to the state governments and their citizens.

Assume a small US federal government limited to defending the borders and delivering the mail and the states will have to address all the other regulatory and policy issues. Now the states will compete with each other to attract big (and small) businesses (corporations) for economic growth and employment. The states will fall over each other to rip every regulation in the book, give tax breaks, environmental exceptions and look the other way when disaster happens. The states will do it all for the short-term gains (greed is good, capitalism will flourish and markets will operate unfettered in the spirit of the free market economy) in economic growth and employment without any regard for the long-term sustenance of all systems that make the earth habitable. It will be the proverbial race to the bottom. Other countries may follow the US to the bottom in order to be competitive. Already we are seeing the dire effects of climate change and fiscal strain due to the last do little (hands off but tax cuts and war, bailed out the financial institutions when the free market failed itself and the people which a small government cannot do) government of 2000-08. (Spending borrowed resources liberally on wars; does it not lead to recession as we have seen historically?) The new wave of deregulation, tax breaks and environmental exceptions will take us probably over the tipping point(s) and then how much more pain and suffering can we (the people) absorb? US and state (and other countries') governments will start to fail (if not already failing) and people will be hopeless and there will be bigger tent cities than we saw in the 2008 financial crisis, not to mention the effects of further climate change: rising sea levels, droughts worse than we currently find in Texas and etc... A new deep world recession will follow and mass employment prospects will nose dive. Is this what we need with a small (or big) government?

"Human activity does not contribute to global warming." said one Republican presidential hopeful. Is he not (assuming it) going against the common sense? How far would he like to roll the dice (with the economy and environment) that his assumption is correct? Another one, a lady said "grow the economy and grow the jobs and it will happen." Unfortunately, I did not catch how she will do it and why I should believe her without specifics.

What does your gut tell you? What does your common sense tell you? What would the analysis of past (applicable) data tell you?

Ravindra Edirisooriya
Senior Accounting and Finance Major
Missouri Southern State University

43. one [man's] common sense is another [man's] foolish idea

R
CEO
Ur BlindSpot

44. One [man's] ignorance is another [man's] common sense

R

CEO

Ur UnexaminedLife

45. In my view, common sense is a product of our past experience. At times, past experience is our worst enemy. common sense is good as long as it is not "too common". If it is based on analysis and reasoning it is good. Often my clients who have made "common sense" or "gut feel" decisions have had problems.

Dr Shantha P Yahanpath

Director

www.totalwealthplan.com

46. Can we look at how decisions are made today and say it is common to use experience to help form solutions yet to "expect the unexpected" and validate any solution through testing first?

If we don't take the time to make a good decision in the first place, how do we find time to fix it later exactly?

David Z

47. Finding the thread of what makes sense today is key. This used together with your current framework of reference provides for better decision making (continuous process).

Steven

Polytechnic of Namibia

48. It's as simple as the old "ounce of prevention / pound of cure" adage. True, a company can miss out on an opportunity while gathering data and trying to make sense of it (postponing a decision in the hope that more and better data will reveal the true path to success).

Going on nothing but "common sense", "instinct", or whatever you want to call it is a recipe for disaster, though.

Steve Flick

Principal

Q9C

49. Know what you know and know what you don't know ... that is true knowledge. But no one is able to do that. Newton with gravity, then Einstein with relativity, who know what is next, and next next.

All analysis, studies, experience, reasoning, etc ... are based on tonnes of assumptions which may be truth at some time but false over a period of time. Only know one thing about common sense ... they are rare.

And the only common sense is changes and taxes.

Anonymous

50. I am working for last 36 years and most of the time I experienced that mind hinted which way to go. Even in doubt, always tried to verify "GUT" feeling by so called common sense, data or other means. This is experience of most of us and despite data indicates different course of action, still most of the

managers take decision what they felt right on first instance and only try to validate or justify when failed by other means. May be "GUT" and commonsense means same to many and different to others.

Anonymous

51. Common sense is taking the right decision adapted to actual circumstances, whether it confirms or contradict our experience.

Lombard

President

ACTILOMB Industrial Consulting

52. How Dangerous Is Common Sense to Managers?

Based on regular definitions in dictionaries, if not managed properly, what is called there common sense could be turned into a synonym for gambling which includes the worst of results. Real examples of this are facts nowadays in the world of business.

Allow me a would-be useful and workable preliminary definition for this comment. Let us suppose that common sense could be a:

-Set of general features we are or are not aware of and which could be used to generate some guidance for workable solutions considering what is/could/should be available -Learned lesson(s) we are or are not aware of This could take us to questions such as: How much are we aware of what we learn? Are awareness and immediate result (impact) somehow linked?

In other words and for the purpose of this comment, let us call this common sense a "this-way feeling".

Some possible characteristics of a "this-way feeling":

-At times, it pops up all of a sudden. Therefore, "this-way feeling" is not necessarily a conscious thing.
 -Based on a "this-way feeling" we might be able to identify ways for how to think about something, i.e. a profitable workable solution -It is possible that some of us have personally experienced that "this-way feeling" is at times somewhat different to the data available or it is the only data available at hand and we have no time available to test it, then what to do? Well, perhaps in this case there are no options available other than to take the chance in a progressive way or not to take it. -I have heard in some countries the expression: let it ("event/solution") fall by its own weight -Today we know that some animals do feel events we do not, what places them ahead of us with additional tools to be more successful with, provided the information they feel is used purposefully.

Whatever the "manufacturing process" and the "raw material(s)" used by our brain in the making of "this-way feelings", what could we possibly do to increase the chances of turning "this-way feelings" into more conscious, regular, workable and profitable optional-solutions? Or how to turn a "this-way feelings" source of solutions into a more conscious, regular, reliable and profitable source of optional-solutions?

We could proceed with tests (trial and error processes) which might require resources (time, money, knowledge, opportunity cost, else) not available at that specific moment of decision. This could mean that we might have to work ahead of the events/needs/problems to solve, in a way which favors our vision, mission and office work. Therefore, as timing seems to be of essence, documenting the case before it really happens, might be a way to anticipate, gain awareness about it, put in place what might favor the conception of conscious optional-solutions, "this-way feelings" including those which pup up and at the same time we would allow ourselves the time to gauge them.

How to work ahead of time?

Instead of reacting (looking for a solution when the need is already there, then the problem would be already ahead of us) it might be useful to identify in advance (anticipation, gaining awareness, prevention) what could favor (opportunities) the achievement of our aspirations (vision and therefore mission and office work) and what could prevent us from (problems) achieving them.

The basic idea could be to identify a workable way in order to have "enough" time available to make tangible and measurable "this-way feelings".

It reads as if the need to answer a question, in order to solve a problem or embrace an opportunity, is what favors the use of "this-way feelings" including those which pup up.

Then it would be useful to have today a research question to answer in due time, generated by a required future solution of a potential future need in order to achieve our vision. It reads as if questions and answers today, the anticipation of future needs, vision, mission and office work, are somehow linked together as a part of this workable way to get the time to possibly gauge today the "this-way feelings"-based solutions of tomorrow.

A would-be feasible way to work ahead of time:

Something proven to be useful, so far, for some jobs (actually, it is the job) in the real world of business is this:

"Question, search and examine till facts prove otherwise (when compared to)" and assort this purposefully with "awareness, connection and comparison".

All these 6 words, if organized for the sake of an illustration, in columns and lines, show at least 9 ways to move forward. This questioning could include the revision of assumptions (data, else), conscious and unconscious ones, something not necessarily easy and pleasant to do because of other people's feelings involved, so dealing properly with this matter might be a part of this would-be feasible way to work ahead of time. Hopefully, this kind of setting based on working ahead of time will favor the encounter with "this-way feelings" ahead of the-moment-of-decision. The above is perhaps something we tend to do unconsciously and from time to time; however, it could be an ability to develop as a conscious, regular, reliable and professional one, even in schools and early education at home.

This could be part of a useful work related to the achievements of our aspirations (vision and therefore mission and office work). It might be a key success factor that it becomes an accepted and wanted conscious part of a job to perform.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Ulysses U. Pardey, MBA Managing Director Am-Tech, S.A. Panama, Republic of Panama

Ulysses U. Pardey, MBA
 Managing Director
 Am-Tech, S.A., Panama, Republic of Panama

53. There is something deeply disturbing to me about this month's column and , if that is one of Professor's Heskitt's intentions, then well done. Watts would have done very well as a Greek Sophist, if we can believe history and that there were such philosopher skeptics, whose purpose was to disprove the truth of any proposition. 'Common sense' is supposedly good sense and good sense also includes moral 'good'. But the intention to do good is also one of the complex processes of mental planning and physical

actions. According to the above summary of Watts' latest book (in full disclosure, I have not read Watts' book, but intend to do so), we might as well throw management ethics out the window because the intention to do a 'good thing' is unlikely to occur or, if it occurs, cannot be attributed to acting ethically.

So much for moral hazard. We might as well let the management stewards of the present financial meltdown stay in place, because, as complexity theory goes, there was never a chance that we could have done any better with different players, bad intentions or good intentions or otherwise.

Welcome to the Fate based economy. Great news for management consultants and bad news for everybody else. I hope I am wrong but I can't prove it just yet.

Doug Elliott

Doug Elliott

Managing Principal

D. Elliott & Associates

54. I agree that we emphasise too much on our common sense in day to day decisions. We try to correlate past result, experience with outcomes. In the process, we tend to forget many things. We perhaps do not take uncommon experience like factors that deviated result, or the factors that enhanced result. We also tend to exclude external dynamics that were present before and at present situation. Besides our commonsense, we also put logic and rationality while taking decisions. And logic is totally based on our perception, assumptions and belief. We should understand that logic is not absolute and is perceived by individual or collective belief. I think managerial decisions are more priority oriented than value oriented. Managerial decisions based on truth, honesty and relevance often take seat and less appreciated than the decision that yield outcome in numbers in short term. Managerial decisions are based on expected and created urgency imposed by industry. That means challenge is to perform or perish. I think fear to meet the expectation of stakeholders drive managers to take decision based on other interest than using their independent knowledge and skills. And this could make decisions to fail. I believe that strategy does not arise from isolation. It is developed based on practices over a longer period of time. They depict the trend that certainly cannot guarantee for future success. Similarly looking at the trend of stock market, it looks easy to make strategy for future investment, but difficult to digest the hopeless outcomes.

I think external competitions compel managers to take decision based on expectation and demand. They take decision trusting their intuition and gut feeling hoping that they will fulfill expectations. In case, it goes well, they get reward, promotion, appreciation and identity. In case, it goes unwell, they may be reprimanded, demoted, or fired sometimes. Now, success or failure of strategy does not reveal the means used to achieve it. Unethical or unfair steps may guarantee success of a strategy whereas ethical and fair steps may not guarantee success of a strategy. Now it becomes difficult to define success. So, it seems that success depends upon the belief of the organisation. Therefore, I think organisations should define success not only in terms of number but in terms of decisions that are based on ethics, honesty and values. Once practiced, organisations will increase its reputation and image in long run, while they may lose success based on number in short run. I believe common sense is not uncommon. So to make commonsense uncommon to predict its success, we need to include uncommon learning and dynamics that are beyond our control. It is natural to emphasise more on positive experience than on negative experience. So, while making decision, and to make it more predictable, we need to understand there are many forces that we cannot control or even predict, for example, our luck, global recession, people sentiments etc.

Ajay Kumar Gupta

Doctoral Researcher and Faculty (ITM)

Tata Institute of Social Sciences

55. Apart from complexity and novelty of the situation another reason why many managers employ commonsense, (labeling it as intuition or sixth sense), is the thrill of taking or getting full credit when the 'gutsy' decision proves right--a thrill denied by more correct but predictable outcome resulting from rational analysis. But the price of such bold, innovative but failed decisions could be enormous. The fact is that in many complex situations sophisticated tools of problem-solving (including computer-based tools) are available such as the techniques of operations research. Still, here the alternatives must be weighed in the context of accumulated experience to enrich the final conclusion. Thus, within the limits of bounded rationality, a search for logical solution must precede the application of commonsense. In other words, commonsense should be used in all decision - requiring situations but only as the icing on the cake and not as the hard crust or foundation.

Yedendra Chouksey

Professor

International School of Business & Media, India

56. Some poetry always helps: Wislawa Szymborska (Nobel 1996) Nothing twice (excerpt)

Nothing can ever happen twice. In consequence, the sorry fact is that we arrive here improvised and leave without the chance to practice.

Even if there is no one dumber, if you're the planet's biggest dunce, you can't repeat the class in summer: this course is only offered once.

No day copies yesterday, no two nights will teach what bliss is in precisely the same way, with exactly the same kisses.

Anonymous

57. Think "commonsense" as a verb, as an action. Find commonsense is a "present perfect conjugation", cannot be applied to "dids or eds", impossible to be applied to "wills" events, maybe the most recurring phrase said, thought or written, before a decision is taken is - "based on commonsense, we decided to ..." or any variation of this like "if everybody agrees ...". Commonsense main related issue is that we always seek security on decisions, freedom of risk. This kind of behavior ruins good management/administration and builds a strong barrier against creativity and innovation. It does not matter if commonsense came from an analysis, several experiences, or after a debate. If we expect from it something like as "we all were right" or "we all were wrong" in the positive or negative ways these expressions may carry on, then it is pure convenience. So Duncan Watts' thesis is that, in predicting outcomes and acting accordingly, we give far too much credence to such things as our own experiences, our ability to determine what is important, and history itself--mainly because complex phenomena are based on events that never repeat themselves and can't be examined scientifically. Best thing to do is convince ourselves that in the management/administration arena as well as in the politics arena, commonsense is something that should be banned, commonsense is relevant for everyday routine each ones live (Monalisa, is the most popular "Oeuvre d'art" or the "gravity is reality" as mentioned before by one of the respondents, lighten light bulbs get hot and can burn our fingers). Complex phenomena need good judgment and foundation and have no relation with collective knowledge (consensus-driven decisions) for the other hand, in the same arenas, quick decisions need conscious and responsible risk taking - behavioral adaptation X risk compensation. The most relevant decisions and realizations to organizations or even better, to humanity, were not done based on commonsense. The worst things ever done, all needed some kind of "commonsense criteria" to be deployed.

Celso Maia

Celso Maia

58. Comment 2

Allow me to stretch this topic a bit further.

Could a corporation know today its future?

Some workable definitions. Let us suppose for the sake of this comment that:

-The future of a corporation is "what-it-will-be-someday". -The aspiration or vision of a corporation is "what-it-wants-to-be-someday".

Therefore, a workable definition today of the future of a corporation (its future) could be its explicitly, clear and concrete, expressed aspirations or vision (the "what-it-wants-to-be-someday"), somewhat affected by future general conditions all players might be subject to. Needless to say that it would be useful to leave room for adjustments based on the dynamic of a learning experience when customers, competition and office work come into play later.

Then, specific, clear and concrete aspirations (specific future) could be one of the key success factors if a corporation would like to be able to work ahead of (its) time.

How could we possibly match aspirations and future, and measure this match?

A would-be feasible-way is provided for in my first comment. If this matching requires working along the way with "what-is-not-yet" tools then the corporation might have to invent somehow these "what-is-not-yet" tools in order to match its aspirations and its future, and the more it can protect its inventions the better. It reads as if there seems to be for a corporation some relationship between its today's aspirations, its future, its inventions and its Intellectual Property Rights.

We might be assuming that a corporation must compete because it is not allowed to impose its aspirations in the marketplace due to anti-trust laws.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Ulysses U. Pardey, MBA
Managing Director
Am-Tech, S.A., Panama, Republic of Panama

59. I don't see the discussion as "is common sense good or bad," but as "does common sense provide measurably useful results." The key word is "measurably." (This is probably an artifact of my long experience as a Malcolm Baldrige examiner). If a manager doesn't return to examine the actual outcome of his "common sense" decision against an expected or desired outcome, then he has no way of knowing if the decision has provided value.

Much of the Baldrige concept is about validating an organization's assumptions through measurement. I've seen many examples of applicants who changed their "common sense" assumptions once they began measuring those assumptions against actual outcomes.

Richard Tango-Lowy
Owner
Dancing Lion Chocolate

60. Common Sense is all about being "Practical" and make decisions according to the circumstances rather than just confined to the stipulated guidelines/ rules etc. Managers should also be able to justify their decisions and I have noticed that this is where the Experience (Tacit Knowledge) of a Manager plays a key role.

Damitha Silva

Senior Manager

Nations Trust Bank PLC, Sri Lanka.

61. Making sense of our lives is difficult; to some, they say it's easy. Following scripts provided you by whatever you believe makes it easier, perhaps, but still unexplained in any scientific sense. Perhaps that is the root of today's dissatisfied world? I've just gotten *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*, by L. Mlodinow, to do as one of the commenters suggested: some more research. I'll look into the Professor's book, too.

Anonymous

62. This has got me thinking about the lazy use of language. It's almost as if 'common sense' is a prop to hide behind so as not to betray inarticulacy or to give some weight behind an opinion which is often nothing more than an unsubstantiated generalisation. After all, whenever someone uses the expression, they usually mean that it isn't common sense at all - which rather proves my point don't you think? Like Voltaire said - "Common sense is not so common" and "Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers." Thomas Paine, in his political tract on *Common Sense* (1776), nailed it beautifully - "A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right." The trouble is we all have our own biases and unconscious or conscious prejudices. Einstein understood this well - "Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen." The more self-aware of us at least recognise what these prejudices are and the more skilful of us know what we are feeling, when and how to manage this constructively when relating to others. The complexity and uniqueness of people will often mean one person's perspective will differ from another's, despite the best mitigating efforts of empathy. So why do people persist in the oxymoron that is 'common sense'? On what authority does he or she speak on behalf of all these other 'sensors'?

It's not as though common sense has morality or class on its side. What was common sense to vast numbers of ordinary Germans in the 1940s was clearly not to the rest of us. The makeup of a jury cuts across the class divide, but how much they are permitted to use their common sense is a moot point. Recent research has shown that two-thirds of jurors don't understand the directions of the judge - so maybe they do have to resort to their common sense in the end. If a child puts a hand in the fire, she won't do it again. If enough children have the same response, does that then become common sense? Adults would say yes, but then what's the difference between learning from experience and common sense? What's the opposite of common sense? Independence? Anarchy? Imagine a weekly magazine column on common sense. I suspect it would be inundated with DIY tips and wannabe soapboxers more akin to the dictionary definition of 'sound practical judgement.' How about a National Common Sense Day? The arguments would be intense, the bars would be full and the emergency services would be stretched. I like George Bernard Shaw's view of it as "instinct ... Enough of it is genius." I don't believe he meant 'herd instinct', but a more individualistic interpretation. Common sense is common to me and your common sense is common to you - "Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense" (Buddha). Language is to be cherished and nurtured, not debased by blandness, platitudes and lazy generalisations.

David Shindler

MD

Dash Coaching Ltd

63. reading the comments my common sense tells me that common sense has a different meaning for everyone and everyone applies the common sense differently. for me common sense is not to give your price list to your competition, common sense would be also communicate to other sector in the company if you run a program that will affect them. I mention those cases because i've seen them happening... as somebody mentioned common sense is not that common.

Experience, wisdom and knowledge are the foundation of common sense and the tools that our subconscious use to make the decision we feel make more sense.

Javier Nudler
VP Sales
Axe Houghton group

64. Looks like Dr. V has it right in comment #18. He said, "Common sense should be defined first so we are all talking about the same thing. Common sense is defined as beliefs or propositions that most people consider prudent and of sound judgment, without reliance on esoteric knowledge or study or research, but based upon what THEY see as knowledge held by people "in common", the collective." That is the perfect definition of common sense, it is not debatable, it is accepted fact, there is one definition, full stop.

Managers should not be making any decisions based upon "common sense", or what we have just read is what "most" would do in a given situation.

A Company is not a Democracy. A Manager gets paid to call the shots others can't stomach, or to make the decisions most can't make because they need a hug first before having to fire their friends. These abilities are most "uncommon" in nature and are completely devoid of "common sense".

Philosophize all you want, that is most "common" in these debates. In successful Companies, orders are given by the Board, to the C-Officers. Those C-Officers give those orders to the Managers, and the Managers enforce them with the authority of both, most "uncommon" by today's standards.

Solomon Morgenstern
Chairman Emeritus
Morgenstern et Cie

65. Very interesting brainstorm. A few observations from my end.

First a few cliches: 1. Hindsight is always wise. 2. That Tomato is a fruit is knowledge; not to use it in fruit salad is wisdom. 3. (In medical diagnosis), If you think of rare things, you will be rarely correct. 4. Whenever in doubt, have a consensus.

We are brought up with these and such cliches that become our premises. Common sense dictates that a case with high fever of 105 F. should be immersed in ice cold water. Will that be right? Common sense is a tool for politicians to play to the galleries. Common sense is an excuse to justify unsound decisions. It comes handy in a blame game - especially to Board of Management - to kick out a CEO when consecutive 2 quarters do not show desired profits. Everyone feels that he has the Common Sense; and others have missed something glaring. Creativity can be suppressed by announcing that the idea does not appeal to common sense; especially if it is from a young manager; more so if the manager is 'she'. Common sense as a managerial approach relies on a probabilistic model and works if the database is massive over a time trend and interpretation is unbiased. If such a thing is available, it is no longer "Common Sense". Also, rarities are notorious to occur as evinced by Murphy's Law.

If common sense were so important in decision making Steeve Jobs would have been constrained to

find a job. Galelio was tortured since he did not subscribe to common sense. Theory of Relativity does not pass the test of Common Sense. Iacocca would not have been a legend if he had listened to Common Sense and apologized Ford onhis knees.

Is it really scientific to debate on a topic when the entity is not defined; theories are not propounded; measuremnets of success/failure are not laid down.

In absence of these, we are entertaining ourselves with an intelligent pursuit.

Dr. S. M. Sapatnekar
Advisor
Karmic Lifesciences

Copyright © 2011 President and Fellows of Harvard College